“‘A POEM AMONG THE DIAGRAMS’”: POETRY AS ARCHIVAL WORK IN MURIEL RUKEYSER, SUSAN HOWE, AND M. NOURBSESE PHILIP

A dissertation presented

by

Anne Kingsley

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

“A Poem Among the Diagrams: Poetry as Archival Work in Muriel Rukeyser, Susan Howe, and M. NourbeSe Philip” presents three case studies of contemporary women poets’ sustained interventions in conventional methods of archival recovery. Focusing on Muriel Rukeyser, Susan Howe, and M. NourbeSe Philip, this project seeks to understand how poetry becomes a tool for and critique of academic work in the archives. Each chapter examines how the poet not only intervenes in the reading of manuscripts, but also disrupts the scholarly history around these documents. In doing so, the poets open their archival subjects to new arrangements of form and new possibilities for telling the history of the subject under examination. In addition to the hoped for recoveries of various sorts, these poets not only change the nature and definition of what constitutes official archival work and the production of historical knowledge (even what constitutes an archive), but they also point to limits to recovery’s potential. Their use of poetry in the work illuminates a sense that knowledge is always relational and never to be final or complete—as, too, for the archives. In this sense, Rukeyser, Howe, and Philip forgo narrative structures that seek complete legibility in order to open alternative arrangements and experiences of historiographic work that can accommodate ambiguity, illegibility, and conjecture. The examination of Rukeyser, Howe, and Philip’s portraits of alternative modes of archival work situates these poets within the discourse not only of a history of women’s poetry as a site for critical interventions but also of the broader discussion of feminist research methodologies that question how and where historiographic recovery takes place.

The first chapter examines Muriel Rukeyser’s Traces of Thomas Hariot (1971), and her production of the, at the time, buried life of the Elizabethan explorer, scientist, and mathematician. Rukeyser uses poetry to recover those aspects of Hariot’s past that are more ambiguous, complex, and unverifiable.
Through this recovery, she disrupts the discourse of specialization in her crossing of poetry and scientific histories. Chapter two focuses on Susan Howe’s sustained engagement with the Jonathan Edwards archive at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007) and *THAT THIS* (2010). Howe’s poetry stages a counterpoint to archival science and authorized archival work by exploring Edwards’ manuscripts as both a material and spiritual practice, thereby drawing attention to the experience of text, texture, and the visualization of the archive in print. Chapter three evaluates Philip’s direct confrontation with the legal record of the slave ship Zong. The chapter traces how the documents and subsequent representations of the Zong trial inform the public memory of the slave trade, but also block or occlude voices of the Africans on board the ship. Philip’s poem, *Zong!,* incorporates fragments of Ifa divination language and verse structure in order to re-present a historiographic vision that emphasizes ceremony and ritual.
For all my students
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This dissertation has its own history.

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I write this for my students, and I dedicate whatever final history this takes to my grandfather, who remembered everything; my grandmother, who remembered nothing; and my new niece, Sloane, who gets to inherit this all.
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“What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?

The world would split open”

Muriel Rukeyser, “Kathe Kollwitz,” (Collected Poems 463)
Introduction: Pin Holes

Figure 1 from Susan Howe’s "Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards" Souls of the Labadie Tract (2007) pg. 121

In the often difficult task of reading and deciphering Susan Howe’s “Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards,” a series of poems published in Souls of the Labadie Tract (2007), I would frequently turn to The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online (WJE), http://edwards.yale.edu. On this website, researchers can explore the “edited published works” and “raw manuscripts” of Jonathan Edwards, Sarah Edwards’ husband, and one of the most famous American theologians of the eighteenth century. As the website states, the mission of the Jonathan Edwards Center is to “preserve and accurately transmit the texts of Edwards' writings” (“About Us”). In Howe’s poem, I was most interested in the word “pin holes,” as it echoed an initial description Howe gives of Jonathan Edwards pinning notes for his sermon to his coat as he rode into what was then the wilderness of the Connecticut Valley.

Online, I can type in “pin holes” under the “Browse the Collection” bar that queries my word search against the entire database of not only Edwards’ published texts, which amount to
twenty-six letterpress volumes, but also his tens of thousands of unpublished manuscript pages (“About Us”). The search returns only one occurrence. But rather than a transcription of one of Edwards’ manuscript pages, the sole search result is from Thomas Schafer’s 1994 “Editor’s Introduction,” for Edwards’ Miscellanies. The Miscellanies are Edwards’ extraordinary and compendious theological notebooks that he kept for over thirty years of his ministry. Schafer’s volume, now digitized and searchable online, was one of the first editions to publish the complete text following the order of Edwards’ original manuscripts. It was a groundbreaking work in Edwards scholarship, as it allowed researchers to read and study Edwards’ extensive and technically complex typological records. With the publication of the transcriptions, Schafer suggests, “Piece by piece, number by number, the reader of the Miscellanies can look over Edwards’ shoulder as he improved hints, pursued clues, and penned his best thoughts” (Schafer 2). Legibility, here, leads to clarity. The phrase “pin holes” appears in Schafer’s footnotes to clarify the reading of the manuscript:

Figure 2 From Thomas Schafer’s "Miscellanies: An Editorial Introduction" WJE Online

Schafer explains that the “pin holes,” bolded above in response to my search, appear on the manuscript where Edwards “had pinned scraps of paper” to his notebooks. Most of these primary jottings and notes are gone as Edwards quickly outlined these rough sketches into sermons or transcribed the notes more clearly in his manuscripts. Schafer’s entry on why tiny holes appear in the
manuscript demonstrates the extensive task of Edwards’ scholarship to make clear, complete, and available Edwards’ notebooks for further research.

I begin my dissertation with this search narrative to account for the striking difference between Susan Howe’s representation of “pin holes” in her poem and Schafer’s entry found through the WJE online. Howe’s insertion of the word pin holes, whether it is from Schafer’s entry on Edwards or a previous scholar, disrupts the “accurate transmission” of the text. Rather than providing editorial clarity, Howe’s poem teeters between legible and illegible as lines double over lines, words are severed of their tops, small line marks cut other lines in half, the poem sits on a diagonal, and even an erased channel runs through the middle. The poem’s use of the language of the footnote, though, is an important key for approaching the work of this dissertation. Howe’s use of poetry both appropriates Schafer’s editorial inscription and also, at the same time, offers another arrangement of the scholarly form. This dissertation examines the way in which Howe and two other contemporary women writers, Muriel Rukeyser and NourbeSe Philip, use poetry to disrupt the intelligibility of archival work.

Muriel Rukeyser’s Traces of Thomas Hariot (1971) examines the manuscripts of the Elizabethan explorer, scientist, and mathematician, Thomas Hariot. Susan Howe’s collection of poems and essays in Souls of the Labadie Tract (2007) and THAT THIS (2010) reflect her interest in and fascination with the Jonathan Edwards manuscript collection at the Beinecke. Finally, M. NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! represents her confrontation with the seventeenth century transcript of the insurance trial of the slave ship Zong. Throughout each of these chapters, I discuss how each poet’s reading of the manuscript pages, transcripts, and reproductions of a particular archive also incorporate the history of scholarly conversations around those documents. Rather than clarify the contents of the manuscripts, Rukeyser, Howe, and Philip forgo narrative structures that seek complete legibility in order to open alternative arrangements and experiences of historiographic work.
Each chapter of the dissertation presents a case study of the poets’ appropriation of and intervention in the archive and its surrounding scholarship. In each chapter, the archive under examination is explained—whether Thomas Hariot’s manuscripts, Jonathan Edwards Manuscripts at the Beinecke in New Haven, or the legal record of the insurance trial for the Zong. In addition, I evaluate the scholarly history that surrounds the manuscripts in order to show how the poets’ intervene in the documentary history as well as the records themselves. In addition to the hoped for recoveries of various sorts, these poets, I argue, not only change the nature and definition of what constitutes official archival work and the production of historical knowledge (even what constitutes an archive), but they also point to a limit to recovery's potential. Their use of poetry to perform such work creates a sense that knowledge is always relational and never to be final or complete—as, too, for the archives. The examination of Rukeyser, Howe, and Philip’s portraits of alternative modes of archival work places these poets within the discourse of a history of women’s poetry as a site for critical academic interventions, and it also sets these examinations within the broader discussion of feminist research methodologies that question how and where historiographic recovery gets done.

Chapter one, “A Poem Among the Diagrams: Muriel Rukeyser’s Traces of Thomas Hariot” examines Muriel Rukeyser’s production and reception of the last of her three biographies on “buried lives”. This was a term, as I explore in the preliminary part of this chapter, that Rukeyser uses to consider those lives that are silent, erased, or obscured in history. To examine the scholarly history she both enters and challenges, I turn next to a discussion of the history of Hariot’s manuscripts, their preservation along multiple institutions, and the scholarship on the intellectual legacy of Hariot in the history of science, before moving to read Rukeyser’s more defiant challenge to these attempts to secure Hariot’s legacy through specialized discourses. The third part turns to close readings of Rukeyser’s use of poetry as an experiment in other forms of recovery. Poetry, I argue, allows Rukeyser to recover those aspects of Hariot’s past that are more ambiguous, complex, and
unverifiable. In her use of poetry, Rukeyser constructs a series of interlocking arrangements that transverse disciplinary, institutional and aesthetic/scientific divides. Through the chapter, I show how Rukeyser claims poetry not only as a means of opening the possibilities of Hariot’s archive to other arrangements or readings, but also a means of confronting what qualifies as scholarship and who qualifies as scholarly authority. The chapter eventually makes its way to two contemporary archives—“Muriel Rukeyser: A Living Archive” and “The Manuscripts of Thomas Hariot” now digitized and available online—to trace how digitalization both opens opportunities for a more multi-directional form of archival scholarship, but ultimately reinforces the disciplinary structures that Rukeyser challenged.

Chapter two, “Images and Shadows of Divine Things: Susan Howe and the Jonathan Edwards Collection,” takes as its case study Susan Howe’s sustained engagement with the Jonathan Edwards archive. It traces the connection the author has to the archival manuscripts housed at the Beinecke library Rare Books and Manuscript collection, which directs the WJE Online that I begin with in this chapter. This chapter argues that Susan Howe’s poetry stages a counterpoint to archival science and authorized archival work by exploring Edwards manuscripts as both a material and spiritual practice, thereby drawing attention to the experience of text, texture, and the visualization of the archive in print. In the third part, Howe’s idea of the “felt fact” presents a way of reading or interacting with Edwards’ archives that suspend desire for mastery and, instead, read it as a visual collaboration. The fourth section traces Howe’s connection between Edwards and Wallace Stevens in order to demonstrate Howe’s effort to build a history of language craft. Here, as in Rukeyser previously, poems become archives for literary transference and exchange. The final part of the chapter turns to Howe’s representation of Sarah Edwards through a series of poems in which Howe’s arrangements representing archival fragmentation and loss suggest that archival knowledge is always relational and never final or complete.
Chapter three, “‘The Africans are in the text’: Ifa Divination Ceremony and the Reproduction of Archival Laws in NourbeSe Philip’s Zong!,” examines Philip’s direct confrontation with the legal record and the logic of the Transatlantic slave trade. The chapter traces how the history and subsequent representations of the Zong trial inform the public memory of the slave trade, but also block or occlude the voices of the Africans on board the ship. To address the order and objectivity of the legal record, Philip draws on the language and forms of “ifa”—an important West African ceremonial tradition—to reposition the poem’s relationship to the past. Through Ifa, as I show in the final section, Philip shifts away from documentary history to a more performative or ritual one. As an alternative to the divide between telling and “not telling,” I argue, Philip’s poem incorporates fragments of Ifa divination language and verse structure in order to re-present a historiographic vision that emphasizes ceremony and ritual as part of recovery work and as an alternative repository of knowledge.

This project seeks to understand how poetry becomes a tool for and critique of academic work in this set of writers. However, what constitutes academic work in the archives is not easily defined or isolated, and, in each of the texts I examine, it has its own history. Working in library or university archives, scouring manuscript pages, creating bibliographies, embedding footnotes, citing scholarly editions, reading scholarly histories, performing close readings, confirming sources, reeling microfilm machines, querying search engines, printing, and xeroxing are just a small series of scholarly movements reverberating in each of these writer’s vision of academic work. Howe’s assertive image of the scholar “[a]rmed with call numbers,” in many ways, evokes a useful image of a researcher equipped with library books and ready to conquer her subject. As reflected by Howe’s use of the word “armed,” the writers studied in this dissertation critique this kind of work as well as perform it. As each of the chapters will demonstrate, the poets envision their place as being both inside and outside scholarly environments. To describe herself working with an archivist to track
down Hariot’s manuscripts, Rukeyser uses the term “gypsy” (*THH* 308), evoking the sense of the wandering, itinerant, though also marginalized, unsettled, and unclaimed scholar. Similarly, Susan Howe confesses near the beginning of her poetic-essay “Personal Narrative,” in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, that “During the 1970s and early 1980s I was a poet with no academic affiliation” (13). Philip, too, in a journal section at the end of *Zong* speaks about forgoing claims to “authorial intention” in her writing of the history of the slave massacre (204). She also, in looking at West African methods of historiographic work, revises the historiographic methods available to perform other kinds of recovery work.

In congruence with Jacques Derrida’s assertion, “nothing is less clear today than the word archive” (qtd. in Manoff 90), the three poets studied here both acknowledge the ambiguity of what defines a collection, manuscript, or record and see that ambiguity as an opportunity for revision. The many dimensions, layers, and forms that appear in each poet’s recasting of her relationships to recovery also evoke Derrida’s description of the Helen Cixous archive at the French National Library as a “multi-directional phenomenon...crossroads, chorus, mingling of voices” (8). The idea of multiplicity runs throughout each of the chapters’ different approaches to reading and arranging the documents of the past and challenges singular or fixed narratives. Moreover, the term “directional” signals movement and process, important terms for examining the poets’ articulations of their archival work as a series of transformations rather than something that can be solidified, bound, or completed. Last, the word “phenomenon” and its connotation of the illogical, wondrous, and sensational as well as the unimaginable and spectacular—two terms particularly important for Philip’s approach to the horrors found in reading the legal records of the slave trade—also speaks to each poets’ sense of the archive and the work that they do there as an experiential event.

Critical discussions of the archive as a type of performance, including Diana Taylor’s discussion of “performance” as a “vital act of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory and
sense of identity” (2), will both extend my work’s model of what counts as an archive or an archival record and also situate the archive and the work scholars perform there within its context, culture, and experience. I am also interested in each writer’s idea of pin holes, those areas in the archive that are silent, erased, carved out, damaged, destroyed, or lost. What is missing from the archive? What is legible or illegible? What other archives can be read? Particularly in the case of Philip’s {\textit{Zong!}}, the poetic sequence approaches the erasures and occlusions from the legal record through ritual and ceremony.

As experiments in poetry as well as in scholarship, the poems discussed in this dissertation push against their own definitions. Muriel Rukeyser constructs a poetic-biography, one that uses poetry to recover the interior life of Thomas Hariot; Susan Howe carefully crafts collage poems; and NourbeSe Philip’s unfolding and fracturing of language on the page begins to shift from avant-garde poetry to the structure of Ifa divination verse. As can be observed from this list, the poets do not share a cohesive portrait of a poem’s definition or function. The poets’ own definitions or approaches to poetry demonstrate their relationship to the form. For example, Rukeyser believed that poems were “meeting places” (LP 162). They were places where “energies transferred” (LP 172). Poems were “processes” and arrangements that could hold “giant clusters of events and meanings” together (LP 173). For Philip, the “muscle of a poem is in the verbs” (196). Poems exemplify “disorder, illogic, and irrationality” in action (197). Poems could critique and “disassemble the ordered” (199). At times, these poets present their own questions on their chosen genre. As Howe wonders in her work on the Dickinson archive, “Are all these works poems? Are they fragments, meditations, aphorisms, events, letters? Right hand margins perish into edges sometimes tipped by crosses and calligraphic slashes” (148). The margins and tipping into edges visualize these poets’ experiments in recovery work, especially as each navigates between the documented and
undocumented, non-material and material, the verifiable and non-verifiable, the concrete and the affective, the linguistic and the visual in their poems.

The poetry of Rukeyser, Howe, and Philip embraces the intuitive, spiritual, sensational, and ceremonial experiences of the archive to challenge the fixity, singularity, and authority of information science. Their challenge to the archive is not only a textual intervention, but also a visual one. The extensive use of images in this dissertation suggests the way in which these poets emphasize the visual characteristics of the poem. Susan Howe and NourbeSe Philip’s poems are most visually striking. In Howe’s “Frolic Architecture,” one of Edwards’ hand sewn notebooks that he made from newspapers becomes the impulse for Howe’s poem (fig. 3). Howe cuts, pastes, and overlays to make collage-like scenes of her poetry.

Figure 3, from Susan Howe’s "Frolic Architecture" in THAT THIS (2010) pg. 61

Howe plays with the typography of print books, editorial editions, and even manuscript numbers in her poems, and, in doing so, exhibits the more tactile and experiential feeling of a manuscript page.
Similarly, in Philip’s *Zong!*, the visual smudges of the poem’s language illustrate printing errors and draw attention to the production of the poem as part of the experience of its reading (fig. 4).

![Figure 4 from M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) pg. 178](image)

While not as directly apparent as Philip’s poem, Rukeyser’s *Traces of Thomas Hariot* also uses the visual to blur the manuscript page with poetry. Rukeyser’s transcription of one of Thomas Hariot’s folio pages skirts the border between a record of scientific notes and the formal structure of verse (Fig. 5).
I chose the name of the dissertation, “A Poem Among the Diagrams,” from Rukeyser’s observations on the interchange between poetry and archival record in *Traces of Thomas Hariot*. The word “diagram” signals not only the visual use of the page, but also the procedural or process-oriented, activity-based thinking that takes place in the production of these texts. The poems of Rukeyser, Howe, and Philip suggest operative configurations that open poetry (and the archival record) to exchanges in structure and reading practice. As Johanna Drucker suggests, visual poetry exerts “dynamic action” (Drucker 17) and announces a more complex, active, and moving experience of a poem. Applying this “dynamic action,” to the reading of historical records and documents offers a more layered, multi-dimensional relationship to the past.
This dissertation contributes to the current critical discussion of “thinking poets,” a term Lynn Keller gives to contemporary poets who produce “exploratory works” and believe that poetry, “like philosophy or political theory, enacts a significant intellectual engagement with the most important and challenging issues” (Keller, Thinking Poetry 2). Keller presents a view of poetry as an active and critical force, capable of creating methodology and critiquing it. Keller’s terminology speaks to a wider community of poets, such as Rachel Blau Duplessis and Joan Retallak, who use poetry to break cohesive narratives as well as to break the poem itself and, in doing so, “transgress the very limits of intelligibility” (Keller, Thinking Poetry 8). Thinking poetry proposes a type of writing that visualizes an “anti-authoritarian ethics” by prompting what Duplessis calls “multi-climactic, multiple centers of attention” (Duplessis, Blue Studios 9). While Howe and Philip are quite firmly entrenched in this emergent scholarly-poetic canon, Rukeyser is not often brought into these dialogues. Her biographies, one of which I cover in the dissertation’s first chapter, anticipate the critical and interventionist spirit of literary criticism as academic-creative scholarship issued by Duplessis, Retallak, and Keller by crossing from biographical prose to poetry and mixing disciplinary methods. As Adrienne Rich explains, because of these crossings, Rukeyser’s work has always been “difficult to grasp because of narrow definitions, cultural ghetto, the politics of canon-makers” (Rich, “Beginners” 17). Part of the narrowing of definitions is a split between the reading and anthologizing of the political endeavors of feminist poetry and the more intellectual or academic ones. In conjunction with Howe and Philips, including Rukeyser’s use of poetry to recast critical methodologies in her recovery of Thomas Hariot in the discussion of “thinking poets” opens the boundaries of periodization of academic feminisms to include those writers whose poetry emerges out of the political, wartime discourse of the first half of the twentieth century and into university and academic rhetoric of the later. Incorporating Rukeyser into the critical discussion also gives a
broader reading to her work that can often be displaced along generic boundaries of poetry and biographical prose rather than fusing these genres—as Rukeyser does—in a more inclusive critical examination of this important feminist literary figure.

I began this introduction with a discussion of the online research center, the *WJE Online*, which I will return to in the second chapter. The digital turn in the humanities on college campuses has shifted disciplinary structures and opened new models for “comparative media” (Hayles “Making Critique”) analyses that call for comparisons between media landscapes including social networks, online archives, cloud based storage, wikis, electronic literature and arts. As Lisa Spiro observes, the way the digital humanities community operates “transparently, collaboratively, through online networks” invites a potentially democratic vision of academic knowledge production (17). These opportunities for collaboration, sharing, open source, and open editing are growing and directing new kinds of scholarly search on a literally massive scale. Matthew Jockers describes the wide-reaching scope in *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (2013),

These massive digital-text collections…are changing how literary studies get done. Science has welcomed big data and scaled its methods accordingly. With a huge amount of digital-textual data, we must do the same. Close reading is not only impractical as a means of evidence gathering in the digital library, but big data render it totally inappropriate as a method of studying literary history. (7)

Jocker’s emphasis on big data analysis in the practice of digital history echoes the historiographic methods of Franco Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (2005). In this text, Moretti argues that mass data sets can allow scholars to create more global and networked claims about the literary past. The push towards transparency and mass data analysis through large-scale information repositories suggests new terrains for historical production and representation. As Scott McLemee explains, Jockers’ and Moretti’s push towards big data heralds in
a new “turbocharged sort of philology” that allows for researchers to collect and analyze verbal patterns across large domains of information (“Crunching Literature”).

Still, a number of the archival practices in digital humanities projects remain embedded in traditional approaches to the archive. Language coding, metadata, tagging systems, and search engines are such powerful means of finding material—this dissertation is itself a testament to how much Google opens ways of completing academic work—but these systems rely on standard language practices and favor literacy as the mode of recording or recovering history. Even though massive databases of archives allow new kinds of archival practices such as digital-textual analysis, these texts must be, as Marc Parry explains, “machine readable” (“The Humanities”). While the possibilities of running tests on large data sets creates new productions of history, close readings of a singular text or of readings of “micro data”—such as when Howe reads a scrap of a wedding dress from an early colonial American archive—or acknowledgements of illegibility are often eliminated. Hence, in this dissertation, I combine the critical discussion of digital archives in each of the chapters with Rukeyser, Howe, and Philip’s more poetry-arranged representation of the unknown, conjectural, and impressionistic characteristics of the archive and archival work. These poets offer directions for understanding and utilizing technologies and alternative technologies, whether the machine or instrument for analyzing history and historical production is a poem, the tactile material of an archival record, or a divination verses and the correspondent ceremonies. Each offers alternative arrangements and contexts of reading the past in meaningful and critical ways. The potentials illustrated by these poets suggest that we interrogate even as we continue to use these new digital instruments for organizing, collecting, and preserving the past and that we continue to open this data to alternative readings that may not follow indexible or even legible patterns. What would it mean to read Sarah Edwards’ legacy not only through Jonathan Edwards’ archive and the capabilities of big data sets, but also through Howe’s poems that acknowledge the inheritance of
historical scraps, edges, aberrations, and erasures of such history? Ushering in more arrangements of the past often tells us more about our relationships to history and historical work as researchers, scholars, and readers than it does about the history that is represented in these forms. In other words, the pinholes footnoted on the WJE may provide a portrait of Early American record keeping practices, but Howe’s arrangement of the pinhole as part of a poem or as part of a diagram, also illuminates our experience of archival work and the limitations of filling such erasures and solving unknowns.
Chapter 1.

“A Poem Among the Diagrams”:

Poetry as Archival Recovery in Muriel Rukeyser’s *Traces of Thomas Hariot*

“Muriel was not, I suppose, a scholar in the history of

science in any of the several accepted senses, but anyone

who doubts her grasp of such matters should have

watched her poring, day after day, over the microfilms of

Hariot’s manuscripts. In their Elizabethan script, in which

equations jostled charts of the constellations, broken

words and phrases, even an occasional poem”

—Jane Cooper, “And Everything a Witness of the Buried

Life” (16)

1. The She-Poet

Accompanying Muriel Rukeyser’s *Traces of Thomas Hariot* (1971), her third and last published

biography on an Elizabethan explorer, new world ethnographer, mathematician, and astronomer, is

an errata slip.
Tucked into the side of the cover, the small, loose leaf approximately the same size as the reproduction (Fig. 1) details several editing and publication errors, including a mislabeled photograph of Dorothy Devereux, the sister of the Earl of Essex and the wife of Henry Percy, the ninth Earl of Northumberland. In *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, Devereux is a recurrent figure whose history—including her brother’s execution under Queen Elizabeth’s reign and the imprisonment of her husband, the Earl, in the Tower for suspected treason against James I in the Gunpowder Plot—unfolds alongside Hariot’s scientific discoveries. Whether Rukeyser or her literary agent, Monica McCall, wrote the disclaimer, the note on the illustration, underscored by the assertive “It is not a portrait of Dorothy Devereux and should not appear in this book,” reflects Rukeyser’s frustration with a series of archival photos and microfilm reproductions that were lost or destroyed prior to her book’s publication. Even Louise Kertesz, Rukeyser’s only biographer, notes the “typographical errors in such a beautifully produced book,” and explains that “[r]eadig *Hariot* is exhilarating but also tiring and often annoying” (Kertesz 349). Although the errata slip is a miscellaneous list of editing errors, it points to the subsequent erasure of *Traces of Thomas Hariot* from literary, cultural,
and, for that matter, scientific histories and symbolizes the wider issue of what Rukeyser saw as the promise and limitations of archival research.

Sometime around 1960, Rukeyser began her long search for the Renaissance scientist. The man who sailed with Walter Ralegh to the New World, inscribed the first commercial ethnography of the Virginia colony in *A Briefe and True Report*, worked with the most advanced telescopes under the patronage of the Earl of Northumberland, composed some of the first maps of the moon, discovered sun spots, measured Jupiter’s satellites, and worked on early atomic models, was also an elusive historical figure. Perhaps the tentativeness of Hariot’s intellectual legacy is due to the fact that he did not publish his scientific experiments, observations, and manuscripts during his lifetime. Only after his death were his papers on algebra published as *Artis Analyticae Praxis* (1631). His muted history may also be attributed to the silencing context of political and religious turmoil during the ascension of James I in England. Hariot’s life is marked by the threat of heresy trials, Northumberland’s imprisonment, and Ralegh’s beheading. The scattering of his papers in various archives, shelved, destroyed, and rearranged, further disrupted historians’ access to Hariot’s past. From the Renaissance forward, Hariot’s history wavers in and out of scientific discourse and remains relatively obscure. As one historian points out, Hariot (1560-1621) and Galileo (1564-1642) were working during similar moments of advancements in the development of telescopes and on almost identical orbital and astronomical measurements, and yet “books about Galileo fill libraries while those about Harriot would fit into a modest briefcase” (Anderson 94). Similarly, in a March 1971 letter to Rukeyser reviewing the existing biographical literature on Hariot, K. I. Franklin, a noted astronomer and assistant chairman of the Hayden Planetarium at the time, observed that Rukeyser’s work to place the Elizabethan figure into the context of his time and place “must be a little like trying to sculpt a hole” (“Muriel Rukeyser: A Registry” Box II:7). Even thirty years later, a small portrayal of Hariot for the May 2003 issue of *National Geographic*, fittingly titled “Publish or
Perish,” employs the same rhetoric to describe Hariot’s occluded legacy in its subtitle: “The untold story of Thomas Harriot, the greatest scientist you’ve never heard of” (Achenbach). Rukeyser would spend over ten years researching Hariot’s past in the “confused, out-of-order papers in many hands” (Rukeyser, TTH 10); however, upon publication in 1971, her biography was quickly dismissed by reviewers and remaindered by the publisher.

*Traces of Thomas Hariot*, as Michele Ware notes, fails to do “what is expected in the writing of a biography, that is, to be linear, rational, and authoritative” (Ware 242). Structurally, Rukeyser’s prose forgoes the chronology and the precise logic of traditional biographies for more reflective, sweeping exegeses on producing Hariot’s past:

What is this life and who is Thomas Hariot? It is not that we go into the past, live in the past, to find him, but that his print, his traces, are around us. Indeed, if one searches the past for him, the search will lead to fiery details, a stroke here and then an airy space, another stroke of what is now called fact, and then something obliterated, drowned, burned, lost. And then another stroke, until an entire structure of life begins to rise, brilliant, with long reaches, venturesome, airy, full of risk, moving in a way that speaks to us in our century. (Rukeyser, TTH 4)

Rukeyser’s affective prose builds a portrait of historical recovery that is more performative than cohesive. Rukeyser winds the reader stroke by stroke through fragmented glimpses of Hariot’s early past, makes spirited sweeps into the intersecting dramas of Elizabethan court culture, colonial expeditions, and scientific revolutions, and drops down into archival transcriptions of Hariot’s experiments measuring and mapping a new cosmology, all at the same time that Rukeyser teleports the reader into and out of her own contemporary moment of twentieth-century space exploration, moon landings, experimental physics, and commercial developments in the Caribbean and South America. Rukeyser charts the movement of the prose not only to follow the facts and evidence of
Hariot’s past but also to follow the “leap of the imagination” (Rukeyser, *TTH* 6). These leaps are then overlaid with Rukeyser’s reflection on her composition of Hariot’s past, creating a biography that is also a portrait of her methodology. As Ware describes it, *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, is a “messy book” (Ware 242) and Rukeyser’s disruption to a clean, clear, or uniform portrait of Hariot’s history is “unsettling” and “subversive” to biographical form (Ware 243).

Not only does Rukeyser’s prose defy the narrative structure of traditional biographies, as Ware illustrates, but the fragmentary form also interrogates scholarly claims to Hariot’s past. Hesitancy, conjecture, and, as Rukeyser says of her structure, “airy spaces…full of risk” (Rukeyser, *TTH* 4), are not the usual foundations of biographical claims, and yet, for Rukeyser, these are the pieces that amass the architecture of his life and influence, even as her prose abstracts any concrete or fixed image. For Rukeyser, Hariot’s scientific experiments with telescopes were challenges to traditional paradigms of knowledge in that they helped solidify and advance Copernican hypotheses that changed perceptions of the nature and composition of the universe from earth-centric to heliocentric. As a historical subject, Hariot’s lost and elusive place in history also interrogates the traditional paradigms of historiographic methods that sought to objectively clarify a subject’s life. As Rukeyser states of the aims of *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, “This book is built according to the nature of an interest in Hariot and the problems, not solved by him, but indicated by him” (Rukeyser, *TTH* 4). Rukeyser accumulates unknowns and retains opacity and obfuscation as part of the portrait her recovery of Hariot. The aptly named title of Rukeyser’s introduction to *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, “The Questions,”—which includes a long series of questions such as “Was Hariot a great scientist? A great man?” and “How do you get from a prison to a moon?”—further reinforces Rukeyser’s approach to biographical structure as a process more closely aligned to a stream of inquiry rather than a moment of fixed assertion. In this light, Rukeyser views the past as something under constant transformation as indicated by her statement: “The search for the traces of Thomas Hariot has led
to answers, to questions, and to a further sight of life so fine in its structure, in the language of what it says to our time, that I take it as far as I can among the obliterations, and let it go for others to take further” (Rukeyser, TTH 12). She depicts the structure of Hariot’s past as a “fine,” delicate, and fragile form. The description of her search illuminates her belief in finding a method of recovery that evokes the complex and often irresolute process of historical production, one in which she saw herself as part of a larger continuum of research work.

The now rare and out of print *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, when it can be found, is tucked into the library shelves of Renaissance history away from Rukeyser’s larger body of poetry, a position that speaks to the biography’s displacement. While many scholars discuss Susan Howe and NourbeSe Philip for their representations of archival recovery in their poetry, very little attention has been given to Rukeyser’s relationship to the archival work exhibited most directly in her biographies. Some literary scholars do, however, claim Rukeyser as a documentary poet. Tim Dayton, John Lowney, and Catherine Gander give the most extensive examinations of her evidence-based poems and documentary style of composition. Dayton’s discussion centers on *The Book of the Dead*, from what is perhaps Rukeyser’s most well-received poetry collection *U.S. 1* (1938). Dayton’s study examines the long poems’ taking up of historical documents around the trial against the mining company to give voice to the mostly silent lives of the miners. Rukeyser, who went down to Virginia at the time of these lawsuits, includes a number of documentary artifacts as part of the structure and language of the poem. Stock charts, legal testimony, and other records of scientific materials related to the trial intersect within the body of the poem to form what Dayton argues is a critique of the power of political authority and class hierarchies (132). Gander picks up Dayton’s discussion of the scientific materiality of the poem and contextualizes Rukeyser’s work in the larger movement of documentary filmmaking and documentary poetics in the 1930s and 1940s. She considers how Rukeyser’s use of documentary technique highlights the hybridity of “creative and realist methods”
and speaks of Rukeyser’s desire to fuse and thereby undo the conventional separation between the document and subjective experience (14). Both Dayton and Gander explore the way in which Rukeyser sees poetry as a means to “extend the document,” a phrase Rukeyser uses as part of an endnote to *U.S. 1* (*CP* 604). The scholarly attention to Rukeyser as a documentary poet, however, tends to focus on her challenge to industrial capital and her desire to shape material artifacts through poetic readings for a more public remembering. But in their focus on cultural and political power, I believe these examinations often miss Rukeyser’s use of poetry as an intervention in academic and disciplinary methods of historical work that define what constitutes official and unofficial historical narratives.

In the full body of her work, Rukeyser continually offers strong critiques of the institutions and processes that authorize knowledge making. A poem in her 1968 collection *The Speed of Darkness* is titled “THE BACKSIDE OF THE ACADEMY” and speaks to the “closed bronze doors” of the academy where “writers, sculptors, painters, composers/ and their guests and publishers will all roll in[…]” (*CP* 446). Rukeyser challenged the concept of historical and aesthetic knowledge as a closed-door practice of the academy split from the culture around it, and she called for a more public and accessible domain of historical work. Anne Herzog’s reading of this poem looks at the way Rukeyser’s language in it merges the “austere” academy with the vibrancy of street life, thereby questioning who gets to determine the “ONE POSSIBLE WAY OF SPEAKING TRUTH” (Herzog 30). In *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, Rukeyser continues to interrogate singular methods of “speaking the truth” and offers new paradigms for structuring and presenting her recovery work.

To form new paradigms of scholarship, Rukeyser experiments with more indefinite or indeterminate claims to knowledge work by seeking out poetry as a means of recovering Hariot’s past. Throughout *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, Rukeyser takes the reader through a series of poets and poetry readings to trace where Hariot’s history lives in the “voices in the poems” (Rukeyser, *TTH*
15). Through these poetic recoveries, Rukeyser traces the history of Hariot’s impulse towards new cosmologies of knowledge and knowledge making. Rukeyser sets up an early indication of this method in the introduction when she describes how the loss of archival records presents an opportunity for reading poetry as part of her research work:

We have no record of the time that Hariot spent in Ireland as Ralegh’s tenant[…] Curiously however we can piece together in poetry and in the other ways that meanings move, that time[…] Molanna will come back to us again, in a work of Spenser’s carrying ideas of change that are familiar in Bruno and in Hariot: Spenser’s great poem, *Mutabilitie*. (Rukeyser, *TTH* 9)

Because of the limitations of archival manuscripts, Rukeyser extends her recovery of Hariot’s past to Edmund Spenser’s poem, *Cantos on Mutabilitie*, a set of unfinished cantos included in *The Faeire Queene* (1609), as an alternative repository. My use of the word “extend,” echoes Rukeyser’s assertion that “[p]oetry can extend the document” (*CP* 604), printed in the endnote to the poetic sequence *Book of the Dead* (1938), a poem built from the archival manuscripts, newspaper printings, and trial transcripts surrounding the Gauley Bridge Tunnel Tragedy where a number of miners lost their lives to silicosis poisoning in the 1920s. Alongside a number of other poetry readings in *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, Rukeyser attends to Spenser’s poem *Mutabilitie* in order to extend the reach of Hariot’s manuscripts and record the way “meaning moves” during his time. In this case, the poem captures the reverberation of Hariot’s experiments in building new sets of scientific knowledge. Later on in the biography, Rukeyser echoes her same desire to connect Spenser’s *Mutabilitie* to Hariot: “But there is another part of life in Ireland, poetry and science, and the buried life, which now becomes visible. The clues are in that most great fragment of Spenser’s, called *Cantos of Mutabilitie*” (87). The “clues” that Rukeyser follows are Spenser’s depiction of the landscape of Ireland and the naming of “Molanna,” the river nymph in the poem, which Rukeyser connects to the abbey by the same name where Hariot stayed in and where he performed mathematical experiments. Through this reading,
Rukeyser draws Hariot’s history closer to the imagery of *Mutabilitie* in order to redefine the idea of the poem as an artifact for historical production.

But Rukeyser’s use of Spenser’s *Mutabilitie* involves more than just the desire to trace circumstantial evidence connecting Spenser’s poem and Hariot’s time in Ireland. Rukeyser also uses the poem’s main character, Mutabilitie, who throws the laws of nature into chaos, to speak to Hariot’s ideas on states of “change” and his emergent interest in experimental science. As Sarah Powrie puts it, Spenser’s *Mutabilitie*, “explores the unpredictable and revolutionary implications of the new science through Mutabilitie’s insurrection, which transforms the heavens from a recognized hierarchy into an undifferentiated space of uncertainty and debate” (Powrie 73). For Rukeyser, the shift between an antiquarian approach to history and an aesthetic one also becomes a means of conjoining science and poetry and placing Hariot into this cluster of transformative, albeit uncertain or unverifiable ideologies. Rukeyser points to these moments of change through excerpts of the poem in her construction of Hariot’s biography: “Proud *Change* (not pleasd in mortall things/beneath the Moone to raigne)” (Rukeyser, *TTH* 88). Rukeyser reads this verse, which begins Spenser’s poem, as an acknowledgment of new astronomical observations and the re-conception of the universe as an interlocking and unified structure, where one motion or change produces another not towards some finite or rational point but indeterminately, endlessly. The poem interrogates the Aristotelian view that the celestial universe is impervious to corruption or change (Powrie 77). Instead, through Mutabilitie, the cosmos is recast in the poem as a place of constant transformation. The figure of Mutabilitie in Spenser’s poem wreaks havoc on order by challenging splits between, as Powrie indicates, “terrestrial-cestial stratification” (Powrie 75). Rather than finite or split categories of knowledge, Mutabilitie presents duality and multiplicity as new modes of understanding that caused “paradigmatic decay” (Powrie 79). Rukeyser uses Spenser’s poem and other poets and poetry throughout *Traces of Thomas Hariot* to de-concretize the search to document evidence from archival
manuscripts and allow for a more fluid and mutable reading of Hariot’s participation and influence in knowledge change.

Critical reception of Rukeyser’s use of poetry as a means to present a more mutable portrait of recovery of Hariot’s history, however, contributes to the biography’s contemporary obscurity. While Rukeyser was ready to promote a method of historiography that embraces mutliformity, her critics were not as ready to accept poetry as a mode of scholarly research. Rukeyser’s reviewers and other Elizabethan scholars, especially those connected to the history of science, critiqued her use of poetry to recover Hariot’s history and often cast Rukeyser’s methodology as tourism or trespass into scientific biography. The most resonant critique was that of A.L. Rowse, a major authority on Elizabethan history (coincidentally or not, his name is misspelled in Rukeyser’s errata slip). In the review of Traces of Thomas Hariot, Rowse described Rukeyser as a “poetic lady, not a scientist” and portrayed the book as a “curious and eccentric work, written very oddly in a mixture of evocation” (Rowse BR 27). On the one hand, Rowse’s critique in not entirely inaccurate. Rukeyser’s embrace of poetry as an approach to Hariot’s past is “curious and eccentric.” On the other hand, Rowse’s critique also indicates prevailing notions of what qualifies as an authorized biography of Hariot and who qualified as a scholarly authority, a dialogue that also points to the divisions of gender in the composition of scientific histories and the eventual loss of this text in public memory.

Rukeyser’s vision of cross-disciplinary production between poetry and science interrogated the idea of authorized (or compartmentalized) forms of knowledge, a view she saw as linked to the Enlightenment vision of standard historical production. In her response to Rowse’s critique, Rukeyser presents her challenge to conventional notions of specialization and scholarly authority:

Well, one of the attacks on me for writing that Hariot book spoke of me as a she poet—that I had no business to be doing this […] And then I thought, yes, I am a she poet. Anything I bring to this is because I am a woman. And this is the thing that was left out of the
Elizabethan world, the element that did not exist. Maybe, maybe, maybe that is what one can bring to life. (Rukeyser, “Craft Interview” 39)

Rukeyser not only claims poetry as a means of opening new possibilities of experimentation in Hariot’s archive, to see it in a new light or to see it through “an element that did not exist,” but also as a means of accommodating a more fluid and flexible structure of researching and recovering the past, as she indicates in her use of Spenser. But her more protean approach also made Traces of Thomas Hariot difficult to classify, retain, or preserve (even value) in traditional disciplinary structures. And, in this sense, Rukeyser’s biography of Hariot, an elusive figure of Elizabethan history, becomes itself obscured. Even a recent resurgence of scholarly interest dedicated to Rukeyser’s “life writing” focuses more extensively on the poet’s first two biographies—Willard Gibbs (1942), a biography on the nineteenth century scientific pioneer in physical chemistry and thermodynamic systems, and One Life (1957), an exploration of the multi-dimensional life of Wendell Wilkie, a politician who ran against and lost to F.D.R in 1940.¹ Traces of Thomas Hariot is relatively absent from these extended discussions.

This chapter explores Rukeyser’s Traces of Thomas Hariot in order to illuminate her alternate methodologies of recovery as a critique of archival and scholarly authority. Rather than address it as a book of errors, the discussion of Hariot’s biography begins this dissertation in order to position Rukeyser as a precursor to the later twentieth and twenty first century “scholar poets,” such as Howe and Philip, whose work presents more direct dialogues on poetry as a method of critical interventions in academic work. Rukeyser’s structure in Traces of Thomas Hariot anticipates Lyn Hejinian’s idea of writing as “field work,” where “one moves through the work not in straight lines but in curves, swirls, and across intersections, to words that catch the eye or attract attention repeatedly” (Hejinian 44). Similarly, Rukeyser’s production of Hariot can be connected to Joan

¹ See The Journal of Narrative Theory, Fall 2013.
Retellack’s assertion that “[e]verything in mass culture is designed to deliver space-time in a continuous drone. One writes poetry and essays to disrupt that fatal momentum” (Retellack 5). Like Howe and Philip’s writing in the next chapters, Rukeyser’s *Traces of Thomas Hariot* both showcases the power of the archive and also demonstrates its limitations.

Including Rukeyser’s biography in a discussion of women poets’ interventions in archival research may seem counter to the aims of exploring poetry as a direct critique of critical scholarship. However, in its form and structure, *Traces of Thomas Hariot* offers an extensive portrait of Rukeyser’s reading of poetry as a space for historiographic examination. The biography’s mixing and merger of forms aligns more directly with Howe and Philip’s multi-genre approaches to recovery that illustrate the archive’s contents as well as its erasures.

2. The Buried Life

Rukeyser often describes her search for Hariot, “the forgotten lost discoverer, the unverified man,” as “fading in and out” of the historical record (Rukeyser, *TTH* 304, 307). The idea of Hariot moving in and out of focus in a kaleidoscopic manner exemplifies an emergent interest during Rukeyser’s research in bringing Hariot, “from the dimness of the archive into the full light of modern scholarship” (Kren 792). At the time of Rukeyser’s researches, a number of major Elizabethan historians, including John Shirley, Jon Pepper, and Rosalind Tanner, were returning to Hariot’s scattered manuscripts at the Petworth House, the Earl of Northumberland’s estate, and at the British Museum, where a number of Hariot’s scientific papers were also held. However, for Rukeyser, this movement into modern scholarship was marked both by openings and closures of access to Hariot’s manuscripts. The restrictions she confronted and the methodologies she sought to
interrogate them reflect the context of new technologies for research and shifting institutional paradigms of archival scholarship.

During Rukeyser’s research, scholarly interest in Hariot’s unpublished papers was motivated in large part by new technologies, such as microfilm reproductions, that were rapidly opening archives. In 1967, in the middle of Rukeyser’s search, the succession of the new Baron at Petworth House opened the library that contained Hariot’s manuscripts to “serious scholars” (Shirley 32). Over 9000 folio pages from this collection and others would become more fully available on microfilm by the time Rukeyser published *Traces of Thomas Hariot* (Shirley 37). The emergent capabilities of Xerox reproduction and the cheapness of microfilm made manuscripts more widely accessible and ushered in democratic and often idealized visions of open access in ways quite similar, in fact, to something like the emergent rhetoric of Wikipedia and open information sites. Not only did the microfilm help fuel an information cascade, but it also ushered in new paradigms of information management. Because microfilm technologies allowed researchers to “search, correlate, and synthesize recorded knowledge,” archival management moved from the organization of “paper” to the construction of “systems” (Bryan 6, 9). The availability of microfilm and its detailed indexing capabilities helped reconceive historical production as a dynamic interchange that could link manuscript collections across different libraries, museums, and other repositories. Yet even the potential for new openings of information and new instruments for performing research work was limited by definitions of scholarly authority. Because the information avalanche of the twentieth century led to new intellectual disciplines (Wood 431), the call for “specialized training” arose (Jones, H.G. 135). Archival and research “specialists” stepped into the role of determining who could become the “masters of the whole records field,” what university or library relations should be established, and what qualifications were necessary to ward off careless custodians of this knowledge and/or irresponsible readings of the manuscripts (Evans 33, 53).
Throughout *Traces of Thomas Hariot*, Rukeyser speaks directly to the opening of Hariot’s manuscripts through microfilm technologies as well as to definitions of scholarly authority. One experience, in particular, illuminates for Rukeyser this duality of emergent yet restricted access:

In that time, the corridors to Hariot began to open; the range of his explorations grew more visible, the questions deepened; but there were doors that stayed obdurately shut. The confusion and even the authorship of the papers were puzzles. What I was saying about Hariot was unverifiable until his papers should be published; and they had been rejected over a hundred years ago by the Oxford University Press. My publishing arrangements at one moment depended on the advice asked from one of our prime authorities, who wrote an amazing letter for a scholar. He told the publisher that I would not be working with the manuscripts, and therefore my book should not be printed. I have a copy of the letter, which for a while ended my hopes. A man who had never met me and had no idea what work I was doing or might do, made this judgment. I went on working with the microfilms of the Hariot papers, brought back from the British Museum; and found another publisher.

(Rukeyser, *TTH* 305)

Rukeyser’s story points to the way in which her research work wavered between access and non-access based on judgment of “prime authorities.” The letter that Rukeyser refers to is from Louis Wright, who, at the time, was the director of the Folger Library in Washington D.C. Addressing Alfred Knopf, the publisher, in 1959, Wright speaks to the difficulty of securing enough Hariot material to write a “significant” book and dismisses the possibility of Rukeyser’s ability to do so. As to whether Rukeyser is qualified to write this book, Wright explains:

My answer is that there isn’t enough material available to make a significant short book on Hariot and that Miss Rukeyser obviously isn’t going to take the time to search out Hariot’s manuscripts and do a first-class job which would require several years. The manuscripts, I
understand, are in a chaotic condition and some of them are in cipher. In short, Miss Rukeyser’s book might reveal a great deal about her imagination but it wouldn’t reveal much about Harriot or any valid connections between Harriot and the 16th century science and exploration. As you can see, I do not think it will be a good book. (“Muriel Rukeyser: A Registry” II:7)

Wright dismisses Rukeyser’s ability to clarify the “chaotic condition” of Hariot’s manuscripts. His letter also reveals what Wright sees as the divide between the “imaginative” mind of Rukeyser and the sustained objectivity he believes is required to write the history of the Renaissance scientist and explorer. For Wright, these approaches reflect what qualifies or does not qualify as sufficient academic work or archival and professional authority.

Even when Rukeyser does gain eventual access to Petworth and the Muniment Reading room where a number of manuscripts and account rolls of the Earl of Northumberland were kept, she frames this reading experience as involving a spectator-like environment where intellectual scholars read manuscripts on one side of the library and “tourists in their processions moved behind the red rope barriers” (TTH 307). Rukeyser’s image of the procession captures her sense of the regulation and organization of historical production as conventionally conceived, and implies her resistance to and effort to create an alternative to it, not only in her documentary verse but in the Hariot biography as well. Rukeyser saw these restrictive scholarly environments as contributing to Hariot’s place in history as a “buried life” (LP 85)—a term she frequently used to describe those histories that are obscure, unacknowledged, anonymous, or silent in the archives.

Still, for Rukeyser, a buried past was hardly an interminably or definitively lost past; she saw it instead as one that required new forms and methods for reaching it in the present. As Rukeyser asserts of her search for Hariot: “And where is Hariot? He is here, he is everywhere, standing at the ends of all corridors, waiting to be found” (Rukeyser, TTH 316). While the details of Hariot’s past
may be murky and opaque, his discoveries and what Rukeyser calls his impulse to “expand the limits, to risk, to break bounds and establish further imaginings” (TTH 15) resonate in circuits of modern scientific thought and in major dialogues of mathematical and cosmological change. Reflecting the tension between his absence and the resonance of his presence in modern scientific thought, Rukeyser’s book jacket synopsis for the biography frames her sense of his pervasive, albeit not transparent, historical influence: “If Thomas Hariot did not exist, we would have to invent him.”

Twenty years later, Stephen Greenblatt, in his essay “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion,” which pushed forward Hariot’s history in the context of new historicist argument, similarly declares of Hariot’s place in the expansion of Renaissance ideology, “If he did not exist, he would have to be invented” (44).

And Rukeyser’s biography does invent him. To reach this figure’s life from the obfuscation of the past, Rukeyser experiments with the concept of “traces,” a term she introduces in her epigraphs to the biography:
The multiple definitions of trace given here operate as an important set of metaphors for Rukeyser’s approach to recovery, her way of extending the documents of Hariot’s past to include the impressionistic and unverifiable. By including vestige, presence, inference, and other forms that are difficult to stabilize or measure, Rukeyser’s methodology challenges the traditional evidentiary goals of archival recovery and opens wider possibilities for constructing an inventory of Hariot’s history. This more open and conjectural mode of understanding how to recover a figure’s life extends into the final definition of “trace” she gives on this page: the “memory trace”, or engram, a term from the study of psychology. The “lasting trace” refers to the way in which an experience, event, or observation creates a mark or impression on the mind. An emergent discourse on engrams as part of the theoretical understanding of memory appears in the late 1950s, around the same time as the beginning of Rukeyser’s search for Hariot, in the work of K.S. Lashley, who re-discovered earlier work on the engram by Richard Semon (Schacter 186). The term re-emerges in popular psychological discourse on the process of memory during the 1970s (Schacter 187). Lashley explored the hypothesis that forgetting was a result of losing the strength of the cues of the engram.
(Lashley 2). To remember, then, was a process of stimulating those engrams by searching for things that would conjure or activate these traces. In this mode of thinking, nothing is permanently lost; experiences can be recovered by finding the right cues to stimulate memory. Rukeyser’s citation of the technical term “engram” suggests that this discussion of memory traces influences her sense of what it means to find Hariot and stimulate our cultural memory of him. The concept of the engram blurs the border between imaginative and hard facts in Rukeyser’s recovery efforts.

Another image that captures Rukeyser’s movement between the known and unknown is her use of Hariot’s concept of “est and non est”, to be and not to be, one of Hariot’s contributions to mathematical logic (TTH 237). In the biography, she speaks of finding this image at the “bottom edge of a folio page” (TTH 238):

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 8, Rukeyser, Traces of Thomas Hariot (1971), pg. 238*

The importance for Rukeyser of this phrase and image hinge on her distinct reading of their use of “and” rather than “or” (TTH 237). She describes how non est and est reflect Hariot’s sense of complementarity rather than opposition, so that the forces of “being and essence,” “action and rest,” two series that Rukeyser names, are not seen as strict divisions, but as parts of a unified thought. Later in the biography, Rukeyser returns to the image again, even reprints the line, to describe her search for Hariot’s past as also existing at this point in between and indivisible (Rukeyser, TTH 314). On the one hand, she discusses how this image speaks to the desire for the tools that can
excavate archival findings whether it is “a metal finder that will rake up his instruments in the sand of the Outer Banks, where his drowned notes lie faceless” or a “shovel that can dig the earth of Molanna in Ireland” (Rukeyser, *TTH* 314). On the other hand, Rukeyser recognizes the nonmaterial, but still resonant, influences of Hariot’s life that mark his existence even in absence. Even Rukeyser’s description of working with archivists evokes the logic of “non est and est.” Rather than split or separable claims to specialization or expertise, she reads the relationship of researcher and archivist as a “[l]ink between two peoples, and between himself and you, however, gypsy, however she-poet you appear to him” (Rukeyser, *TTH* 308). The image of the gypsy, as well as the echo of Rowse’s dismissive phrase “she-poet,” reflects Rukeyser’s more dynamic, wandering, itinerant, roving, and both/and view of recovery as a challenge to more conventional views built on narrow versions of expertise.

Rukeyser’s approach to historiography in *Traces of Thomas Hariot* also highlights a moment when second-wave feminist critique was radically changing university dialogues. New technologies of recovery were shifting the kinds of histories and stories that could be produced from the archive, and, in turn, new methods of performing historiographic work and writing historical or literary critique also entered the scene. Rukeyser’s biography of Hariot not only echoes many of these calls to recover “lost” or “buried lives”; it also reflects the call for new feminist research methods and practices in its structure and methodology. Essays such as Elaine Showalter’s “Women and Literary Criticism” (1971), were examining the state of the study of women’s writing and women’s identity within the college system (859). Rachel Blau Duplessis, in her reflection on this moment of the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, calls the period an “intellectual renaissance,” one which ushered in a “paradigm shift” (Duplessis, *Blue Studios* 15). Duplessis also considers the way in which feminist political critique turns to the university as a site of resistance where faculty positions, conditions of appointment, and research opportunities were marked by race and gender (Duplessis, *Blue Studios* 15).
21). What was a radical movement outside the university was now a radical critique of (and, increasingly, within) the university. Presenting this position of being both inside and outside of the university, Duplessis describes the “Great [Political] Awakening” of the university as a conversion experience whereby, “we were at one and the same time inside and outside an institution, in a contradictory position that gave us, suddenly, analytic suspicion, observational leverage, and demanding questions that brought many political and ideological practices into question” (Duplessis, Blue Studios 22). By 1975, a few years after Rukeyser would publish the biography of Hariot, Annette Kolodny’s essay “Some Notes on Defining a Feminist Literary Criticism” actively framed the call for new frameworks and critical methodologies for historical work (92). By 1976, Kolodny would follow this assertion to explore new methods with an acknowledgement that “what we call imaginative or artistic creations are often ‘breakthroughs’ for us precisely because they break through the rules and patterns we had previously described and in so doing offer us new visions, other ways of knowing which had not otherwise been available” (Kolodny, “The Feminist” 828). One of those ideological practices under examination was the set of methods and narratives through which researchers display historical authenticity and authority. Though the “intellectual renaissance” comes, at least for the Hariot work, just a little too late, Rukeyser’s use of poetry as a method of “tracing” Hariot’s past between the known and unknown and moving across disciplinary divisions anticipates feminist literary criticism’s desire to bridge scholarly and aesthetic labor.

III. A Poem Among the Diagrams

Rukeyser uses poetry in her recovery of Thomas Hariot as an alternative repository in which to perform archival work. In doing so, Rukeyser attempts to open the contemporary academic
culture around the production of Hariot’s manuscripts, discussed in the previous section, to new arrangements and paradigms. Poetry offers a means of articulating without dividing what Rukeyser reads as the complex interactions of Hariot’s fused life of poetry and science. Through the search for this fusion among a number of other poets in Hariot’s time and after, Rukeyser presents a counterpoint to a chronological vision of Hariot’s past by layering a multi-directional set of poetic relationships in the biography so that they reveal the patterns of Hariot’s discoveries. Poetry, for Rukeyser, accommodates multiple modes of relations, resists static claims, and follows a more transformational and transformative than conventional view of history and historical work.

In an early discussion on the place of the poet in Elizabethan England, in *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser connects the period’s rapid sense of expansion to the possibilities opened by poetry:

*They will speak of Elizabethan England as the great setting for poets. There was a sense, then, they tell you of expansion and discovery unlimited—of the new and strange within reach—the hostile legendary seas now opening upon other countries under God, with striped men, greenness beyond imagined jungles, every monster newness, volcanoes of gold, a swarm to the mind, so that it must open, go it must and discover. All appetite and power is suddenly here, within the hand, within the poem, to those who dare. Mostly because of two things: the sea, sea-power, what that meant to the island, and because of that most excellent invention, America.*

*Our age is opening now. We have air, and its other dimension. We have the frontier of nuclear energy, whose curse has already been chosen, and for whose blessing we must live… We have, in the opening of such a time, a sense of an age disclosing undefined possibilities, new meanings for multiplicity, and new meanings for unity.*

*This age contains the promise of poetry among its great promises. (LP 25-26)*

Rukeyser’s vision of this period links the development of sea power and science that were dramatically changing the composition of the world to the poetry that appropriates and shapes these
new dimensions of knowledge. In the passage, these developments move in tandem. Her emphasis on the language of expansion—“opening,” “undefined possibilities,” and “new meanings for multiplicity” (LP 25)—speaks to Rukeyser’s belief in poetry as a process, a system of relations, and a movement or motion of parts rather than a form that is finite, isolated, or static. Rukeyser frequently dismissed any study of poetry that treats language and form as “static mechanics” (LP 166). Poetry, Rukeyser argues, is not formed “like crystals on a lattice of words,” a view of things she relates to New Criticism; instead, poetry is a “process, in which motion and relationship are always present” (LP 166). For Rukeyser, poetry is a “dynamic system,” one she compares to the interlocking structures of the Panama Canal that lift ships by lowering and raising water through parallel lock systems (LP 187). Hariot’s relationship between est and non est resonates in Rukeyser’s image of the locking structure where oppositional values, like the positive and negative levels of water, are a part of a linked system. This dynamic system also appears in her recovery of Hariot through a series of readings that depict the interlocking structures of poetry and science.

Rukeyser reads Hariot’s manuscripts as multi-dimensional assemblages of science and poetry that resist claims to specialized knowledge or the splitting of disciplinary thought systems. Rukeyser’s most emblematic image of the interlocking system that informs her recovery of Hariot is a folio page she titles, “A Poem Among the Diagrams. Hariot’s ‘Three Sea Marriages’ from his papers.” She sets the reproduction of the folio page among a small collection of Renaissance learning: an alleged, though unverified portrait of Hariot; Hariot’s map of the moon; a map of Sion House where Hariot performed his scientific experiments under the patronage of Northumberland; pictures of Walter Ralegh, Queen Elizabeth, John Donne, Giordano Bruno, and Shakespeare; several illustrations from Hariot’s A Briefe and True Report; and a picture of the constellation of Ophiucus that Kepler refers to in a consideration of the mathematical and poetic-astrological accounts of stars (TTH Interior Insert).
The folio page shows a series of merging scientific observations that map out Hariot’s legacy, including Hariot’s geometric and astronomical measurements, his scientific notations, and a small pencil inscription of the number “490” in the top right hand corner. (This last likely signals an archivist note related to the organizational structure of Hariot’s manuscripts.) As Rukeyser points out, there is also a sketch of a poem with the “haunting, suggestive, beautiful title,” “Three Sea Marriages” (TTH 255). Rukeyser’s selection and central placement of the image in the biography emphasizes her claim that poetry could provide a method of reading and recovering Hariot’s history of scientific discovery. Rukeyser uses the poem to conjoin the various elements of the record,
The poem is on a folio page with diagrams of parallels showing congruent angles, diagrams of angles over concentric circles and arcs (instrument-reading?) and, upside down, part of a passage about Nonius as observer and practicer, ‘besides the difficulties and insufficiencies in observing the means to the conclusions we sought. (TTH 257)

In her examination, Rukeyser moves across the record’s scientific calculations and poetic forms and reinforces her belief in poetry as an interrelated arrangement of parts, in this case, a gathering of forms between scientific documentation, instrumentation, and poetry. Rukeyser’s transcription of Hariot’s notation on Nonius—a mathematician and cosmographer directly preceding Hariot, he developed instruments for precise measurements in navigation that increased the capabilities and reach of the astrolabe (Crato 62)—points to Hariot’s search to find the right instrumentation to document his scientific observations. The mention of Nonius also signals Rukeyser’s parallel desire to formulate new ways of reaching Hariot’s history through this poem.

Rukeyser’s image of Hariot’s poem gives her a way of articulating a series of linking and converging ideas, practices, even technologies, and recalls Rukeyser’s own diagrammatic illustration of the exchange of ideas between artwork, artist, and audience in *The Life of Poetry*.
Through the diagram, Rukeyser envisions a series of interrelated parts where “A is the artist, A’ the audience, or witness, and C the consciousness of both […]” (LP 51). Rukeyser gives a similar reading to Harriot’s poem by suggesting that these systems of meaning making and the forms or measures that they take are interdependent. Rather than isolate Harriot’s poem as erroneous, trivial, or aberrant to Harriot’s scientific measurements, Rukeyser recovers “Three Sea Marriages” as a central depiction of the interrelation between scientific thought and poetry. Furthermore, Rukeyser insists that the structure she discusses is not static, suggesting that the “diagram is false” unless all the parts and its vectors are seen in “motion” (51). This reflects Rukeyser’s reading of poetry as dynamic system that emphasizes process, movement, and transformation. By finding the same features in Harriot’s work, she justifies her own methods in poetry and in the construction of biography.
As all this implies, Rukeyser examines “Three Sea Marriages,” as a poem in process. She describes the record as a “worksheet” and observes that “[t]he steps of the writing are there” (*TTH* 255). Rukeyser walks the reader through her exploration of the draft-like form of the poem by observing the full sequence of Hariot’s crossings out and revisions. For Rukeyser, this process signals Hariot’s imaginative mind as he works to illustrate the new advances in conceptions of cosmological and mathematical change as part of a set of corresponding relationships, or marriages, through the body of a poem. It may not give concrete answers to questions about his past, but as Rukeyser describes the construction of the poem “tells us, as poetry does, things various, multiplied, in contradiction, ambiguous” (Rukeyser, *TTH* 256). Rukeyser transcribes the full poem as follows:

![Figure 11, "Three Sea Marriages" Muriel Rukeyser's *Traces of Thomas Hariot* pg. 258](image)

Rukeyser returns from outlining Hariot’s process of writing to focus on the poem’s portrayal of the astrolabe, staff, card, and compass—all instruments that Hariot, and others, used to chart and navigate the sea as well as to map the moon, measure orbits, and redesign conceptions of the cosmos. The connection of sister and brother, which Rukeyser reads as Hariot’s depiction of Ralegh and Elizabeth in the biography, unite the empire, explorer, and new technologies of measurement.
As Rukeyser acknowledges, her reading of this poem doesn’t capture a complete or even necessarily coherent statement about Hariot’s past. The poem could equally be, for example, a description of the conjoined system of an eclipse that Hariot noted during this time (Miscellaneous 23). Instead, she delivers the poem as a conceptual source that recovers a representation or impression of Hariot’s fused life. She writes,

“...One cannot derive the biographical in factual statement from any poem; but one can say what absorbed and evoked the life of these fusions in the poet. For the poem is not “emotional thinking” nor any other putting together of the split terms of our usage, that culturally tried to force us to say, “physical,” “emotional,” “spiritual,” “psychic.” All the splinters of the kind of thinking that the most whole of the Elizabethans have shown us we never need accept. From their joining of poetry and science, we can trace the buried life and bring it through in ourselves. (TTH 258)

Rather than attach Hariot’s manuscripts to official narratives, Rukeyser characterizes the poem as a site of experimentation to see what gives rise to or brings together these dynamic and merging streams of inquiry. And, forgoing any desire to “splinter” these kinds of thinking for the reader, Rukeyser hints at the possibilities of seeing Hariot’s fusion of poetry and science, his “buried life,” in “ourselves.”

Rukeyser continues to read Hariot’s fused life not as a single history or subjectivity, but as an intricate set of networks that extend what it means to “find” Hariot in the archives. This is evident in Rukeyser’s use of Giordano Bruno, an Italian astrologer and poet, to rework Hariot’s past into other assemblages that demonstrate relationships between science and poetry. While no clear line of connection can be drawn from Bruno to Hariot, Rukeyser reads Bruno’s life as “interpenetrating” Hariot’s (TTH 65). Rukeyser establishes a connection between Bruno and Hariot in the first epigraph of the biography through the use of the excerpted passage, “The world, a
sacred holy animal, to be loved.” The quote is from Bruno’s *De Immenso*, a poetic treatise that revises the vision of the Earth as a centered and fixed body in the universe to one seeing Earth as a moving entity in an open and infinite universe (Neves 2). The quote also refers to Bruno’s pantheistic belief that the world is an infinite expression of the divine. According to Miguel Granada, Bruno’s philosophy put forth in verse form the belief that God could be found in all things, everywhere, and that the expression of faith or communication with God could take place as a communion with nature (Granada 92). Bruno’s pantheism radically revised institutional ideas of the Catholic Church as the central authority, and he was eventually executed for heresy in February 17, 1600 (Boulting 304). A number of historians call Bruno the “martyr of science,” in that his death ushers in modern cosmological thinking, but Bruno’s work in science was deeply connected to many systems of learning whether poetry, philosophy, or magic (McTighe 55).

In the biography, Rukeyser views Bruno, like Hariot, as a figure who pushes against mainstream ideologies and un hinges knowledge *as is*, to show knowledge as a transformative and transforming process. Rukeyser says of Bruno, “Everything he said swam against the main current” (*TTH* 72). According to Kertesz, “Rukeyser admires Bruno’s courage in maintaining his unorthodox ideas, and she associates him with all those in the forefront of knowledge to whom the world’s prejudice has been directed through the years” (354). Bruno himself asserts in his text *The Candle Bearer* that he is an “academic of no academy” (“academico di nulla academia”) (qtd. in Hufnagel 2). Hariot (and Rukeyser, for that matter), falls similarly in this position of being both within *and* outside of institutional thought.

Rather than position Bruno in one field or another, Rukeyser aligns him as one more fused life located alongside and in circulation with Hariot’s past. She says of Bruno’s *De Immenso*, “A dialogue is here, of course, between poetry and prose, science and poetry, the universe and man. More. A dialogue ‘between’ all things, one speaking with everything, one speaking with the unknown
and the world” (TTT 111). Rukeyser views the poem as a record of Bruno’s desire to arrange science and poetry as processes though which to explore the unknown contours of the universe. These lines are followed by the quote from the epigraph in Latin:

Est animal sanctum, sacrum, et venerabile, mundus:

Quoque animante animans est at quidquid vivit in ipso:²  (TTT 111)

In De Immenso, Bruno sees the infinite universe as a constantly unfolding process that extends past the limitations or possibilities of the individual eye and can accommodate oppositional forms or contradictions. Rukeyser’s excerpt from Bruno’s poem recalls her assertion in Life of Poetry that “[e]xchange is creation. In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader” (LP 173). A poem like Bruno’s is a constantly unfolding document in history and carries its own history as it shifts from one reading to the next as part of its afterlife. Rukeyser’s reading confronts the idea of the document as something that can be preserved, kept pure, or remain untainted. Rukeyser’s approach, instead, speaks to her desire to read the histories of Bruno and Hariot as a series of transferences. Rather than a mode of history that “freezes,” the reading of poetry and science carries forth what Rukeyser calls the “motions of the imaginative arts” (LP 173).

Still, in some ways, Rukeyser’s connection of Hariot to Bruno demonstrates the work of a traditional biographer. She describes her diligent search among Hariot’s manuscripts to find any sign that Hariot may have read Bruno or intersected his circle. However, the only material or archival proof that Rukeyser cites for the connections between Hariot and Bruno is a small annotation. She writes,

² Rukeyser does not give a translation for this part of the text except in the epigraph where the first line is translated as “the world, a sacred holy animal, to be loved”. I translate the passage this way: “The world is a holy, sacred, and venerable animal/ And, in the lives of every living creature is a living(spiritual) being or deity.”
There is a sign in Hariot’s writings. It is a very small jotting which appears slowly as you look at the page. It is off in the left edge of a folio and it reads: ‘Nolanus de immense et mundi.’ The book is there, in the locked White Room at Petworth House where, the story goes, Turner painted.

Try to find a copy of *De Immenso.* (*TTH* 159)

A small note on Hariot’s manuscripts speaks to the possibility that Hariot may have read Bruno, the Nolanus of the passage, and underscores her search for the *De Immenso.* Rukeyser continues to pursue a connection between these two figures and, at the end of the biography, describes a moment at Petworth where she finally gains access to the Earl of Northumberland’s “locked” library—where the books from the period of his captivity in the Tower are kept—and finds, amongst all the other artifacts of lost eras, Bruno’s *De Immenso.* On one diagram etched in the book, Rukeyser observes “the dent of the compass foot” (309). The slight, and unverifiable, impression signals Rukeyser’s accommodation of different types or forms of artifacts and gestures back to her initial sense of the word trace as “vestige” or “non-material” indication (*TTH* epigraph). The mark on Northumberland’s book, Hariot’s notation, Bruno’s new vision of the cosmos, and Rukeyser’s discovery all gather and assemble in this artifact. This scene shows both Rukeyser’s sustained close reading of Hariot’s papers and her desire to open her archival work to conjecture and impression. Rukeyser takes us into her archival wanderings where marks and impressions lead us to swim in the current of possibility through the different “modes of the imagination” that Bruno and Hariot represent (*TTH* 161). In contrast to her own methodology, Rukeyser describes one historian’s claim that Bruno’s new arrangement of the systems of the universe was synthetic and that, according to the historian, was “not founded on some rock of well-proven certitude” (*TTH* 161). Rukeyser observes, however, that Bruno is a “pioneer of certitude that is based on something other than rock”. She explains, “He is a swimmer of infinity. Many have followed him, not knowing whom they
followed, yet swimming ever in those shoreless floods” (*TTH* 161). Rukeyser’s description of Bruno’s influence envisions a different than usual relationship to historical work; it ruptures the idea of a cohesive or stable figure of the past. Instead, through the poems, Rukeyser portrays the past as a series of interlocking figures, perhaps diffusive, and yet ever present. In “Pan-Historiography: The Challenges of Writing History Across Time and Space,” Debra Hawee and Christa Olson argue for the “necessity of consulting multiple archives” (98). Consulting a number of collections can help, as the authors argue, “avoid the traps of homogeneity” (96). Hawee and Olson think of this as an “accumulation of texts and performances,” across a number of archives, but in Rukeyser, this sense of the multiple is also a feature of one’s reading processes.

Rukeyser follows Hariot’s traces across multiple poems, treating them like miniature archives, as when she finds further traces of Hariot’s influence in the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Rukeyser excerpted Coleridge’s expression, “A new light was struck by Hariot,” in that same initial epigraph where she cites Bruno. The “new light” refers to Hariot’s role in the transformation of scientific ideas in mathematical, solar, and telescopic observations. This brief mention is not evidence of a comprehensive portrait of Hariot’s influence on Coleridge, but it does, for Rukeyser, testify to a link between Hariot and Coleridge’s imaginative thinking where the separate elements of the imagination combine. As Catherine Gander has noted, “Coleridge’s conviction that an equal meeting of contraries reveals the human capacity for ‘imagination’ appealed to Rukeyser’s own poetics of connection” (106). For Coleridge, the imagination was a site for alternative scenarios and alternative arrangements of form. As Denys Harding suggests, Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* is a “thought-experiment” where Coleridge is “trying out formulations” (Harding 105). Coleridge sets up two concepts of the creative mind—one that relies on fixed definitions and calls up these past scenarios

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3 This excerpt comes from Coleridge’s “Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life,” a tract on the rise of modern science. Printed in *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 1*, as an appendix to “Aids on Reflection” (Coleridge 380).
like memory work or recall, and the other the “secondary imagination” that “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create” (qtd in “Defaulting to Fiction,” Richardson 674). This secondary imagination takes as its material the impressions of the external world—the tangible and real—and reinvigorates these through the power of the creative mind (Richardson 674). In Coleridge’s concept of the imaginative mind as a site where the properties of the tangible and intangible might be fused, Rukeyser finds her own practice of navigating the known and unknown, verifiable and unverifiable in Hariot’s papers. The activity of searching through uncertain material remains—a fragment here, a letter there, a mention, an allusion to his work—coalesces in the imaginative capacity of the researcher.

Towards the end of the biography, Rukeyser returns to Coleridge’s interest in Hariot through her description of Coleridge’s participation in a scientific experiment conducted by the chemist and inventor, Humphry Davy, in 1796 (TTH 228). The chemistry experiment involves Coleridge’s use of nitrous oxide as a stimulant for the mind, which, as Rukeyser describes it, “provides dreams of so profound a perspective and so catenary a form that their joy is probably not to be surpassed by anything in waking or intoxication” (TTH 228). The experiment affirms Coleridge’s belief that chemistry presents a “divine scheme” where “all can become each and each all,” or, where the imaginative mind unites or links with the natural or physical world (qtd. in Lefebure 86). Through Coleridge, Rukeyser reassembles a reading of Hariot’s past and extends poetry as a means of reworking new arrangements of his history.

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4 Coleridge and Davy’s relationship is built from the intersection of science and poetry (or the imaginative life). This is likely why Rukeyser saw a place for Coleridge in the biography as a means of establishing a lineage of this way of thinking. Coleridge, for example, ssays of Davy in a lecture for the Literary and Philosophical Society in Leeds:

My attachment to Sir H. (then Mr) Davy, who had shortly before commenced his Mark of Glory as the Cheminical Lecturer, a Glory not brighter or filling a larger space to my mind now that I look back on it, than it did at Bristol, in his twentieth year, when I had to look forward to it.—I can truly say, that I lectured for pride: but it was the Pride of being a fellow
Rukeyser catalyzes the translation of this connection by drawing on a letter Coleridge sent to a fellow poet, W. Sotheby, where Coleridge explains that an object or organism may be discreet and independent as well as connected to other organisms through a larger ecosystem. Rukeyser sees Coleridge’s theories of interconnectivity as an extension of Hariot’s roughly sketched mathematical vision of gravitational force that shows how one planet can be pulled by or attracted to another. In the biography, Rukeyser directly quotes Coleridge’s translation of the scientific argument on interconnectivity to the arrangement of poetry, “In Hebrew poets, each thing has a life of its own, and yet they are all one life. In God they move and live and have their being; not had, as the cold system of Newtonian Theology represents, but have” (TTH 228). Coleridge is speaking against the Newtonian belief that bodies are coherent and complete, rather than subject to multiple interpretations. Rather than reducing complexity by isolating the parts of matter, Coleridge sees these parts as interconnected through a larger system. This echoes Rukeyser’s assertion in Life of Poetry:

This gathering-together of elements so that they move together according to a newly visible system is becoming evident in all our sciences, and it is natural that it should be present in our writing. Where it exists, it gives us a clue as to a possible kind of imagination with which to meet the world. It gives us a clue that may lead to a way to deal with any unity which depends on many elements, all inter-dependent. (19)

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5 Coleridge writes in the letter: “Nature has her proper interest, and he will know what it is who believes and feels that everything has a life of its own, and that we are all One Life. A poet’s heart and intellect should be combined, intimately combined and unified with the great appearances of nature, and not merely held in solution and loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal similes” (Coleridge, Letters, 404).
Rukeyser, like Coleridge, saw poetry as an interdependent set of parts, incapable, ultimately, of a finite reduction or a static claim. Instead, poetry offers the notion that knowledge is constantly in flux and built on a number of assemblages.

Another example of the complex arrangements Rukeyser constructs to recover Hariot’s traces is her reading of a small dedication in George Chapman’s translation of Homer titled *Achilles Shield*, printed in 1598, to explore the complexities of relations and intersections of Hariot’s resonance in history:

To my admired and soul-loved friend

Master of all essential and true knowledge

M. Hariot. (*TTH* 146)

For Rukeyser, the reference signals the resonance of Hariot within “[a]ll manner of learning” (*TTH* 148). Rukeyser extends her examination from the dedication to the poem that follows where Chapman praises Hariot’s role in new dimensions of knowledge making that create “bonds among astronomy, many kinds of exploration, and poetry” (*TTH* 146). Rukeyser reprints a the opening portion of the poem along with several other pieces:

To you whose depth of soul measures the height,

And all dimensions of all works of weight,

Reason being ground, structure, and ornament,

To all inventions, grave and permanent

And your clear eyes the Spheres where Reason moves. (*TTH* 146)

For Rukeyser, the poem’s first lines evoke the dimensions of Hariot’s interior life where reason is “ornament” to invention. She sees this dedication as an aspect of Hariot’s scientific experimentation where imagination and hypothesis moved what was known or observable into new arrangements.
Rukeyser continues to excerpt verses from the poem that praise what she names Hariot’s “wholeness” (TTH 147).

Then under all those forms you should discern
My love to you, in my desire to learn.
Skill and the love of skill do ever kiss:
No band of love so strong as knowledge is;
Which who is he that may not learn of you,
Whom learning doth with his light’s throne endow? (TTH 147)

The poem praises Hariot as a scholar who is wedded to knowledge. For Rukeyser, the poem symbolizes the scope of Hariot’s influence. She writes, “Again and again in Chapman’s writings, the breathing of Hariot is felt” (TTH 147). Rukeyser approaches Hariot’s past as something that can be read intertextually, or as a series of moving parts documenting Hariot’s imagination, rather than something that needs to be straightened or ironed out.

Rukeyser’s reading of Chapman in the biography continues to unfold as part of a larger continuum of literary history as she shifts from Chapman’s dedication to Hariot in Achilles Shield to John Keats’ reading of Chapman in the famous poem, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” Rukeyser’s layering of various poems to recover Hariot’s past reflects her belief in what she saw as the “multiple time-sense in poetry” (LP 31)—poetry’s ability to hold multiple reverberations of the past and the reader’s ability to experience these resonances. In the biography, Rukeyser explores the possibility that Keats’ description of his “encounter” with Chapman’s translation would have involved the edition with the dedication to Hariot (TTH 144). Rukeyser layers these encounters through her reading of the sonnet—Chapman with Hariot, Keats with Chapman, and Rukeyser holding them all—to explore what she calls the “celebration of discovery” across different arrangements of time (TTH 145). She reads the lines of Keats’ poem,
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;

*(TTH 145)*

as a reference to Hariot, as astronomer or “watcher of the skies,” and Hariot’s new vision of the cosmos as he mapped Jupiter’s satellites, or the way in which a “planet swims into his ken.” Rukeyser examines the poem as offering other “kinds of seeing” *(TTH 145)*. There are a number of discoveries Rukeyser claims that Keats’ poem celebrates. The language not only evokes the image of Hariot as astronomer, but also as explorer. Rukeyser points to the poem’s famous slippage between Cortez and Balboa in the lines, “Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes/ He stared at the Pacific— […]” *(TTH 145)*. While Rukeyser claims that every “school boy knows” that Keats has substituted Cortez for Balboa, she also argues that only Hariot combines the vision of the astronomer and the experience of the explorer. Rukeyser even turns to Kenneth Burke to describe his reading of Keats’ poem as a “meditation,” where the poet “come[s] upon a new internal sky” *(TTH 145)*. Meanwhile proof of these connections, as providing hard material facts about Hariot’s past or allowing an authoritative claim about his influence, is not Rukeyser’s goal here. Instead, Rukeyser uses Keats’ poem to promote a way of reading poetry as a “deep inner event,” or experience, capable of many arrangements *(TTH 145)*, one that binds Hariot’s discovery to Keats, to Rukeyser, and to the reader’s own reading of the poem.

As is the case with Rukeyser’s other biographies *Willard Gibbs* and *One Life*, the subject’s history in the book and Rukeyser’s experience of historical work often extended into her own published poems. Her work on Thomas Hariot is no exception. Rukeyser’s poem, “The Outer Banks,” was first published in *Poetry* (1965) and then published in *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), three years before her publication of *Traces of Thomas Hariot*. It is a sequence of twelve small poems that loop in and out of the landscape of the Outer Banks and her search for Thomas Hariot. In the *Craft*
interview, Rukeyser explains that her “prose is really a footnote to the poems. The Hariot book is a footnote to the Outer Banks poem” (31). The idea of the footnote suggests a reversal of what might be considered authorized accounts of Hariot’s life. The biography becomes footnote to the experience of the poem. The footnote also suggests continuity between Rukeyser’s texts and her desire to constantly rearrange forms so that, for instance, biographies intersect with poems. In a footnote to “The Outer Banks”, Rukeyser explains that “several journeys” have led her to this place, but the latest is her biography of Hariot. Rukeyser was familiar with the North Carolina and Virginia coastline as the site of the first flight by the Wright Brothers, which was symbolic, for Rukeyser, of the idea of extending one’s vision or imagination through both poetry and science. Of course, this was also the landscape where Hariot would spend his year documenting Ralegh’s first settlement. Rukeyser describes the Outer Banks as “a strong country of imagination” (CP 624).

In the same *Craft Interview*, Rukeyser further explains that she was familiar with this site from her childhood where she “played on sandbars” (31), an image that appears in the biography and the poem. The sandbars in the Outer Banks are constantly shifting and changing form. This land mass even shifts, so that the very terms to describe it alter as it does, as islands become inlets become peninsulas. In the introduction to Hariot’s biography, Rukeyser brings the reader into a moment of her own reflection on this particular landscape. She writes, “Standing on the shore, you look out over the little waves, past the sea-birds moving between you and the Outer Banks. Sand at the sea-bottom shifts, the water moves, the sandbars are shifting slowly. It is the landscape of the imagination” (*TTH* 16). The sandbars are temporary rather than stable or solid, and become symbols of Rukeyser’s process of reworking and rearranging her experience of Hariot’s past. “The Outer Banks” can be read as a punctuation of her search for Hariot and as a reflection on her own work as a poet sculpting this historical portrait. Rukeyser’s sense that the history of the Outer Banks was under constant renovation appears in the image of the shifting sandbars that begins the poem:
Horizon of islands shifting

Sea-light flame on my voice

Burn in me

Light

Flows from the water from sands islands of this horizon (CP 448)

The islands’ shifting masses also speak to the concept of transformation, motion, and process as water, like time, constructs and deconstructs the land. Rukeyser stages a poem about witnessing these changes not only in the exterior landscape, but also in the internal or interior life. The light, like the imagination of Hariot, echoes Coleridge’s quotation, “a new light was struck by Hariot.” Later in the sequence, Rukeyser transposes these initial lines of the poem,

Shifting of islands on the horizon.

The cycle of changes in the Book of Changes (CP 449)

Rukeyser’s Book of Changes refers to a Chinese divination ritual (CP 624) and speaks to Rukeyser’s experience of the landscape as ceremonial in that it involves both a familiar ritual and one that is also constantly changing.

Rukeyser’s poem continues to extend the image of the sandbars to the shifting layers of the history of the Outer Banks:

Sands have washed, sea has flown over us.

Between the two guardians, spiral, truncated wing,

history and these wild birds

Bird-voiced discoverers: Hariot, Hart Crane,

the brothers who watched gulls. (CP 449)

In this verse, the poem extends the history of the sand bars to Hariot, to Hart Crane, and to the commemorative memorial of Wilbur Wright’s first flight. The “Hatteras” section of Hart Crane’s
The Bridge (1930) also speaks to the history of this “coastwise range” (Crane 69). In his poem, Crane frames the landscape through the widening scope of history taking the reader through “ancient names,” “native clay,” to the dunes where “Wright wind wrestlers veered” (Crane 69). Crane also portrays Hatteras as a landscape of poets symbolized by the poem’s summoning of Whitman, a poet whose eyes are like “Great Navigator’s without ship” (Crane 70). Whitman’s presence underscores the sense of connection and communion across different arrangements of time and geography in the poem. This is a poem that presents what Paul Mariani calls the “long view” of history (Mariani 334).

Similarly, Rukeyser’s poem both echoes and extends Crane’s “long view” of the past.

The connections between the different texts—whether Hariot, Bruno, Coleridge, Chapman, Keats, Crane, or Rukeyser—exemplify the inter-textuality of much of Rukeyser’s writing as subjects, themes, and ideas are reworked continually into other forms. There is a sense in reading Rukeyser’s poetry and her biographies that the language and ideas are performed and re-performed again and again in different arrangements, one text layering, echoing, revising, or circling back to another. Rukeyser saw the constant reworking and recovering of the past into the present as a series of experiences that each contained its own history. The final verse of Rukeyser’s poem circles back to Hariot through the image of the “The wreck of the Tiger, the early pirate, the blood clam’s/ Ark, the tern’s acute eye, all buried mathematical /instruments, castaways, pelicans […]” (CP 453). Rukeyser summons Hariot’s past as well as the ruins, losses, or “buried mathematical instruments” of that past. In the final lines of the poem, Rukeyser extends the history of the “Outer Banks” to her own,

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Women, ships, lost voices.
Whatever has dissolved into our waves.
I a lost voice
Moving, calling you
On the edge of the moment that is now the center.
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From the open sea.

Rukeyser saw that her own voice, as poet, enters, even “dissolves,” into this past and its many arrangements, vectors, and movements of form. By placing herself in this scene, she, too, becomes part of this process and of the production of Hariot’s history and the history of the Outer Banks. The image of the “open sea” is a useful metaphor for Rukeyser’s recovery of Hariot, which, begins with the opening of Hariot’s archival papers and reverberates, through poetry, across a series of multiple and multiplying associations.

Of course, Rukeyser’s challenge to disciplinary dialogues through her open sense of form did not bode well for the history of Traces of Thomas Hariot. In part, reviewers and readers may have found it difficult to negotiate and accommodate these crossings between poetry and science, between these historical figures and herself, between herself and her readers who were meant to be witnesses to all these intersecting dialogues. Suzanne Gardinier’s reading of Rukeyser’s early investigative journeys in poetry mirrors one way of approaching Traces of Thomas Hariot:

Her transformations of this experience into poetry are not uniformly successful; her method was to grope, to try more than she could do, to stand at the edge of the unsayable (too large, too deep, too blurred, too secret), determined to make its silences speak. Where she fails, the result is obscurity, sometimes pomposity, sometimes baldness, language stripped of its nuanced power; where she succeeds, the power locked in the risk of her attempts pours into the poems, in a voice both impersonal (in the sense that weather is impersonal, or history) and particularly her own. (93)

Gardinier’s description sets up the challenge of reading Rukeyser’s methodology: on the one hand, it promotes “obscurity,” groping for something to mean anything; on the other hand, the risks she takes can produce a “power” that fills her poems. But this is a fusion that Rukeyser saw as inherent in this type of work, and releasing or isolating one method from the other would break the links and
exchanges possible in recovery work. In her refusal to pull apart the known from the unknown, poetry from scientific thought, Rukeyser’s may have helped cause her biography of Thomas Hariot to be shelved, lost, and seemingly, no matter where you would place it, displaced. Once published, reviews of the biography were quick to evaluate and dismiss the validity and qualifications of the poet to construct this type of historical work. Or, more often, reviewers expressed difficulty in placing Rukeyser among Hariot “scholars.” Where did this poet fit in the recovery work of the Elizabethan explorer and scientist? Where did this poetic method belong, and did it belong anywhere?

William Applebaum’s review of Traces of Thomas Hariot for Isis, discussed briefly in the introduction, outlines some of the disciplinary boundaries that Rukeyser challenges in her recovery work. For Applebaum, Rukeyser’s methodology provides a “kaleidoscopic view,” rather than a definitive or specialized one (279). While his review does appreciate the way that some of Rukeyser’s techniques open questions about the “relationship of science to poetry, of form to content, about different ways of knowing, and about history and the historical imagination,” Applebaum finally judges her methods as “irrelevant, far fetched or based on misinterpretation” (279). He concludes that they “result in missed connections and lost opportunities” (279).

Rukeyser’s view of archival work as flexible, expansive, and transformative does not align with the view of recovery as mastery over archival material. Rukeyser’s portrait of recovery unsettles the qualification of official narrative or authorized biography.

A review similar to Applebaum’s appeared in the London Times and describes Rukeyser’s writing as a “species of poetic prose which has freed itself from the usual restraints of grammar, logic, and order” (Hurstfield). He moves from his observations on Rukeyser’s experiment with “poetic prose” to her use of form, “What we have here is not a biography but a veritable collage of the courtiers, politicians, scientists, historians and explorers of the period” (Hurstfield). He further
claims, “It may be that this book will appeal to those who like impressionist pictures of a past age. But Hariot, who escaped the dangers of Atlantic hurricanes, and the no less stormy politics of the late Elizabethan period, has also somehow managed to escape the turbulent prose of Mrs. Rukeyser” (Hurstfield). Like the earlier critique, this review reads Rukeyser’s poetic prose, here described as “impressionistic,” as a chaotic scene of recovery. Because it does not present the sort of clear, objective portrait of her subject biographies are conventionally expected to provide, the text is cast as a failure of scholarship.

However, some reviews illustrate a shifting paradigm on the possibilities of recovery and the types of “creative” methods one could employ in this practice. For example, the poet May Sarton in a letter to John Simon, Rukeyser’s executive editor, dated March 24, 1971, describes Rukeyser’s text as “wonderful interweaving of a point of view with material elusive and fascinating” (“Muriel Rukeyser: A Registry” II:7). She continues to praise the methodology of the construction:

Muriel Rukeyser has always had a genius for seeing relationships between science and poetry, a sense of the wholeness of a world, so she is an Elizabethan herself. This is more than a documented search, a piece of history. It reverberates like a poem where there is a fertile marriage between ‘traces’ of Muriel Rukeyser’s vision and ‘traces’ of Hariot’s in a work of art rather, perhaps, than a work of history. (“Muriel Rukeyser: A Registry” II:7).

Similar to Sarton’s observations on form, a letter from Kenneth Rexroth to Rukeyser’s executive editor, John Simon, from around this same time, describes the work as “creative scholarship” (“Muriel Rukeyser: A Registry” II:7). Rexroth views the structure of the piece as a “nexus at which all sorts of fascinating tendencies, influences, pressures and plots crossed” (“Muriel Rukeyser: A Registry” II:7). Rexroth reads the departure from traditional biography and the complementary

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6 John Simon was the Executive Editor of Random House. The letters to Simon, now collected in Rukeyser’s papers, were most likely used to generate promotional material.
move towards poetics as a new form of scholarship and accepts poetry as a space to work out historical research.

Rukeyser’s attention to the poem as an alternative site for archival recovery relates to her belief that poetry invites a transformative response from the reader. What does it mean to bear witness to Hariot’s imaginative process? In *Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser theorizes on a reader’s relationship to a poem: “A poem does invite, it does require. What does it invite? A poem invites you to feel. More than that, it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response” (11). The poem as a site for archival work asks the reader to bear witness to not only an event, but the processes, thinking, and practices that give way to its invention. The reader is not only made to see poetry as a “vehicle for witnessing” (Herzog 28) the political, social, or even scientific climate, but is also made witness to the process of the imagination, in this case, Hariot’s mind as it seeks out new paradigms that fuse these different facets of thinking together.

**IV. The Living Archive**

A relatively new project “Muriel Rukeyser, A Living Archive,” [http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org](http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org), created by Eastern Michigan University’s English department (2012), is a fitting place to continue thinking about Rukeyser’s relationship to Hariot’s history. The idea of the archive as “living,” reflects Hawhee’s call to “get[t] the documents and artifacts to move” (101). The use of the word “living” in the project’s title evokes Rukeyser’s commitment to reading and arranging history as a constantly transforming process that breathes, moves, travels, and takes steps in different directions. The site’s philosophy upholds Rukeyser’s concept of poetry as a “meeting-place” and suggests that the emergence of more collaborative technologies further
embraces what Rukeyser saw as the multiple intersections of academic work (“Muriel Rukeyser: A Living,” “Our Mission”) The mission statement says,

[s]he would be fascinated by web technology, and recognize its inherent potential for articulating her unusually expansive relational vision of poetry as a cultural resource with many ‘uses’—a truly unfashionable word when used in conjunction with poetry. (“Muriel Rukeyser: A Living,” “Our Mission”)

The technology on the site allows for footnotes to her texts, interdisciplinary dialogues on her relationships to other writers, maps to her texts, and reprinted poetry and prose. It is a multi-voiced site dedicated to thinking through the movements of Rukeyser’s poetic and scholarly life. Rather than maintain a vision of Rukeyser’s work as a type of “fossil poetry” (LP 166), an Emersonian phrase Rukeyser uses elsewhere to indicate an inert or static view of language, the site explores the possibilities of a more transformative view of recovery and re-enters Rukeyser’s history through different modes and forms. Still, the site is situated in the specificity of department life and confronts, in much the same way that Rukeyser did, the very real boundaries of disciplinary forms.

Hariot’s papers, too, have undergone major renovations. Digital archives have opened Hariot’s papers to new systems of organizing and correlating material and also revise how one performs scholarship online. Also initiated in 2012, “The Manuscripts of Thomas Harriot, 1560-1621),” http://echo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/content/scientific_revolutions/harriot, is an online repository of Harriot manuscripts collected from various institutional archives including the British Museum, British Library, and the Petworth Library. This site displays the reach of emergent digital technologies and their ability to synthesize information across institutional settings and embed it in the larger structures of search engines, metadata, and tagging systems. As the site details in its explanation of the history of the manuscripts, the project seeks to “reunite[e] the scattered papers on a single platform” (Stedall “Context”).
Through this platform, the site “aims not only to publish Harriot’s surviving papers but to organize them in such a way that readers can find their way more easily through the disordered raw material” (Stedall “Summary”). The site manages the information by organizing the manuscripts into main topics such as navigation, alchemy, algebra, optics, mechanics, and astronomy as seen below:

![Figure 12 "Index to Topics" The Manuscripts of Thomas Harriot, (1560-1621).](http://echo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/content/scientific_revolution/harriot)

These topics link to other subtopics that help navigate the manuscript pages. For example, clicking on “Sea-Faring and Navigation,” leads to the topics of “ships and instruments” and “navigation.” The website uses arrows (see Figure 8) between manuscript folios in order to show linked or sequenced calculations or experiments.
These connections present a more elastic approach to archival categories and perhaps a more complex view of the way in which knowledge intersects and overlaps in more dynamic systems within the manuscripts. Still, as the first image above illustrates, these categories tend to become isolated into divisible fields. Even though the capabilities of the arrow system allow a more interactive view of manuscript arrangement, the vectors show linear pathways of knowledge connection built on clearly indexed, and, therefore, connected categories. For example, there are no vectors that extend to other realms of Renaissance learning, nor are there variable or unverified vectors that could accommodate Rukeyser’s conjectures, impressions, or traces. The website, as a whole, maintains categories of specialization and focuses on Hariot within the history of science and mathematics.
In a strange way, Rukeyser’s biography itself performs a certain technological function—I’m thinking here of something like Google Scholar or Google Books—that builds across multiple traces of Hariot’s past where queries pull both related and sometimes unrelated matches. But Rukeyser’s biography is also about the craft of poetry and its ability to hold the verifiable and unverifiable in play, not just what is indexed through data points. In her recovery of Hariot, Rukeyser sees poetry as an expansive system in its ability to move, reach through, and appropriate discourses of knowledge work. And yet Rukeyser’s biography is also a cautionary tale, in some ways. The idea that these interrelations were indefinite and that the unverifiable traces read in poems could hold up against the concrete hold of facts met with its own challenges of publication, academic acceptance in the history of science, and even the biography’s displacement in Rukeyser’s own literary history.

Rukeyser acknowledges this tension at the end of the biography in a small afterword called “Lost, Foundered, Found.” In this section, Rukeyser speaks to the difficulty of reaching Hariot in “our own time” (TTH 319). Rukeyser cites the quotation from Hariot’s printer page of A Brief and True Report, “PERIT ET INVENTA EST” (TTH 319). On the one hand, Rukeyser explains, Perire means to “to be lost, and also to die, to perish, and to waste away with love, to be undone, to founder, to be ruined politically, and also to vanish” (TTH 319). And, on the other hand, “invenire is to come upon, to light upon, to find, to meet with” (TTH 319). Once again, the tension between the dark and the light suggests the est and non est, the being and non being, involved in Rukeyser’s recovery of Hariot. This tension is not resolved. Rukeyser believes; instead, it is part of the “identity of the states of change” and the “phases that Keats and Chapman, Shakespeare, Ralegh and all discoverers—among whom Hariot takes his place—have known and have given to us” (TTH 319). Rukeyser didn’t see her work on Hariot as a question of scholarly qualification, ownership, or completion; rather, she saw herself in a continuum of literary histories that others would move forward. Reflecting this continuity, Rukeyser’s last acknowledgements in her text are to her students.
at Sarah Lawrence College, who she “first set the errand of searching with me for the traces of
Thomas Hariot,” and “to those unknown to me who will go on with the discoveries” (TTH 323).

Rukeyser saw in poetry a mode of arranging Hariot’s past that could accommodate the
movement and circulation of not only of his history, but also of the influences of his legacy in
multiple other forms and readings. For Rukeyser, to encounter a poem is to feel the resonance of
this historical system:

Experience itself cannot be seen as a point in time, a fact. The experience with which we
deal, in speaking of art and human growth, is not only the event, but the event and the entire
past the individual. There is a series in any event, and the definition of the event is the last unit
of the series. You read poems, the poem you now have, the poem that exists in your
imagination is the poem, and all the past to which you refer it.

The poet, by the same token, is the man (is the woman) with all the poet’s past life, at the
moment the poem is finished, that is, at the moment of reaching a conclusion, of
understanding further what it means to feel these relationships. (LP 178)

Rukeyser’s description of the “experience” of reading poems anticipates the “felt experience” of
Susan Howe’s archival work, taken up in the next chapter. For both writers, a poem’s ability to
extend the “fact” opens the view of the archive beyond the contents we recover and beyond the
question of errors to the many layers of scholarship that we continually inherit, perform, and
experience.
Chapter 2: “Images and Shadows of Divine Things”

Susan Howe and the Jonathan Edwards Collection

“I don’t know. Although I’m not a religious convert, I believe in the sacramental nature of poetry. Jonathan Edwards’ manuscripts announce the coming of Dickinson’s. When you see the material objects, in all their variety of shapes and surfaces, it’s like coming on unexplained spirits singing into air”

--Susan Howe, “Art of Poetry”

1.

In the field of contemporary women’s poetry, Susan Howe’s work is synonymous with radical experimentation in archival recovery. Her poetry often draws attention to the edges and fractures of archival collections: marginalia, unpublished manuscripts, ephemera, record locators, call numbers, folder numbers, object IDs, and pencil marks. Even eraser smudges from scholarly annotations create textual material for her verse. Snippets of these archival remnants are visually and linguistically fragmented on the page through a dramatic handiwork of cutting, copying, and pasting to form her collage-like poems. Since the time of her earliest compositions, Howe has framed and reframed the language of the archival manuscript in order to distort or disorient poetic and archival readings by fracturing verse, overlapping lines, and positioning blocks of language upside down,
diagonally, and convergently. These fractured performances often center on early American archives and the scholarly inheritance of the literary and material past contained in those collections. On the one hand, Howe turns to archival canons—those collections that carry a long even mythic history of their contents, such as those pertaining to Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville—both to illustrate the landscape of reading practices performed at those sites and to intervene in those readings. On the other hand, in exploring these archival canons, she also recognizes archival loss—the unknown figure, the unidentifiable text, the fragmented textile, the marginalia, the annotator, and the “perpetrator-with-eraser,” those that “corrupt” the original archival record (“Non Conformist” 98).

This chapter examines Howe’s responses to one such archival canon: the Jonathan Edwards collection at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library at Yale College. Howe’s reading of the Eighteenth century American theologian and pragmatist and his archival materials appears in a number of her books, including My Emily Dickinson (1985, 2007), The Midnight (2003), Souls of the Labadie Tract (2007), THAT THIS (2010), and several of Howe’s essays and interviews. In Howe’s reading, Edwards’ manuscripts become radical poetic experiments that intervene in scholarly research that seeks to clarify a fixed arrangement of the minister’s archive. As a counterpoint to archival science and authorized archival work, Howe explores the archives as both a material and spiritual practice drawing attention to the experience of text, texture, and the visualization of the archive in print.

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7 Howe’s “Perpetrator-with-eraser” is part of her description of the scene of scholarly work in Melville’s notebooks. She is discussing Wilson Walker Cowen’s examination of Melville’s marginalia. Howe details Cowen’s observation that there are erasures in the books. She summarizes his findings: “Elizabeth Shaw Melville is probably the culprit” (Non Conformist, “Melville’s Marginalia,” 98)
The poem resembles a scrap of torn or crumbled paper emphasizing the fragility of the archival record. “Phyllirea,” a genus of evergreen that produces a red fruit (Lindley 224), is one of the only fully legible words and points to Howe’s fascination with the minister’s diligent and prolific typological practices representative of his desire to document the natural world as an embodiment of scriptural faith. A series of unpublished manuscripts and notebooks in Edwards’ archive illustrates the minister’s commitment and struggle to record his typological work and his own reading practices. Howe’s representation of Edwards’ manuscripts shows the limits to recovery and suggests that archival knowledge is always relational and never final or complete. Rather than clarify a reading of Edwards’ system of typological identification, Howe continually represents Edwards through the
look and feel of his archival manuscripts. In one interview, “An Open Field,” Howe relates how she found the manuscript books of Edwards’ “Efficacious Grace,” a visually stunning manuscript hand sewn from salvaged paper and silk paper fans:

‘Two of them were constructed from discarded semi-circular pieces of silk paper Edwards’ wife and daughters used for making fans. If you open these small oval volumes and just look—without trying to decipher the minister’s spidery hand—pen strokes begin to resemble stitches of thread as if the text moving across its fragile textile surface contains message within message. As if the surface and meaning co-operate to keep alive in one process, mastery in service, service in artifice. (“Open Field,” para 4 )

What Howe saw can now be seen online, and reproduced here, in the form of digital images from the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library.
Figure 15 from Jonathan Edwards' "Efficacious Grace," Beinecke Collection. http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3521146
Howe’s poems are a response to the visual beauty of the archival record. Howe interprets Edwards’ manuscript as a space where the aesthetic meets spiritual practice. This is a space of wonder—where the visual beauty of the object or artifact arises out of curiosity and the impulse to know the unknown, whether this constitutes an affective, sensory, or spiritual realm of the experience of the manuscripts. This is also a place to admire rather than just “decipher” the archive’s contents. Howe’s description of the manuscript asks us to suspend the desire for “mastery” over subjectivity. Instead, she sees the archival manuscript as a visual collaboration, one in which the
scholar interacts with the archived author and the archive itself in order to construct meaning and history. Moreover, Howe demonstrates that, interwoven into this notebook, literally, is a history of women’s work: Edwards uses the paper for silk fans his wife and daughters created. Howe turns to these notebooks as well as the fragmented and marginal remains of Edwards’ wife, Sarah Edwards, to both recover an alternative vision of Edwards’ work and show the limitations to any “true,” “final,” or otherwise stable or authoritative version of recovery. Howe represents her sustained reading and unreading of the minister’s archive through fragmented poetic narratives of the ministers’ history and poems reflective of his archival assembly (and disassembly).

These notebooks also have an editorial and scholarly past that Howe both draws from and disrupts. Significantly, Howe reads, quotes, and excerpts from Perry Miller’s 1956 *Errand into the Wilderness*, a classic work of American literary history. This text greatly influences Howe’s vision of Edwards in early New England history. Miller emphasizes that Edwards’ part in the Great Awakening cannot be understood through just a sociological or even religious analysis, but must also be placed back into the environmental and philosophical “wilderness” of Edwards’ bailiwick, the Colonial territory of the Connecticut Valley. As Miller states, “Jonathan Edwards was a child of the wilderness as well as of Puritanism” (Miller 153). For Miller, Edwards’ archival manuscripts testify to his diligent typological practice in recording his observations of the natural world and his desire to document “phenomenon in ultra scientific terms” (153). While Howe returns to Miller’s historiography, she also dislocates the surety of Miller’s reading by resisting the weight and fixity of any claim to contain or organize Edwards’ manuscripts. Instead, she sees the archival manuscripts as a visual collaboration, one in which the scholar interacts with and thereby co-authors the construction of meaning and the construction of history in which the author and archive participate.

As Rukeyser constructs alternative modes of archival work through her recruitment of poetry into her reading of Thomas Hariot’s past, so too does Howe turn to poetry to intervene in
“authorial roles”. The use of the term here echoes Howe’s description of Emily Dickinson’s editor Thomas Johnson whose “copious footnotes, numbers, comparisons, and chronologies mask his authorial role” (*Birth-mark* 135). The term “authorial” also resonates closely with the language of authority, authorization, and authenticity, which are all important terms in archival work and scholarship. These are, of course, also terms that Howe’s poetry seeks to unsettle, blur, and fracture in academic work. Howe highlights and “[un]masks” Johnson’s role in creating his subject, Emily Dickinson. At the same time, however, as Howe acknowledges, “poetry is never a personal possession” (*The Birth-mark* 147). Unlike the scattered, destroyed, and fragmented remains of Thomas Hariot’s archive, the Jonathan Edwards collection is an immense, regulated, highly organized, protected, preserved, and edited archival space. It is a thriving archive from within which researchers produce compendiums and multi-volume editions of both his published and unpublished manuscripts. Not only does the Edwards archive have a history of curation, Jonathan Edwards’ impact on American literary history, theology, and philosophy—especially in pragmatist philosophy, typological readings of the natural world, and his involvement in the Antinomian crisis—also has a long academic genealogy. Howe intervenes in the reading of the archive in order to question what it means to write these literary histories and perform archival work.

A number of critical assessments of Howe’s arrangement of archival materials exist. Stephen Collis’ *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (2006), offers the most sustained reading of Howe’s scholarly work in the archives. Collis positions Howe between the role of scholar and anarchist (10), maneuvering between the desire to navigate and discover the archives and the desire to disrupt the materials and the practices that produce historical narratives from archival contents. Collis observes the way in which Howe is careful with the “material particularities” of an archival document, from her detailed packet descriptions and catalogues of materials as well as her attention to the imprints, annotations, and marginalia that are or are not noted in the archive (10).
The “anarchist” Howe is more critical of the “arbitrary authority” and institutional structures that shape academic work (10): “These two Howes meet in the archive itself, struggling over the conflicted and mutable document, seeking both ‘revolution’ and ‘revaluation’” (11). One could similarly affix the title of anarchist-scholar to Rukeyser’s and Philip’s relation to the academy. As scholars who participate in research work connected to institutional knowledge structures, they are also poets who challenge the normalization of academic work and seek other means of shaping knowledge from the archive.

Part of Howe’s intervention in archival work is a revaluation of the document as a factual record. In her texts, Howe embeds definitions, layers blocks of citations and scholarly quotes, creates or borrows encyclopedia-like entries, and inserts snapshots of archival documents. However, these documentary excerpts are not meant to prove or demonstrate a scholarly relation or claim about this knowledge; instead, the juxtaposition of these documents with one other and with her poetry challenge any fixed sense of meaning. In Howe’s texts, layered facts speak more to the practice of knowledge work than they make claims towards a proof of concept. As Marjorie Perloff asks in “‘The Rattle of Statistical Traffic’: Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe’s The Midnight,” “What place does such a dry, factual paragraph have in a text ostensibly classified as poetry? How do those dates, [...] names, and acronyms function in what purports to be imaginative writing?” (206). Perloff explores Howe’s fascination with the way in which attempts to “fix” language into authoritative accounts slip into fantasy and imagination, noting those spaces in The Midnight where “prose shifts seamlessly from documentation [...] to a statement of poetics [...] to the insertion of personal experience” (213). The resulting assemblage of materials creates a realm where the factual and imaginary intertwine and press against what constitutes a document, but also challenge what constitutes a poem.

Other critical discussions focus specifically on Howe’s physical arrangement of her verse and
draw attention to the way Howe uses language as an object of production. Gerald Bruns’ essay “Voices of Construction: On Susan Howe’s Poetry and Poetics (A Citational Ghost Story),” arranged as a numbered series of observations on Howe’s structure, declares as his first point: “1. The poem is a physical object, a spatial and visual artifact, in which words and letters are images to be placed like lines and colors on the white space of the printed (or perhaps handwritten) page” (29). His second point, however, separates visual construction from expression: “2. The physicality of writing suggests that (in keeping with a number of American or, for that matter, modernist poetic traditions) poetry for Howe is an objective construction, not a subjective expression” (33). While the poem as “physical object” is an important element in exploring Howe’s reading of the archive as an “unsettlement” (Birthmark 2) of traditional narratives of American literary history, Howe connects the visual composition to affective expression and, in doing so, suggests a reading of the archive as a subjective and often personal experience that extends beyond physical construction.

In addition to the physicality of the archival manuscript, Howe draws attention to the margins of articulation—to what can or cannot be expressed or what can or cannot be brought into form in archival histories. In one of her most cited expressions, Howe writes, “I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate” (Howe, Europe 14). Rather than just a visual or physical critique of the archival page, Howe also sees the poem as a mechanism for recovering those voices in history that have been lost, erased, or silenced or do not fit into the taxonomy or structure of the archive. In Howe’s texts, poetry becomes, as Ming-Qian Ma explains, a “counter method” that challenges the “epistemological enterprise” or administration of language rules (137). Through poetic assemblages, Howe draws attention to language in the archive to illuminate those voices that remain inarticulate or inexpressible.
2. “The Task of the Historian”

Edwards’ history is also a history of how we perform or do academic work encompassing the history of academic scholarship, historiographic methods, and archival practices. How do we read Edwards? Do we read him as a cold, angry minister, a scientific philosopher, or as an artist? Do we read him theoretically as a Calvinist philosopher, or as a product of the national imagination, or as grounded in the specific cultural or even environmental landscape of colonial New England? What works do we read? His collected print editions? By which editor? Or, do we read his unpublished manuscripts? And, through which editor’s system of chronology do we organize these readings?

Several recent digital projects focused on the Edwards archive strive to make the archive understandable in scholarly terms. The Jonathan Edwards collection reflects the most up-to-date standards and practices of digital scholarship and offers both an entryway and counterpoint to Howe’s depiction of these contents. One can see a portion of the Jonathan Edwards’ collection online through the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library website. In response to emergent digital technologies that could aggregate the critical editions transcribing and interpreting Edwards’ published and unpublished manuscripts, Yale University created the Jonathan Edwards Center in 2003. The center’s most recent project, The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online (WJE), is an online collection of Edwards’ articles, published works, and manuscripts (http://edwards.yale.edu). The center refers to this site as a “digital learning environment,” suggesting a reinterpretation of research as a spatial and interactive landscape across multiple terrains of material (“About” http://edwards.yale.edu/about-us). Through this digital archive, the center offers a “comprehensive” database of searchable transcribed manuscripts including “reference works, secondary works, chronologies, and audio, video, and visual sources” (“About” http://edwards.yale.edu/about-us). However, the actual images of the manuscripts and artifacts
themselves, available through the Beinecke collection, are not linked to the online edition. This separation enforces the severance between the visual and the linguistic aspects of the page space of archival materials that Howe brings together in her work.

Connected to the center is the “Sermon Editing Project,” where scholars can volunteer to become Edwards’ editors, and users are given a piece of a manuscript or record and offered the chance to make both a “literal transcription” and “edited forms” of the selected exhibit, with the goal of making Edwards’ work “available in a more efficient manner” (“Edit Sermons” http://edit.edwards.yale.edu). The site also emphasizes that the crowdsourcing initiative pushes forward “global accelerated editing,” meant to expand the production of Edwards’ manuscripts to the public, especially his sermons that have been transcribed but not edited (“Edit Sermons”). In exploring these archival projects, one gets the sense of a history of academic life and the contemporary vision of academic scholarship in digital archives as a movement towards mass production rather than reflective or close reading of a researcher’s experience with the manuscript. Still, when scrolling through the digital images of Edwards’ manuscripts at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library or the online editorial footnotes on the Works of Jonathan Edwards Online (hereafter referred to as WJE), the effort towards “efficiency” seemingly struggles against the immense and ineffable contours of what this archive tries to categorize and preserve. On the one hand, the project is technologically and collaboratively exciting in that a serious scholar or “interested lay person” (“Edit Sermons”) has the opportunity to contribute to Edwards’ history. On the other hand, as Howe’s poems illuminate, the push towards efficient and large-scale production can often diminish the more affective or tactile experience of what it means to produce historical readings.
1. The margins of the first several sheets in the ‘Miscellanies’ are badly worn and sometimes tattered. This is especially true of the first leaf, and there is no copy of No. a in the Dwight copies. Not long after J.E. wrote the essay he copied a large extract from it into the sermon on Isaiah 35:8 (printed in Works, no. 478–Isaiah 35:79), and about twenty years later he copied another into his ‘Personal Narrative’; both have been helpful in establishing the text. For the ‘Personal Narrative’ passage and the date of No. a, see above, pp. 76–79. 
2. MS: ‘strange [sic] notions.’ In the sermon on Isaiah 35:8 J.E. read it as a plural: ‘Men are apt to drink in strange notions of holiness.’ 
3. The first three letters are lost at the left margin, but the word is preserved in the sermon. 
4. The second ‘and look’ is a deliberate repetition; when J.E. copied this sentence into the sermon interlined the second ‘and look’ above a caret. 
5. The location of ‘most’ on the MS shows that a short word is missing from the left margin. 
6. A remnant of the last letter of a short word is visible at the left margin.

Figure 18 “Of Holiness,” From the Sermon Editing Project, Miscellanies, WJE online, http://bit.ly/1nXeDqZ
The Edwards’ archive (Fig. 17) and the footnotes to an excerpt in *Miscellanies* from the *WJE* online (Fig. 18) reflect the complex cosmology of material and intellectual thought inscribed in Edwards’ manuscripts. The first image (Fig. 17) of a page from Edwards’ *Miscellanies Book 1* highlights the density of Edwards’ small script and the difficulty of editorial transcription. The annotation “undated” reminds us that these texts cannot be placed in an easy chronology. Similarly, Thomas Schafer’s editorial notes (Fig. 18) draw attention to the “badly worn and sometimes tattered” leaves of the physical record. The notes reference to earlier scholarly editions suggests the layers of editorial history through which we read Edwards’ archival materials, layers that push against the idea of an “original” reading. The detailed footnotes point towards the scholar’s desire to make sense of these artifacts by not only attending fully to but also obliterating these layers. As Edwards’ biographer George Marsden affirms, the “task of the historian” is to make Edwards’ life “intelligible” (Marsden 2). Beinecke digital manuscripts and the sermon editing projects work towards this goal of intelligibility by constantly acquiring new information through which researchers can analyze Edwards’ historic texts. And yet the first image of the manuscript on the homepage of the collection, an image that accurately represents the composition, look, and feel of thousands of manuscript pages in the archive, showcases the difficulty of making “sense” of these contents or of making final claims to or about them.

In viewing the online images of Edwards’ archival materials, I am reminded of Derrida’s description of the trouble that Helene Cixous’ dream notebooks present to the library’s categorical systems. What are these texts? What do we call them? How do we index these items? Derrida explains the difficulty of delineating classifications:

> The line here would be drawn between literature and others, between literature, Omnipotence-other, and its others, and non-literature, between the material and the form,
private and public, secret and non-secret, the decipherable and the undecipherable, decidable and undecidable. So many conceptual pairs which here dwell in a perpetual fog, worse than oppositions, conflict, oppressive hierarchy or repression. (Derrida, Geneses 24)

In the process of archiving, the notebooks acquire a certain title, a subject or category, and a content description. These definitions are meant to make these texts accessible and searchable. Still, as Derrida notes, the contents are not easy to name, and any naming splits the “pairs,” the both/ands, the irresolvable multiplicity of the contents. In Derrida’s reading, Cixous’ notebooks represent a “perpetual fog,” a term which suggests that the archival material is murky, indefinite, and indeterminate. The content is more opaque than it is susceptible to any transparent ordering.

Edwards’ manuscripts also challenge archival categories. Rather than “dreams,” Edwards’ scriptural practices and his endless struggle to inscribe the divine push against archival systems, scholarly histories, and “digital learning environments that attempt to organize and produce these contents. However, as I will show in the following sections, Howe’s portrait of Edwards and the Edwards archive represents her resistance to the splitting of “conceptual pairs,” and showcases her desire to keep the “secret and non-secret, the decipherable and the undecipherable, decidable and undecidable” at play. In the case of Edwards, the empirical and the spiritual are part of this “perpetual fog.” However, the Edwards archive is less fog-like, in the sense of something blurry or irresolute, and more like an assemblage or a layered collage where cut ups, crossings, fractures, seams, ink blots, and paper tears are all bound together. Indefinite records are layered one on top of the other as collages of material history, echoing, reverberating, and crashing into one another. Through her use of poetry as a mechanism to shape and reshape these archival contents, Howe’s work reflects the places where the literary, theological, aesthetic, textual and visual histories intertwine and multiply rather than offer a singular or definitive vision of the past.

Moreover, as the image of the homepage of the Beinecke collection illustrates and as Howe’s
work emphasizes, these manuscripts are also visual artifacts that reflect the physical beauty and intricacy of the record. There is an ineffable beauty in the materiality of these archival records that doesn’t necessarily have a space, context, or index in academic scholarship, but does materialize in Howe’s arrangement of her poems.

3. “The Felt Fact”

Susan Howe’s Souls of the Labadie Tract begins with a scene describing Edwards’ record keeping practices:

Errand

During his ministry in Northampton, Jonathan Edwards traveled alone on horseback from parish to parish. Boston was a three-day ride east. It was easier to get to Hartford and New Haven. At Greenfield, the Mohawk trail began its climb westward toward eastern New York (then frontier territory). As an idea occurred to him, he pinned a small piece of paper on his clothing, fixing in his mind an association between the location of the paper and the particular insight. On his return home, he unpinned each slip and wrote down its associated thought according to location. “Extricate all questions from the least confusion by words or ambiguity of words so that the Ideas shall be left naked” he once wrote. Poetry is love for the felt fact stated in sharpest, most agile and detailed lyric terms. Words give clothing to hide our nakedness. I love to imagine this gaunt and solitary traveler covered in scraps, riding through the woods and fields of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

(9)

Howe depicts the image of the traveling minister pinning his thoughts on his body as he ventures across the frontier territory of the Connecticut Valley. I, too, love to imagine this wanderer on his “errand,” literally embodying his documentary practice, “covered in scraps,” and working to clarify
the language of his observations and spiritual impressions. Howe’s portrait of Edwards’ language craft also draws attention to the pins—the application, the tool, the material instrument that performs the work of attaching and fixing the record. The emphasis on pinning and unpinning marks an important moment in Howe’s depiction of Edwards’ documentary practice as it highlights material design and craft. Her reading points to the handiwork and the mechanics of producing these written texts and highlights their physicality. Howe’s description widens the reading of the artifact into the landscape of an early American frontier and expands the record from a flat document to the material construction of Edwards’ typological practices and his struggle to merge empirical expression with the divine.

Howe’s reading of this scene is not only an act of documentation and record keeping, but also of poetic making. Howe’s construction of the scene points to the materiality of Edwards’ struggle to record his observations and find expression for what he saw in this new wilderness in a stripped down, clear, and pure language. In the shift from the material to the expressive, Edwards’ record keeping becomes, for Howe, an act of poetic production or the “love of the felt fact.” The “felt fact,” reflects Howe’s earlier assertion, “I call poetry factual telepathy” (“Sorting facts” 7). Factual telepathy implies an intuitive mode of observing facts and a way of seeing the material world within a poetic reality (“Sorting facts” 9). One can see and experience the “visible” reality as well as “recuperate the hiddenness and mystery of this ‘visible’ world” (“Sorting facts” 10). Majorie Perloff sees Howe’s use of “ambiguous evidence” (117) as creating a reading or assemblage of “documentary facts” that remains “elusive” (122). She calls the use of documentary evidence “tissues of citation,” a phrase that reflects the ephemerality, texture, and opacity as persistent features of citation (122), the very things that academic citation usually presumes to clarify or do away with. Ross Gibson similarly suggests that attentiveness to Howe’s notions of “felt conviction” (179) provides a model for embodied methods of approaching historical texts through our sensory
or affective experience:

I think we need to be adept in a mode of historiography that appeals to the senses. We need non-textual (but designed and structured) patterns of propositions about the past, propositions that register in the nervous system, that register as pulses, flows, rhythms and lapses. And we need to propose these patterns in such a way that the perceiver gets convinced ‘in the bones’ rather than in the portions of our sensibility that manage linguistic, textual argument. (179)

The concept of the “felt fact” represents Howe’s method for approaching the archival record as both a material and experiential artifact and foregrounds the occasion for materializing and constructing her own approach to history as poetic practice.

Throughout Howe’s depictions of Edwards’ record keeping practices, the concept of the “felt fact” constructs an alternative reading of literary history that is expressive, ambiguous, and contradictory rather than singular, cohesive, or official. Most significantly, Howe connects Edwards’ record keeping practices to Emily Dickinson’s productions of her poems into self-bound folios. For example, in an early description of Edwards in *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe draws attention to the minister’s construction and craft:

Jonathan Edwards carefully sewed his work into handsome notebooks, as did Emily Dickinson. Among his manuscripts are several containing 212 numbered entries he made with different inks and pens over the span of his life. Miscellanies-fragments; like her poems they were never meant for publication. They have since been published under the titles *Images and Shadows of Divine Things,* and *The Beauty of the World.* (52)

Howe’s image of the “carefully” sewn notebooks underlines the technical characteristics of Edwards’ record keeping practices. More than just a transcription of Edwards’ writing, Howe’s project showcases Edwards’ practice of sewing the leaves of paper together to construct this
“handsome” text and, in doing so, illuminates the material and aesthetic composition of the form in addition to the content he inscribes in the notebooks’ pages.

Howe’s comparison of Edwards’ series of “miscellanies—fragments…never meant for publication” (Howe, My Emily 52) and Emily Dickinson’s fascicles illustrates the way in which our understanding of these authors’ texts are mediated through a series of later publication and editorial decisions. In The Birthmark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American History, Howe presents her experience of reading the publishing history of the Emily Dickinson’s fascicles. Observing that “An idea of the author Emily Dickinson—her symbolic value and aesthetic function—has been shaped by The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and first published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University of 1951 […]” (Howe, Birthmark 131), Howe underscores the way in which a scholar’s editorial decisions and his production of the archive can invent Dickinson’s place, even her value, in literary history. The emphasis on the publisher and the privileged rank of the university and its press also situates the scholar’s value and his or her ability to produce and disseminate this kind of historical work. Howe extends her description of this initial reading of Dickinson through Johnson to the publication of the Manuscript Books and Master Letters by R.W. Franklin. In reading the wider landscape of Dickinson’s publication history, Howe acknowledges the tension between the author’s work and the scholarly desire to make her readable: “[I]n a system of restricted exchange, the subject-creator and her art in its potential gesture were domesticated and occluded by an assumptive privileged imperative” (131). Howe examines the “domestication” of the Dickinson manuscripts by excerpting editorial notes from Johnson and Franklin’s editions of the poet’s work including Franklin’s references to “typesetting conventions” (132), his representations of Dickinson’s crosses and dashes, and spacing, and his decision, in editing the volume published as The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson, that “[s]tray marks have been ignored” (Howe, Birthmark 132; Franklin, ML 10). Other editorial notes
on “a drop of ink” (132), breaks versus stanza structure (134), marks and crosses separating words (137), word lists (139), and the classification of poems as letters and letters as poems (140) demonstrate how scholarly work shapes literary histories and authorial reception. At the same time, Howe’s arrangement and reading of these various and divergent discussions of and interventions in Dickinson’s editorial history undermine the idea that there is any way to receive or claim (or even read) this history at all. As Howe asserts, “‘Authoritative readings’ confuse her [Dickinson’s] nonconformity” (139). Howe draws attention to the unreadable or illegible aspects of Dickinson’s manuscripts: “margins perish” (148), “meaning is scattered” (148), and Dickinson’s “polyphonic visual complexity” (141) strains against organizational systems.

In bringing Edwards and Dickinson together, Howe highlights how scholarly editing shapes the archive. Howe’s account of the “domestication” and orderings of Dickinson’s fascicles mirrors the description of the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript’s organizational practices for archiving Edwards’ manuscripts. In the Beinecke’s digital archive, Edwards’ manuscripts are given a certain taxonomy that fixes a definition of the object’s genre (“manuscript,” “notes”); subject systems (“Great Awakening,” “sermons,” “preaching—US—History—18th century,” “Theology,” “Calvinism”); and place as a singular item (“Box 21”, “Folder 1249”). The WJE Online editorial note of about “Images of Divine Things,” by historians Wallace Anderson, Mason Lowance, and David Watters, provides an intricate map indicating the arrangement and order of Edwards’ typological system by following ink patterns, observing x markings, and grouping manuscript pages by their watermarks (“Note on the Manuscript”).
The Beinecke’s push towards making a clear arrangement of Edwards’ manuscripts mirrors Howe’s depiction of the scholarly history of clarifying Dickinson’s crosses and dashes (*The Birth-mark* 148). However, Howe’s focus on the materiality of the manuscript pushes against a reading of the text as a fixed (or fixable) system by suspending the act of interpretation or meaning making. Instead of forming a precise map of the manuscript’s contents, Howe first appreciates this “handsome” manuscript as a visual experience.

And it is a handsome manuscript. At the same time that Howe’s description of *Images and Shadows of Divine Things* acts as a counterpoint to the Beinecke’s system of classification and the editorial note’s drive towards cohesive and final arrangements, the digital archive does offer us a partial view of Howe’s visual “experience” of this text.
The precision of the lines of texts, the patterns of x’s down the edge of the paper, the thick thread down the spine that holds the notebook together flared out like a candle, and the brittle edges all give the viewer a sense of the multi-dimensionality of the manuscript’s construction. By presenting the construction of the notebook, Howe resists a reading of this text that would try to clarify Edwards’ system of documentation. Instead, Howe presents the manuscript as a material representation of language craft in early Colonial New England.8

8 As Matthew Brown suggests in The Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England, one must evaluate a manuscript’s “spatial, visual, and tactile properties” as part of the “myriad forms of communication” during this period in early New England history (xi). Brown further points to the way in which “the properties of the codex, its spatial heft, relative durability, and leaf sequencing” point to the artifact’s textual history. One can look at the “written record’s
Howe’s connection between Edwards and Dickinson not only points to the physical representation of the archive, but also links Edwards’ struggle to document the divine to Dickinson’s own complicated crafting of poetic expression. Howe reads this literary history as an inheritance of the “[d]ualism of the visible and invisible” (45). In My Emily Dickinson, Howe describes Edwards as “the Puritan consciousness” that “shadows and prefigures that of Emily Dickinson” (47). “Shadows” suggests that Edwards’ past as not only anticipates Dickinson, but also casts over her something dark, ominous, impressionistic, and not fully formed. In My Emily Dickinson, the section titles that bring these two figures together—“My Light is Death,” “Guns and Grace,” and “Conversant with Spiders”—underscore this sense of a dark shadow (45, 46, 47). As Isabelle Alfanty observes, this shadow, or as she describes it, an “obscure light,” is Howe’s emphasis on Dickinson’s “Calvinistic genealogy” (“Reading”). For Howe, this genealogy is cloaked in the “dualism of the visible and invisible” (My Emily Dickinson 45) and speaks to the Calvinist or Puritan desire both to “explore nature’s hidden meaning” (My Emily Dickinson 46) and to “discipline” it (My Emily Dickinson 46). Howe locates Edwards in the landscape of the sweeping religious authority of the Great Awakening and the small colonial communities who struggled to find order within an early American frontier. Howe calls Calvinism an “authoritarian theology” with an “autocratic governing principle over liberty” (My Emily Dickinson 38). In her description of Edwards’ systematic approach to his record keeping practices, Howe points to the way in which Edwards appropriates this desire to apply moral order on the surrounding world and to make the “governing principles” of the divine visible and articulate in his sermons.

However, Edwards’ desire for moral order was also constantly threatened by a sense of the material impact,” even “independent of the messages its words conveyed” (1). Brown’s conception of the “material impact” of the manuscript carries a similar resonance to Howe’s idea of the “felt fact” by extending a reading of the archival manuscript as a tactile experience.
unknown and unknowable. In a wonderfully haunting passage, Howe describes the Calvinist drive
toward moral order:

Cut off from familiar customs, from European civilization and its ‘enlightened’ intellectual
progression, trying to impose order on a real wilderness where winters were harsh, where
wolves howled around the outskirts of each settlement, and a successful harvest often meant
life or death to the community, the idea that our visible world is a whim and might be
dissolved at any time hung on tenaciously. (My Emily Dickinson 39)

For Howe, the frontier landscape that Edwards’ wandered through as an itinerant preacher both
provoked the will to order and the acknowledgment of submission to powers beyond human
control. In Howe’s description, Edwards reflects this dualism between the Calvinist call to
“discipline nature” (46), exhibited by his typological practices, and the profound and terrifyingly
liberating potential of acceptance and deference to the unknown, ineffable, or, as Howe describes it,
the “unseen Ocean” of God’s salvation and the “irrational beauty of life” (45).

Howe reads Emily Dickinson into this genealogy to open a space for the irrational, “I say
that Emily Dickinson took both his legend and his learning, tore them free from his own
humorlessness and the dead weight of doctrinaire Calvinism, then applied the freshness of his
perception to the dead weight of American poetry as she knew it” (51). Howe sees both Edwards’
fiery consciousness and struggle to perfect his language craft as entering the “structure of her
poems” (51). She describes this relationship in further detail: “The recipient of a letter or
combination of letter and poem from Emily Dickinson, was forced much like Edwards’ listening
congregation, through shock and through subtraction of the ordinary, to a new way of perceiving”
(51).

Echoing her description of Edwards’ notebooks in My Emily Dickinson, Howe returns to this
portrait of the minister in The Midnight:
The relational space is the thing that’s alive with something from somewhere else. Jonathan Edwards was a paper saver. He kept the old bills and shopping lists, then copied out his sermons on the verso sides and stitched them into handmade notebooks. (58)

Part of the experience Howe evokes in this scene of record keeping is the relationship between the layers of these texts. These different genres of material life—“old bills and shopping lists”—that become part of the archival record speak to the way in which these texts assembled the interior and exterior world of the minister. The word “stitched” further adds to the idea that Howe sees Edwards’ manuscripts as gathering and holding together what she refers to later as a “document universe” (Midnight 61). Howe links this practice to poetry and extends the description of Edwards past Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts, finding it as well in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s record keeping practices: “When he was in his twenties, Emerson cut his dead minister father’s sermons in manuscript out of their bindings, then used the bindings to hold his own writing” (58). Mirroring the passage in My Emily Dickinson, Howe reads poetic production back into its visual assemblage and suggests a relationship between poetry and the experience of the archive.

In THAT THIS, Howe describes a similar emergence of the “felt fact” as a catalyst activating her poetic practice: “I often have this sense of intruding on infinite and finite local evocations and wonder how things are, in relation to how they appear. This sixth sense of another reality even in simplest objects is what poets set out to show but cannot once and for all” (THAT THIS 34). In her approach to the archive, Howe’s confrontation with manuscripts unfolds as a powerfully evocative encounter, one that elicits amazement, excitement, grief or thrill. Howe often echoes the words “I wonder” in her texts. Another example of this position towards scholarship occurs in her contemplation of her work with Emily Dickinson manuscripts:

Sometimes I wonder over the insistent pencil or pen strokes in her late fragments and drafts—the way each word, syllable, punctuation mark, or letter shape is separate from and
speaks to what follows or interrupts. “A Word is inundation when it comes from the Sea—Peter took the Marine Walk at the great risk," she once wrote. She tried the sentence out on a scrap of paper before incorporating it in a letter to an unknown recipient. She understood the prevision of the organizing intellect (habit) versus the unruliness of immediate sensation (spontaneity). In poetry they are antithetical but necessary to each other. A poet enters the engulfing nature of language itself—the distance and immediacy of words. Maybe her late drafts and fragments with their repetitive marks, crosses, dashes, strokes, circles, slashes, and blanks are archaic compositional sources clearing the ground for something new. (“Open Field”)

The archive is a space within which to contemplate the marvel of the artifact. As objects of wonder, archival manuscripts mark the “outermost limits of the natural” and register “the line between the known and the unknown” (Daston 13). Wonder, as a contemplation of the “felt fact,” is the stimulus for poetic practice as Howe collects, fragments, and arranges archival materials to produce new readings or contemplations of historical records between the articulate and inarticulate spaces of history. Ming-Qian Ma explains that Howe’s poetry explores alternative means of articulating “common knowledge” (152) and, in doing so, is always in process. Ma further explains, “Poetry, in this sense, is never written; it is, always, writing” (153). In its power to provoke contemplation, wonder is also an active occupation, and in this way echoes Howe’s sense of poetry as an active practice or performance that continually rewrites or reveals the past.
In Howe’s exploration of Edwards’ history and his struggle to articulate sacred truths in natural phenomena, she also interweaves Wallace Stevens’ poetry. Connecting Edwards and Stevens at the beginning of Souls with an epigraph that combines the two writers’ vision of language craft, Howe stages a shared history or inheritance of a pragmatist philosophy of language production.

The silk-worm is a remarkable type of Christ, which when it dies yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing. Christ became a worm for our sakes, and by his death kindled that righteousness with which believers are clothed, and thereby procured that we should be clothed with robes of glory. (Vid. Image 46. See II Sam. 5.23.24; and Ps. 84.6: the valley of mulberry trees.)

--Jonathan Edwards, “Images or Shadows of Divine Things”

The poet makes silk dresses out of worms.

--Wallace Stevens, “Adagia” (epigraph, Souls)

Richard Poirier writes that pragmatist thinking showcases “writing itself as an activity...as a dramatization of how life may be created out of words” (qtd. in Grimstad 2). In Poirier’s reading, experience of the world takes place through a continuing cycle of composition. Edwards’ “Images or Shadows of Divine Things” and Stevens’ “Adagia” are similar texts in that each involves inscriptions or definitions of types—one’s observations on the material world and then the subsequent exercise or practice of crafting the language for that perception as a constitutive act. This was an important practice for both Edwards and Stevens in terms of exploring the meaning or perception of a word and its part in a larger and continual process of composition. In these epigraphs, Howe points to the writer’s articulation of the “silk worm” or “worm” as a technical and material worker; it labors to...
produce thread in order to clothe “believers” or create silk dresses as poetic artifice. The language of material creation draws attention to the process or experience of composition in the words “yields” and “procured,” and, in Stevens, the emphasis on “makes” gives us a sense that the silk worm is a material worker spinning thread or language for poetic production. In this case, the silk worm helps create or compose something beautiful—“robes of glory” and “silk dresses”—as well as tactile and textural. The different creations help emphasize what Howe sees as the difference between Edwards and Stevens. Edwards’ inexpressible is a sense of or experience of the spiritual whereas Stevens’ “silk dresses” accentuates the aesthetic. However, the image of the silk worm is likewise representative of martyrdom and death, linking the materiality of language craft to ephemerality, transience, and impermanence.

By citing Edwards’ observations of the silk worm, Howe draws us in to experience his language work. As the Stevens scholar Joan Richardson suggests about Edwards’ notebook entries, “one no longer thinks about the language, but in it […]” (Richardson 28). The idea of thinking “in” language frames Howe’s sense of recovery. To approach Edwards’ archive is to dwell in its material forms as well as its linguistic and semantic constructions. If looking at the manuscript is a visual and tactile experience, here, Howe suggests it is also a meditation or exploration of language craft.

Edwards saw language as a conceptual space, “the room of the idea,” or as Richardson terms it, “the residence of reflection” (Richardson 26). Howe’s portrait of Edwards’ silkworm shows this sustained meditation or reflection on language work. Howe’s reading of language production as a continuum between Edwards and Stevens explores the shaping and reshaping of language and, in doing so, blends the archival experience with a poetic practice.

Steven’s “Adagia,” a set of notebooks containing a collection of aphorisms or proclamations on language, exemplifies a type of labor or language craft parallel to Edwards’. One of Steven’s most famous entries, “[a]ll of our ideas come from the natural world: Trees = umbrellas” (Stevens,
CP 903), mirrors Edwards’ sustained meditations on the relationship between the perception of “reality” and the crafting of language to arrive at (or continue to work towards) some quintessential, albeit ultimately ineffable understanding of “truth”. Marjorie Perloff calls “Adagia” a “commonplace book,” where observations and reflections are recorded and suggests that Stevens used “Adagia” to “ruminate on the nature of poetry and poetics” (Perloff “Beyond ‘Adagia’” 17). Stevens’ rumination on the worm as the poet’s material for making “silk dresses” mirrors Edwards’ practice of translating or converting an encounter with the natural, material world into poetic form. The clothing or poetry makes “visible what is invisible”—the initial experience or perception of that object. For Edwards, this realization of the inaccessible or invisible is the product of faith. For Stevens, the poet shapes language to clothe the passion of the imagination. By bringing these two figures together in her combined epigraph, Howe constructs a history of thinking about the relationship between the natural world and the aesthetic experience as an act that moves from annotation to language creation.

In Souls, Howe continues to build the connection between Edwards’ and Stevens’ attention to language craft through an image of their record keeping practices. Paralleling the image of Edwards pinning his notes and observations on scraps of paper to his body as he ventures through the “wilderness” of the Connecticut Valley, Howe introduces Stevens’ documentary practice in a second “Errand,” placed right before the beginning of the poems called “118 Westerly Terrace,” Stevens’ West Hartford address:

Wallace Stevens, a surety claims lawyer and later vice-president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, observed, meditated, conceived and jotted down ideas and singular perceptions, often on the backs of envelopes and old laundry bills cut into two-by-four-inch scraps he carried in his pocket. At the office, his stenographers, Mrs. Hester Baldwin, and
Marguerite Flynn, made transcripts. During night hours and on weekends, he transformed the confusion of these typed up ‘miscellanies’ into poems. (Souls 73)

Howe’s image of Stevens’ technical work of record keeping from the slips of papers to the typed transcription of the work mirrors her depiction of Edwards’ documentation. The very idea of the stenographer brings to mind the act of recording and inscribing, and the image implies, in fact, a process of creating an exact or precise record of testimony. Calling them “miscellanies,” Howe also conceives of these slips as comments on everyday life. The term also echoes Edwards’ “Miscellanies,” which were another set of notebooks, similar to “Images,” for recording his perceptions of the natural world. At the same time that these “miscellanies” are an assemblage of notes, they also become the material for poetry in Howe’s illustration.

In these dual “errands,” Howe accentuates Edwards and Stevens’ mechanics and materiality of perception as part of an aesthetic process. In fact, Steven’s devotes much of his poetry and prose to considering the relationship of the thinking mind to the material world:

The material world, for all the assurances of the eye, has become immaterial. It has become an image in the mind. The solid earth disappears and the whole atmosphere is subtilized not by the arrival of some venerable beam of light from an almost hypothetical star but by a breach of reality. What we see is not an external world but an image of it and hence an internal world.

Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet’s sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense. (qtd. in Richardson 182)

The outside, “external” world becomes an internal experience and poetry is the structure through which those sensations are documented. Similarly, poetry can also demonstrate an alternative way of constructing a literary history through resonance rather than official narrative.
At the end of her vision of Stevens’ errand, Howe enfolds her own experience into this language work: “Today while out walking, I experience ways in which Stevens’ late poem ‘The Course of a Particular’ locates, rescues, and delivers what is secret, wild, double, and various in the near-at-hand” (Howe, Souls, 74). Howe’s statement both cites and echoes Steven’s poem. Her use of the word “today,” echoes the first line of Stevens’ poem, “Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind” (Stevens, CP 460). The certainty of the time in Howe’s echo of Stevens is then dislodged by Howe’s experience of the “secret, wild, double, and near-at-hand.” In her portrait of Stevens’ record keeping practices and in her reading of his poetry, Howe proposes a method of doing literary history that traces a resonance of shared language use, but troubles any certainty about whose language we inherit or experience.

After this parallel image of the two figures’ Errand, Howe brings Edwards and Stevens together in a section of poems titled “118 Westerly Terrace,” the address of Stevens’ home in West Hartford, CT. Using the image of the home as her stage, Howe shapes and reshapes the language of Edwards and Stevens, and, in doing so, blends archival work with a poetic practice. In this set of poems, Howe creates a vision of literary history that summons a series of poetic hauntings and undermines the stability of lyric or historical subjectivity. The first poem in the series begins:

In the house the house is all
House and each of its authors
Passing from room to room

Short eclogues as one might
Say on tiptoe do not infringe  (77)

The poem is Howe’s revision of Stevens’ “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” which contemplates the relationship between a reader and his or her consciousness of a book’s language.
The poem questions what it means to arrive at a true or unfiltered relationship to expression: “the access of perfection to the page” (Stevens, *CP* 311). The poem’s repetition of “the house” summons the multiple layers of knowable and unknowable histories available or accessible in the poem. “The house” with its emphasis on the definitive article, summons the particular site of Stevens’ home. And yet the closer or more inside this language we come (even closer or more inside Stevens’ poetic practice), the less we are sure whose home we are in. Moreover, the presence of “authors” suggests the many ways in which this house or the concept of home becomes a poetic image that is part of a larger literary lineage. The image of the authors “passing from room to room” takes the reader through a tour of the structure, but also echoes Edwards’ concept of the “room of the idea” (Richardson). The poem contains a literary inheritance in these “rooms” of the many authors passing through these words. As Gerald Bruns writes of this set of poems, “…perhaps the main character of ‘118 Westerly Terrace’ is just the house Stevens lived in, and who knows, he may be there still, since in Howe’s world you can’t have a house (or a poem) without a ghost in it” (Bruns 32). Bruns’ vision of the ghost suggests that once a reader is immersed in Howe’s language, one is not in a “pure” space, but in a long historical continuum of poetic language work where each word contains an archive of literary history.

The following poem continues to inhabit and explore the word “house.” Entering into the history of this home, Howe’s poem includes the reader’s perception and meaning making of this history. Here, pronouns and perspectives shift and bring the speaker and the reader into the scene:

I want my own house I’m
You and you’re the author
You’re not all right you’re

All otherwise it appears as
If you don’t care who you
are—if you count the host   (78)

For Howe, the poem is a place in which to explore these shifting perspectives of the mind. The
passage from “I” to “You” unfixes the role of viewer or author and asks who is authoring or making
meaning of language. The reader or this “other” person, “you,” becomes the author. While the
assertion “I want my own house” suggests a desire for a claim to language, ultimately, whose
language we’re in or whose house we’re entering is blurred. Howe captures the shifting sense of
perspectives in her essay on Stevens, “Sometimes while reading Stevens I feel as if a soul has power
to imagine nonexistent things and can pass from one body into another” (Howe “Choir”).

A poem like this undermines the singular lyric or historical subject; instead, it stages a poetic
reading of Stevens’ house that blurs the boundaries of historical subjects. In summoning these
hauntings and echoes of a literary genealogy within the poem, Howe’s poem creates an unstable but
powerfully suggestive archive of composition practices. Howe frames the two authors’ search for the
“secret, wild, and double, and various in the near-at-hand” (Souls 74). Often, in this series of poems,
we get the sense that the poet sheds light on these more spiritual or immaterial contours of language:

It was the passage I always
used at first fall of dusk so
the thought of it hangs like
a bright lamp in the realm
of the spirit where each word is
consent to being or consent
to partial being on its own (98)

The poem exhibits language as a living, moving, and spiritual entity where one understanding of the
word can pass into another. The image of the passage, whether it reflects the structure of a walking
path, the passage from one room to the next, or the passage of a verse of poetry, emphasizes the idea of moving through form. The firmness of “I always” suggests a routine, like the endless cycle of record keeping practices Stevens and Edwards undertook to explore the language for representing reality. But this is also “the realm of the spirit,” where the poet might also summon in language what is unexplainable or ineffable. As Bruns suggests, for Howe “[…] poetry is a form of ghostwriting; or, to give the screw another turn, poetry is a certain way of inhabiting and resonating with a world in which even mere things—leftover, discarded, or forgotten things like things in a desk drawer—are haunted […]” (42).

In the “spirit realm,” Howe’s poems turn to the imagination to reflect what she sees in Edwards and Stevens as the “inexplicable intricacies and ecstasies of form” (Howe “Choir”). Here, the sensation of language is experienced through poetic form. The concept of “consent to being,” echoed in the poem above, is Edwards’, and it refers to his philosophy of harmony with the material world. Edwards believed that the form of language couldn’t, in itself, achieve aesthetic value or beauty when describing the natural world. For Edwards, the “consent to being” is relational: one perceives something in the natural world as beautiful or wondrous, such as the phenomena of the “first fall of dusk,” because the viewer feels or senses something beyond material reality. The exercise of casting language onto this form involved creating a linguistic experience that might represent or reflect this moment of observation and intuition—or faith.

The pronouns in the following poem show this shared sense of language, as Howe creates patterns in which Stevens and Edwards’ words overlap and intertwine.

I heard myself as if you
Had heard me utopically
Before reflection I heard
You outside only inside
Sometimes only a word
So in a particular world
As in the spiritual world (96)

This passage plays with perspective and the way in which language shapes meaning between people or between observation and composition. The shifts between the pronouns “I” and “You” create interplay between different moments of reading; whether it’s Howe’s reading of Stevens and Edwards or our reading of Howe, one tries to enter these words “utopically,” to experience the union with this literary inheritance of language craft. As Howe explains in “Choir answers to Choir,”

Beauty, harmony, and order are represented by the arrangement and repetition of particular words on paper. Often while reading Jonathan Edwards’ ‘Personal Narrative,’ or the poems gathered together in Stevens’ last two collections *Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*, I feel the inexpressible sense of affection Edwards describes when referring to his reading as an ecstatic union between nature and scripture. (Howe, “Choir”)

But in roving through the poem’s language, these literary genealogies remain ineffable and not fully formed.

Howe’s vision of the poem as a place to explore the history of language formation in the space between the material and immaterial continues to resonate. She writes elsewhere in “118 Westerly Terrace,”

Face to the window I had
to know what ought to be
accomplished by predecessors
in the same field of labor
because beauty is what *is*

What is said and what this
The poem moves us again to the house. Now, the speaker faces the window to consider the work of her predecessors. The speaker reflects on the “field of labor,” whether this is the natural world or the space of the poem. The last three lines shift between Edwards and Stevens’ pursuit to name or reach “what is,” and the ambiguity of “is” and “it” to their reference. Through this fusion, Howe brings these figures’ language and philosophy together in the poem, and, in doing so, collects these echoes to create a multidimensional view of literary history that might not resemble a scholarly essay or an official narrative but that does construct a means of reading these figures together. Rather than a clear chronology or a close reading of their work, Howe asks the reader to experience the shaping and reshaping of the material realities and spiritual evocations. The endlessness of the activity emphasizes process not product, one with values but not the or an ultimate value.

Poetry has no proof nor plan nor evidence by decree or in any other way. From somewhere in the twilight realm of sound a spirit of belief flares up at the point where meaning stops and the unreality of what seems most real floods over us. It’s a sense of self-identification and trust, or the granting of grace in an ordinary room, in a secular time. (Howe “Choir”)

4. “The Past Whose”

Although Edwards is a resonant figure in several of Howe’s texts, her more radical experimentations with poetic form occur in her representation of the archival presences of Sarah Edwards, Jonathan’s wife, and Hannah Edwards, his sister in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* and THAT THIS. Buried in the Jonathan Edwards archive at the Beinecke are the few archival remnants that mark the life of two colonial New England women. In THAT THIS, Howe describes the contrast between Jonathan Edwards’ records and Sarah and Hannah Edwards’ archival contents:
[...] apart from a journal kept by Esther Edwards Burr (Jonathan and Sarah’s eldest
daughter) after her marriage, and a few letters to and from the sisters, daughters, and Sarah,
all that remains of this 18th century family’s impressive tradition of female learning are a
bedsheet Esther Stoddard Edwards probably spun and embroidered herself, Sarah’s wedding
dress fragment, and several pages from Hannah Edwards Wetmore’s private writings—along
with posthumous excerpts collected and transcribed with commentary by her daughter Lucy
Wetmore Whittlesey. (21)

Of course, these fragments testify to more than just the state of Sarah and Hannah’s records; they
reflect the state of archival scholarship on the history of colonial women. Very little documentation
or record of women’s work exists in the archival sense. Under the structures of the archive—both
the context in which the records are created (or excluded) and the way in which one enters the
archives now—women’s histories are often absent, silenced, or erased. Howe’s poetry reconstructs
the experience of archival work by rearranging these traditional modes and methods of archival
representation. Her work opens the questions: How can we read these records differently? Is it
possible to read them at all? How does one approach this history or historical recovery without
imposing the same set of structures that exclude women’s voices and productions? Howe’s effort to
both seek recovery and acknowledge its limitation takes the form of poetic collages that break the
language of archival records and rearrange the archive’s contents. This is less about precise or
definitive narratives than about exploring an approach to the archive that disrupts the rationalizing
or clarifying process of historical work. Instead, Howe’s work invites reflection and contemplation
on the uncertainties and “undecidabilities” of the archive. This is not a method that advances
mastery or determines the subject in its entirety; rather, Howe’s poetic collages offer an assemblage
of voices, textures, even textiles that embrace the ambiguous and irrational practices of historical
work. Though these poetic collages acknowledge the limitations of archival recovery, Howe assuages the loss of women’s voices in the archive by constantly recasting new perceptions of its contents.

The last section of poems in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, “Fragments of a Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards,” continues to explore the possibilities and limitations of recovery as an endless though insufficient process that may, nonetheless, especially if these losses are acknowledged, challenge the transparency and purported objectivity of archival systems. In this section, Howe turns to the history of Edwards’ wife, Sarah Pierpont, to examine archival loss through a series of collage-like poems. If the prolific and seemingly immense structure of manuscripts and records characterizes Edwards’ past, for Howe, a small blue scrap of fabric reflects the archival remains of Sarah Edwards. This stunning visualization of the finite material of Sarah’s history begins the set of poems and not only reflects the “undecidability” of archival material in the tension between the material and the spiritual it records, but also reflects the affective and intimate experience of archival work.
Howe’s rendition of the fragment clears out the language of the archive and presents the fabric against the blank white page.
In stripping the language of the “finding aid” from the scrap of fabric it seeks to classify, Howe presents the visual reality of archival loss as well as re-orders the possibilities of encountering this material anew through the “subtraction” of all content that tries to clarify its purpose.

Howe’s initial image of the fabric scrap creates a series of tactile associations across Souls of the Labadie Tract. Its square-like geometry suggests an affinity towards “order” and arrangement of the material world. The fabric is pinned to the page as if to fix or secure its legibility. And yet, the not quite square, unraveling, and thread-y fabric from the dress also echoes the original epigraphs
that begin *Souls* where the silk worm becomes the image of ineffable, divine, and poetic composition. The ephemerality of the “scrap,” also parallels Edwards’ practice of pinning scraps of paper to his body and Stevens’ habit of jotting down his observations on scraps of paper. Edwards’ practice of sewing together salvaged rags into notebooks—even the pinholes can be seen in these manuscripts—mirrors the image of the blue fabric scrap from Sarah’s wedding dress. By interweaving the images and practices that connect Edwards’ and Stevens’ compositional practices with the history of Sarah Edwards and the larger spectrum of women’s archival histories, Howe inscribes among other things, the next branch of the genealogical tree she’s been recovering and inventing.

The blue scrap, symbolic of Sarah’s private life and eighteenth century women’s work, reflects the experience of archival loss and the difficulties such loss creates for efforts to document Early American women’s history. Material records of Sarah’s existence are slight. Material records that mark Sarah’s history and her relationship to Jonathan Edwards are often transcriptions, whether in Edwards’ hand or in those of scholarly editors’. In *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe details small fragments of Sarah’s life through Jonathan Edwards’ personal writings. In an entry titled “On Sarah Pierpont,” Edwards describes his first encounter with Sarah in New Haven when she was thirteen. The other surviving text is a “personal narrative” of Sarah Pierpont that details an account of her religious conversion.

In the narrative, Sarah details an account of her religious awakening in 1742, where she experiences the “uncommon discovery” of God’s excellency. In this conversion narrative, which Jonathan Edwards asks her to record, she explains her experience of an “inexpressible” sense of God that elevates her soul above domestic cares. She describes how deeply this experience marks her soul, how it creates such an impression that she could face the town or her husband’s “ill will” even if it meant being driven into the “deep snow” (Dwight). Laura Henigman examines this
narrative—read now in transcript from Edwards’ hand, later appropriated into his sermon *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival of Religion*, and printed in Sereno Dwight’s publication of *The Works of President Edwards: With a Memoir of His Life* (1830)—as a “most intense vision of congregational unity” (168). Henigman argues that Edwards eventually adopts Sarah’s use of affect (or the intensity of her affect) in his own work. For Henigman, this layered reading of the document shows the way in which Edwards’ minister-authored texts and archival records inflect Sarah’s history and voice as well.

The only extant copy of this narrative is printed in a nineteenth-century biography of Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards, 10 Volumes, edited by Sereno Dwight*. Sarah’s original manuscript record of her experience has been lost (Henigman 7). Henigman details the difficulty of piecing together the history of women linked to the male clergy of Colonial America. Surviving documents, when they exist at all, are often preserved in the larger collection of men’s archival histories or encompassed in family or institutional archives. Not only is Sarah Pierpont’s archival material in Jonathan Edwards’ archive, her language in the personal narrative is shaped by social, cultural, and scholarly appropriation. As Henigman observes, “most writings of colonial American women survive because they were solicited by ministers and shepherded through the press by those men to fit their agendas, edited and shaped, we may assume, to an undetermined extent by their pens. Once ‘out,’ women’s words were another’s” (Henigman 7). Henigman shows that Jonathan Edwards incorporates Sarah’s religious experience into his sermons and writings, including *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, which championed submission to the divine during the Great Awakening. On the one hand, for Henigman, this is an example of the “erasure of women in New England discourse and culture” (8). On the other hand, Henigman also argues that if we read these texts for what they are as “compromised texts” then we can focus on the “interactions” of these two historical figures and the “mutual exercise of power and influence” (Henigman 8). Howe, in many
ways, presents a parallel argument through her poetry. Like Henigman, she both frames and represents erasure, and she also demonstrates the way in which Sarah and Jonathan Edwards’ language are mutually constructive.

The image of the fragment of the wedding dress becomes the occasion for revising or re-reading Sarah’s personal narrative and the stories of her conversion. Howe continues to both visually mirror and distort the design of the initial material fragment as an act of narrative revision. “Fragments of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards” represents the most radical visualization of archival work in *Souls*. Lines of text are in play: they cross, cut each other off, overlap, break, swoop down, change fonts, and fade. Small poetic collages reflect the minutiae of the archive and shift the reader’s perception between the legible and illegible. Howe places Sarah’s historical subjectivity in relation to (or as part of a continuum of) literary history and the discourse of the inexpressible boundaries of the material and spiritual world in the archive.

The poems beginning with Sarah’s fragmented dress scrap continue to demonstrate her view of the archive as a visual and artistic medium. The look and feel of Edwards’ handmade notebooks directly influences Howe’s impressions of Sarah’s past. As she describes them in an interview, “An Open Field,” these poems “were a way to translate into print [her] reaction to the thrill of seeing the collection of Jonathan Edwards’ manuscripts at Yale’s Beinecke Library” (“An Open Field”). Howe relates how she found the manuscript books of Edwards’ “Efficacious Grace,” a visually stunning manuscript hand sewn from salvaged paper and silk paper fans:

Two of them were constructed from discarded semi-circular pieces of silk paper Edwards’ wife and daughters used for making fans. If you open these small oval volumes and just look—without trying to decipher the minister’s spidery hand—pen strokes begin to resemble stitches of thread as if the text moving across its fragile textile surface contains
message within message, as if the surface and meaning co-operate to keep alive, in one process, mastery in service, service in artifice. (‘Open Field’)

Figure 23 "Efficacious Grace," Beinecke Collection, http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/about/blogs/room-26-cabinet-curiosities/2008/11/06/efficacious-grace
Howe interprets the Edwards’ manuscripts as a space where the aesthetic meets spiritual practice. This is a space of wonder—where the visual beauty of the object or artifact arises out of curiosity and the impulse to know the unknown, whether this constitutes an affective, sensory, or spiritual realm of the manuscripts she is viewing. This is also a place to admire rather than just “decipher.” Howe’s description of the archive asks us to suspend the desire for “mastery” over subjectivity.
Instead, she sees the archival manuscripts as a visual collaboration, one in which the scholar interacts with the construction of meaning and the construction of history. Interwoven into this notebook, literally, is a history of women’s work in Edwards’ use of the paper for silk fans his wife and daughters created. Finding Sarah in the archive becomes a means of reading these different materials of her existence. To do this, Howe reanimates the matter of history through her use of bricolage, thus acknowledging the artifact’s physicality and also the verbal layers of its history.

The first “poem” in the series both mirrors and distorts the geometry of the wedding dress fragment:

![Figure 25 “Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards” Susan Howe, Souls of the Labadie Tract pg. 113](image)

The shape of the poem as an echo of the wedding dress scrap draws attention to the handiwork or crafting of the poem and Howe’s emphasis on the mechanics of visual design. The
poem’s structure also distorts the geometry of the shape: lines slope down, spacing between words is elongated, some lines slant and collide, and words are seemingly slashed or cut off in the shifting movement of the line. In this distortion, Howe’s poem challenges occlusion as well as accentuates her visual and linguistic obfuscation of the archive. To make obscure in Howe’s work is itself an additional practice of recovery. The poem mimics and fractures the precision of the scrap of fabric, and it disorients the reader and proposes a new mode of reading the language of the archive. The first clear wording at the top of the poem, “the past whose,” signals an attempt to hold the past in some definable form, but then the lines quickly collide into clipped off words and cut lines. The words “becoming” and “metamorphosis” reflect the idea that the poem transforms and reshapes this past and denies any stable reading of the archival fragment. Even the use of the word “whose” undermines any strict or clear view of ownership or possession of this past. Is it Jonathan’s, Sarah’s, Howe’s, or the reader’s? There is a way in which these figures are all enmeshed in any composition of the past. For Rachel Blau Duplessis, Howe’s recovery of the “half seen half forgotten” (Blue Studios 131) demonstrates her “suspicion of dominant meaning” while denying any clear reclamation of Sarah’s identity (Blue Studios 131). In this struggle to bring voice or subjectivity to these marginalized figures such as Sarah, Howe must move her poetry to represent the margins of existence. Through the distortion of the poem’s form, Howe critiques archival hierarchies and authorities that seek to organize the archive’s contents rather than portray its undecidabilities.

Howe’s poem also draws the reader into the archive and into the language of the archival record. In Uta Gossman’s reading, Howe’s “nonconformist memory” and positioning of words on the page demonstrate a “deep sense of word history” (89). As in “118 Westerly,” each word seems to hold an archive of literary genealogy. The language choices in the poem echo Sarah’s lost conversion narrative that Edwards’ transcribes. Words such as “Soul” and “snow,” and the fragments of the word “winte” (winte[r]), all resonate with the language describing Sarah’s
conversion or submission to the divine. In the transcription, Sarah describes this period of her life as a transcendent experience, one which, “occasioned great sweetness and delight in [her] soul” (Dwight). The conversion reads as a shift from the corporeal world to the spiritual and from the physical or tactile-ness of domestic life to the emotional experience of the divine: “the light of divine love has surrounded me; my soul has been lost in God, and has almost left the body” (Dwight). The presence of “snow,” too, signals the duality of material and sacred worlds, the latter of which the language of the narrative defines as a more wild or inarticulate space. In one scene, Sarah imagines the possibility of her being pushed to the margins of her social world of Northampton in punishment for what she felt was a break in “point of prudence” (Dwight):

There was then a deep snow on the ground, and I could think of being driven from my home into the cold and snow, of being chased from the town with the utmost contempt and malice, and of being left to perish with the cold, as cast out by all the world, with perfect calmness and serenity. It appeared to me, that it would not move me, or in the least disturb the inexpressible happiness and peace of my soul. My mind seemed as much above all such things, as the sun is above the earth. (Dwight)

Here, the snow represents the absence of domesticity. It appears as a space of the inexpressible, where, in this case, Sarah embodies her spiritual conversion as liberation. In Howe’s poem, “snow” is only a word, and its fragmentation from the rest of the narrative means that my own analysis, too, can only be hypothetical and invented.

Even though the language of Sarah’s narrative resonates in the poem, the image of snow also connects to Edwards and Stevens. Snow is a recurrent aspect of Edwards’ observations of the natural world of the Connecticut Valley. In his “Scientific and Philosophical Writings,” he notes that “frozen fog” is made of a number of particles, “which were all little stars of six points as the particles of snow” (Anderson, “Scientific and Philosophical Writings”). This passage is repeated in
Howe’s essay, “Choir answers to Choir,” between two passages on the “minds inner relation with nature’s vibratory hum” (para 6). The reference to snow may also suggest a connection to Stevens’ famous lines from the poem “The Snow Man”:

One must have a mind of winter

To regard the frost and boughs

Of the pine-trees crusted with snow (Stevens, CP 8)

The poem, as James Longenbach states, “records reality’s stark imperative” (James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens*, 23) to question how the poet actually sees the natural world unfiltered by the social, cultural, or aesthetic relations that form the language through which to articulate this perception. How does, for example, one really see the pine-trees? The assertion, “One must have a mind of winter,” suggests that one must clear the mind of layers of literary inheritance. The poem both advises a kind of utter emptying, and records its impossibility. The idea of submitting to the unknown reflects Sarah’s conversion narrative where the snow represents the ultimate errand away from the domestication of marriage and community life.

Howe’s representation of Sarah’s archival history is aptly described in Rachel Blau Duplessis’ essay on Howe’s work, “WHOWE,” an early feminist discussion of Howe’s crafting of the poetic page as a challenge to canonical histories. Duplessis looks at a number of Howe’s experimental texts—Secret History of the Dividing Line (1979), Pythagorean Silence (1982), Articulation of Sound Forms in Time (1987), and My Emily Dickinson (1985)—to examine the way in which Howe’s “experimentalist desire for interrogation” brings to the surface marginalized histories and lost voices in the archives (*Pink Guitar* 123). Duplessis names Howe’s assemblage of genres and histories, “matted palimpsests” (126), a description that speaks to the way in which these poems visualize multi-dimensional texts that push back against any monolithic claims to literary history. Instead, Howe presents layered and
fragmented pieces of the archive. Through this construction of form, Duplessis suggests that Howe brings us closer to the language of the text in order to inspect it more intimately:

She is suspicious of languages and discourses as already made and inhabited things; she wants to enter and inhabit the untoward crevices of language…archaic words, names that may no longer have things, shadows of things and feelings difficult to name (*Pink Guitar* 132).

To represent these “names that may no longer have things” and the “shadows of things and feelings difficult to name” in the Edwards’ archive, Howe collects the pieces and fragments of archival life that resonate with Sarah and Hannah’s histories. These poetic arrangements provoke and respond to the “wonder” of Edwards’ own manuscripts. In these constructions, which often mimic the look and feel of Edwards’ record keeping notebooks, Howe reshapes an archival experience that resists the illusion of an authorized history and the attempt to fix or rationalize narrative. Rather, as I argue, Howe’s poems continue to collect and arrange pieces and remnants in new configurations in order to stimulate the impression of wonder. Through this work, Howe continuously frames the archive as a space where rational and systematic documentary practices give way to (or expose) a more sensory, affective, or irrational dimension.

In disrupting archival coherence or legibility, Howe’s poems rethink the standard professional versions of what archives are, do, mean, and of what can and should be done with and to them in projects that, however well-intentioned, recover willfully.
In this poetic construction, lines of archival description overlap and intersect. The words “A piece of th[e],” “small bi[ts],” “White fol[der],” and “[1]727,” the date of Sarah Pierpont and Jonathan Edwards’ wedding, all refer to the wedding dress fragment and its location in Jonathan Edwards collection. The parenthetical “folded paper” speaks to the work or labor of storing and preserving this scrap that is carefully tucked away inside the folded paper of a file folder. The word “folded” also appears a number of times in the description of Edwards’ record keeping practices where he would fold paper to make folio pages for his notebooks. The poem also, in its emphasis on folding and foldedness, speaks to Howe’s own process or work in crafting the composition. The lines fold one on top of the other to reshape the archival language. The rearrangement of form brings the reader into a closer relation with or position vis-a-vis the language, but it also disorients, obscures, and keeps the history partly inarticulate and fragmented.
The following poem straightens out the poetic line, but again draws attention to the opacity of the printed text. Different font types and sizes layer one on top of the next and give the impression of a collage of various recorded descriptions.

Figure 27 “Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards” Susan Howe, Souls of the Labadie Tract, pg. 116

One section of the legible language in the poem, “a small gift card size envelope,” reflects confinement or limitation to any actual clear reading. Between the bolded lines, the faded or whited-out lines, the passage teeters between the “finite and infinite,” a phrase that slowly comes into focus in the middle of the poem. Howe’s work and the technical production of the fragment’s archival history seeks to recover this trace of Sarah Pierpont as well as recognize the impossibility of any full recovery of Sarah’s past. Howe produces a reading of the archive here that places the wedding dress fragment into the layers of archival manuscripts and the indexes and archival descriptions that make these texts knowable.

The last poem or archival scene “Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards” illustrates Howe’s shaping and reshaping of Sarah’s past as a framing of the inexpressible. This poetic fragment testifies to Howe’s decision to show the margins of the archival record without making claims to any coherent reading. We read this poem below not to “know” Sarah’s historical truth or story, but to experience the archive as well as its limitations.
Between legibility and illegibility, Howe draws attention to the materiality of language. I cannot help but see this line as a visual reference to the needles or pins for sewing the manuscripts together, and, in looking at the images of the archive at the Beinecke, I see this often at the margins of the book, the crease or fold of the paper. It is the space where language is clipped off, unreadable, and unintelligible. Howe’s poems show a constant and continuous unfolding, echoing, opening and resealing of the archival record.

In THAT THIS, Howe’s reading of the archival manuscript continues to draw attention to the shape and feel of the manuscripts as part of a reading of Edwards’ history:
The folio-size double leaves Jonathan, Sara, and his ten tall sisters wrote on were often homemade: hand-stitched from linen rags salvaged by women from worn out clothing. Grassroots out-of-tune steps and branches, quotations of psalms, dissonant scripture clusters, are pressed between coarse cardboard covers with frayed edges. The rag paper color has grown deeper and richer in some. One in particular, with a jacket he constructed from old newspapers then tied together at the center with string, looks like a model for a canoe. The minister or possibly some later scholar has christened his antique paper vessel ‘The Doctrine of [the] Justice and Grace of God, Explained and Defended, and the Contrary Errors that Have of Late Prevailed, Confuted…’ (22)

In this vision of the archival document, Howe highlights the way in which Edwards’ record keeping practices bring a number of material artifacts together. The textual experience Howe portrays here is one in which linen rags, spiritual quotation, newspapers, and string are all bound in this notebook. It is a gendered reading of the composition, too, where women’s clothing is part of the material production and texturally speaks to women’s work. Howe’s reading of the material experience of the record unsettles certainty (and patriarchal readings), here, as Howe names these writings as disjointed and “dissonant”. Like Edwards’ *Images and Shadows of Divine Things*, scriptural notes blend with other quotations, annotations, and other markings and reflect Edwards’ systematic, albeit chaotic, attempt at articulating his spiritual arguments. Howe’s titling of the artifact as “paper vessel” or “canoe” suggests a reading of this material as a type of visual and material structure of cultural transmission. The archival manuscript becomes a kind of technology that reveals the cultural, material, and gendered work of early Colonial New England. Howe also opens the reading of the unpublished manuscript to an uncertain past. In fact, in one of her earlier printed essays, “Choir answers to Choir: Notes on Jonathan Edwards and Wallace Stevens,” Howe extends this same description of the notebook “hand-stitched from linen rags salvaged by women from worn out
clothing,” to reflect on what can or cannot be retrieved from recovery work. She writes, “Harmony continues to exist through fact and experience—though there is no reason why it should—nor is there any proof you can read back to the notion of one mind’s inner relation with nature’s vibratory hum” (“Choir” Howe sees, for example in Edwards’ notebooks and in her own experience of the archive, a sense of “harmony” or beauty that comes from observing the material world. However, in these observations, Howe recognizes the limitations to recovery and the impossibility of reconstructing a definitive history of Edwards’ private writings on his solitary rides and walks. Even the Beinecke’s printing of the title suggests the uncertainty in naming archival records:

![Figure 29 Jonathan Edwards “The Doctrines”. Beinecke Collection](http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3794780)
An image from the notebook (Figure 3 and 4) illustrates Howe’s emphasis on the experience of the archive’s visual aesthetic as a means of approaching Edwards’ material and spiritual practice. In addition to the title “The Doctrine of [the] Justice and Grace of God, Explained and Defended, and the Contrary Errors that Have of Late Prevailed, Confuted…,” the Beinecke and scholars in Edwards history call the manuscript the “Gazetteer Notebook” because, as can be seen above, Edwards constructed the manuscript by sewing together pages scraps from the English newspaper so named (WJE, http://bit.ly/1kg6C83). According to the editorial notes printed in the WJE, the newspaper was “cut up and stitched into a long, narrow notebook with blank margins outermost. It is a fine example of Edwards’ frugality” (‘Book of Minutes’). As one can see, Edwards would write his notes on the margins of the page. Visually, the record creates a collision of language, where the
typed font of the newspaper runs up the edge of the page and juxtaposes the handwritten script that moves horizontally. The printed lines of the newspaper mirror the vertical lines Edwards likely used to indicate that he had used this note elsewhere in his vast compendium of texts. Edwards’ notebook disorients a linear or even clear reading practice and accentuates Howe’s notion of relational space. Here, the language of eighteenth century colonial print comes into contact with Edwards’ concepts of Calvinist theology. In a later passage in “Choir answers to Choir,” Howe details another scene of Edwards’ writing practices. Howe describes:

He wrote in the margins of abandoned pamphlets, across used envelopes, on remnants of silk paper used by Sarah, his wife, and their seven daughters—Sarah, Jerusha, Esther, Mary, Lucy, Susannah, Eunice—for making fans. He constructed most of the nine books of the journal titled ‘Miscellanies’ by himself. Only the ninth was made by a bookbinder. Book 1 (1722) is a folio made from seventeen to twenty separately folded sheets stitched together with the pages ruled in double columns. Other covers are made of heavy paper, except Book 2, which is decorated oilcloth. On rare occasions where they do appear, periods and commas are generally indistinguishable. The prose retains its regularity and harmony even vertically in gutter margins. (“Choir”)

Howe recognizes that the Edwards archive has become, for his later interpreters, the site for the pursuit of historical clarity and intelligibility and shares a similar scholarly fate as the work of Emily Dickinson. And yet for Howe, these manuscripts speak more to the experience and wonder of working with handmade archival records than they recount a cohesive portrait of Edwards’ past. In her attention to the composition and construction of the notebooks, Howe illustrates a more tactile expression of Edwards’ manuscripts that foregrounds her lyrical shaping and reshaping of the archive shifting the composition of history from the observation or argument of facts to an experience of those facts.
Chapter 3:

“The Africans are in the text”:

Iifa Divination Ceremony and the Reproduction of Archival Laws in NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong*

“The only reason why we have a record

is because of insurance—a record of property

criteria for selection” – NourbeSe Philip, “Notanda” in *Zong*

NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong* represents the poet’s sustained struggle to read and recover from reading one of the most famous archives events documenting the history of slavery—the eighteenth century trial transcript and corresponding print publications detailing the occurrences on board the slave ship Zong where 132 Africans were thrown overboard in order to collect an insurance claim on the “cargo.” The history can be told (in brief) as follows: Having lost his ship’s route from West Africa to Jamaica, facing malnutrition on board, and responding to a supposed lack of water, the captain, Luke Collingwood, ordered a number of the slaves to be thrown into the sea. Other slaves, facing their impending death, jumped overboard rather than suffer their fate at the hands of the crew. Once the ship returned to England, the owners, Gregson, filed claim with the insurance company to be reimbursed for the loss of value of the cargo. The insurance company refused, which resulted in the trial *Gregson vs. Gilbert*. The history of the Zong, shaped mainly by this trial transcript and the famous abolitionist account by Granville Sharp, continues to generate the public memory and archive of the transatlantic slave route.
Over the course of six sequences of poems; a glossary section that includes “Words and Phrases Heard on Board the Zong”; a ship’s “Manifest”; a “Notanda” or journal section detailing the production of the poems; and the transcript from the trial Gregson vs. Gilbert, Philip intervenes in the historical recovery of the famous massacre. She rewrites and fractures the language of the law and the trial transcript in order to disrupt the coherence of this archival narrative. Philip unhinges its patterns, severs its categories, ruptures its tones, blurs sequences of letters, and reimagines its language systems through the architecture of the poem. She even, as can be seen below, points to and interrupts the printing rituals and routines that proliferate the narrative and make it legible:

![Image of ZONG! Pg. 179](image)

Figure 31 Snapshot from “Ebora,” NourbeSe Philip ZONG! Pg. 179

This poem, taken from the last section of poems titled “Ebora,” or underwater spirits, is similar to Rukeyser and Howe’s poetic projects in that it is difficult to know exactly how to name Philip’s form. The structure both signals a type of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry in its attention
to the rupture of reading practices and also emphasizes the poem’s visual characteristics. Through this intervention in form, Philip not only draws attention to the language of the historical event shaped by the trial transcript—“creed,” “crew,” “captain,” and the reference to the insurance “underwriter” (179)—but she also confronts the language and structure of this documentary history. Anita Rupprecht, in her important essay exploring the proliferation of the archive of the Zong trial, “’A Limited Sort of Property’: History, Memory and the Slave Ship Zong” (2008), explores how Philip’s poetic text “decolonize[s] the Zong as icon” (266) both by representing its loss as well as the “unspeakability” of slavery (267). Rupprecht points to Philip’s poetic text as an example of a “defacement of the official document” and a subversion of the “murderous rationality on which the law was based” (268). By cutting and literally ripping apart and reformulating the language into alternative forms, Philip attempts to break into the logic of the loss and the erasure of historical representation.

In the “Notanda” or journal section, Philip presents her production of poetry as an act of destruction. She evokes the semblance of murder through her appropriation and then obliteration of the trial transcript’s language and form:

--I mutilate the text as the fabric of African life and the lives of these men, women and children were mutilated.

--I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling.

(191-2)
The near checklist-style notation of Philip’s description captures her desire to destroy the logic of the massacre by violently dismembering the objectivity of its contents. Philip enacts what has been done to the slaves on the language of the page, as though she wants to exact a type of linguistic retribution. And yet, even as Philip takes us through the spectrum of this “semantic mayhem,” or massacre of the grammar of the document, she points to an alternative reading at play. Both in the poem above and in her description of her methodology, Philip invokes ceremony or ritual as another possible reading within this recovery. Philip shifts from the mutilation of the record to a ceremonial sacrifice. A sangoma is a name given to traditionally South Africa divination healers (Binsbergen 373). The aim of a sangoma diviner is to provide healing by reinserting the client into his or her proper place in the universe (Binsbergen 374).

This invocation of an African seer or healer is part of a larger pattern in the poem, a pattern invoking African ceremony and ritual in order to create a different relationship to the past from the one the trial transcript requires or permits. Philip draws on the language and forms of “ifa”—a West African divination ceremony—to reposition her poem’s relationship to the past, shifting it away from a documentary history to a mode of performance or ritual.

Even in Philip’s violent explanation of her work, ritual, as a means of recovery, offers Philip the possibility of reinterpreting or re-visioning murder as sacrifice, a sacrifice that may bring, as she states, “portents of a new life” (192). Under the aegis of ceremony, the massacre of the slaves may, in imaginative if not literal terms, be renewed and revaluated. This chapter examines Philip’s invocation of Ifa divination ceremony as an important alternative way to read archival histories of transatlantic slavery. As a poetic device, Philip summons Ifa to reconfigure an approach to the history of transatlantic slavery through an African ceremonial tradition that points up and symbolically restores the archive’s erasures.
For Philip, the documentary record of the case of the Zong is a “tombstone” (194)—an ambivalent metaphor symbolic of both destruction and memorial. She recognizes the trial transcript as a partially compensatory means to recovery as well as a document that blocks or occludes the voices of the Africans on board the ship. A researcher on transatlantic slavery must work with documents such as the legal transcript to capture a composite of the past, but these records and the larger systems of record keeping are also complicit in the mass erasure of historical voices. Philip’s assertion that this document is a tombstone captures the wider discourse on the difficulty of working with the archives of slavery, a difficulty articulated by many African and African American scholars. For example, Saidiya Hartman, in her essay “Venus in Two Acts,” also describes the records and documents of an enslaved woman’s life as a tombstone:

The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. Given this, “it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp [these lives] again in themselves, as they might have been ‘in a free state.’” (2)

Hartman’s description of the archive speaks to the limitations of historical recovery, especially with regard to the actual restoration of historical agency, in the documents that record the transactions of the slave trade. Given the trial transcript’s entombment of the massacre as part of an insurance trial, Philip captures the impulse to challenge or break this archival inheritance through a literal dismemberment or disfigurement of the jurisprudential logic of the document. While fully recognizing the limitations of archival work, through poetry, Philip reimagines the archive in order to open the trial transcript to new configurations.

The few actual remaining records of the Zong case, including the trial transcript and its subsequent reproductions in British newsprint, abolitionist history, and contemporary scholarship, are the generative bones of this recovery work. My use of the word “bones” echoes Philip’s title of
her first sequence of poems, “Os,” and her later notation in her journal of the anthropological or “forensic” impulse to trace and identify the bones of the murdered dead (201). Similarly, contemporary literary scholar Myriam Moise describes the case as a “skeletal record” (6) reflecting the absence of flesh or human spirit around this history. The bones of this story signal the material or archaeological remnants of the Africans on board the ship, in terms of the evidence that can be collected, measured, and stored. However, Philip’s text questions where experiences that do not fit the archaeological impulse of documentary records belong in recovery work. Philip writes in her journal: “How did they—the Africans on board the Zong—make meaning of what was happening to them? What meaning did they make of it and how did they make it mean?” (194). Philip’s poetry offers an alternative to conventional archival versions of material recovery by rethinking the position and practices through which readers experience this history by recasting it within a West African perspective.

Throughout the Notanda section of Philip’s work, Philip speaks about her poetic practice as a means of “not telling” the history on board the Zong that also “must be told” (197). She frequently repeats this phrasal tension between telling/not telling in order to emphasize the process of both accessing the language of the legal record as well as disturbing its narrative and logical structures. For example, she describes her approach to this history through poetry: “[…] I want poetry to disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself” (199). The emphasis on “not-telling” frames the recovery of the massacre as a challenge to narrative, and Philip’s description of this act also suggests an alternative telling, one that has been “released” from the legal record and the systematic violence structured by the institutions that produce that documentation.

A number of scholars, such as Myriam Moise, Erin Fehskens, Jenny Sharpe, and Sarah Dowling examine the various modes of Philip’s impulse to “not tell this story that must be told”
These scholars show how Philip’s poetry works against the totalizing nature of the legal document by destabilizing language, fragmenting historical voices and subjectivities, and accessing spaces of silence to connect to the violent past locked in the trial transcript. However, this research often lacks attention to Philip’s alternative for telling.

Examinations of Philip’s use of fragmented voices, languages, and geographies moving and colliding on the page point to Philip’s presentation of the history of the Zong as spectral, haunted, and always in flux. Myriam Moise claims that Zong! “is a multi-vocal song, one in which history, culture and religion are seen from multiple perspectives, as both Christian references and African religious symbols are enhanced” (33). Moise does acknowledge Philip’s use of divination through the poem’s return to the image of the “Oba,” but in her account this is a method of recounting the limitations of narrative rather than as part of a larger system of meaning making repositioned through an African worldview. Therefore, while Moise does reference the representation of West African linguistic and religious systems, still more extensive work can be done to better understand Philip’s reference to these alternative relationships to historical work.

In terms of what language becomes fragmented, Erin Fehskens’ evaluates Philip’s use and subversion of the form of the catalogue. Fehskens poignantly argues that Philip interrupts the catalogue’s order even as she draws on its list-like structures by opening these forms to “polyvocality” and “multiple word possibilities” (410). Fehskens describes Philip’s poetry as a “disordering cacophony” that “undermines the calculations and credit that circulate in the European voices of the poem” (415). And yet, while Fehskens’ article moves the conversation closer towards an examination of these possibilities and alternative voices in the archive and its representations, an examination of the type of voices Philip summons by creating this discord remains missing. Specifically, there is a lack of examination of Philip’s movements towards ceremony and the
particular invocation of West African divination practices that appear so frequently in the poetic sequence.

Philip’s disordering and fragmenting of the legal record perform what Jenny Sharpe calls a project in “affective memory” (1). For Sharpe, this disordering works against the materiality of the transcript and the material objectives of the slave trade by creating a more “intuitive” response through the construction of a more “visceral form” (1). Sharpe focuses on the limitations and silences of the archive of transatlantic slavery and examines the way in which Philip’s text enters these silences to summon the archival afterlife of the Africans on board the Zong. The poetic form Philip creates dislodges the official record by disjoining the time and space of the event. Through this form, Sharpe argues that Philip accesses the ghostlike hauntings that continue to traverse this muted past in the present. Sharpe draws on Philip’s previous dialogues on silence, such as “Discourse on the Logic of Language,” to explore the way these silenced pasts might be made visible as well as audible through an evocation of sensory expression in this telling/not telling of the past. Sharpe explains, “Silence is the site of a linguistic wound due to the violent uprooting of African people and active suppression of their native tongues as a means of social control” (10). This felt experience, very much resonant in Susan Howe’s work in the previous chapter, creates a social or reciprocal connection between the reader and the past that destabilizes the authority of the documentary past of slavery (Sharpe 12). Sharpe claims that Philip destabilizes the archive of transatlantic slavery by recognizing silence as a means towards affective expression. In Sharpe’s reading, Philip intersperses African words in her text in order to create a patois or creole memory that “breaks apart the master’s language” (16). And while Sharpe’s examination clearly envisions Philip’s disruption of colonizing languages, the particular language Philip accesses—that of West African divination ceremony—also offers alternative ways of ordering history and positioning oneself to do or practice historical work. Rather than just reading language or silence as a means
toward expression, this chapter extends Sharpe’s reading to consider the characteristics of Philip’s ceremonial account.

While the examinations of Zong! just summarized provide important readings of Philip’s disruption of the logic and structure of the legal record, the research often overlooks Philip’s restructuring of a comparative epistemology. The ceremonial form that Philip uses to give account to the Zong has not been fully examined, but it needs to be if we are to better understand the way in which this poem contributes to the discourse of alternative methods of archival work. Philip’s Zong! presents the poet’s intertwinement of multiple historiographic positions in her incorporation of West African divination systems into the body of her poems. She not only uses the language of Ifa divination, but she also references its stylistic and structural features. In terms of academic practice, the poem’s use of Ifa proposes a form of research that finds its methods or methodologies in the societies or cultures being recovered—in this case, in the practices of the West Africans on board the Zong in addition to the legal record of the event that records the massacre. As an alternative to the divide between telling and “not telling,” I argue, Philip’s poem incorporates fragments of Ifa divination language and verse structure in order to re-present a historiographic vision that emphasizes ceremony and ritual as part of recovery work and as an alternative repository of knowledge.

II. “You have heard this story before”

As Erin Fesken announces in her essay examining Philip’s use of this legal history, “You have heard this story before” (407). And we have. The legal record of the Zong and its subsequent representations are central to the public memory of transatlantic slavery and generate a huge documentary universe or what I’d like to think of as the full body of records and research that
scholars use to revive, revise, and recirculate these histories. Moreover, not only do the insurance trial for reimbursement of the loss of cargo and the records that surround the case constitute the primary documents for the history of the Zong, these documents also contribute to, even create and discipline the historiographic methods used in the academic study of transatlantic slavery. Clear documentary lines extend from Prince Hoare’s *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* (1820) to James Walvin’s *Black Ivory* (1994) and his later study *Zong* (2011), and Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. These are all central texts of the discussion of the history of the Zong that inherit, maintain, and extend the production of the documentary records and continue to regenerate the public memory of the massacre.

As all these works acknowledge, very few documents exist that actually mark the events on board the Zong. The ship’s log that might otherwise account for naming or identifying the slaves on board the ship is famously lost. An advertisement in a Jamaican newspaper for the sale of the 200 survivors of 442 Africans on board the ship documents the mass loss of lives (Walvin 99). However, it is the insurance trial for the loss of cargo and the corresponding uptake of the trial into abolitionist rhetoric that continue to produce entry points into this history. These documents often reflect the institutions of European and Western print production and continue to realign the history of the Zong with the material logic of the institution of the slave trade. Philip’s strategy is to disrupt that alignment and to offer an alternative to it. I begin examination of this matter by first discussing what needs to be disrupted.

The transmission of the Zong case in print in the late eighteenth century highlights the central role the British press played in the proliferation of this particular history as well as its role in shaping the memory of transatlantic slavery (Swaminathan 486). In March 1783, the sea merchant owners of the Zong brought the trial to court in Liverpool when the underwriters refused to endorse the claim for loss of cargo (Walvin 103). The first public record of the case to describe the
details of the trial is an anonymous letter published in the March 18, 1783, issue of *The Morning Chronicle* (Swaminathan 485). It was at this point, as the story goes, that Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustava Vasa, reads this letter and brings it to Granville Sharp’s attention on March 19, 1783 (Hoare 236). Sharp, encouraged by Equiano to prosecute the men responsible for the massacre for murder, attends the King’s Bench appeal in May of 1783, with a short hand recorder where a “new trial was granted to the insurers” (Hoare 236). The actual transcript of this appeal is fully printed in 1831 in *Reports of Cases Argued*.

Prince Hoare’s biography of Granville Sharp, one of the more famous and authoritative biographies of the famous British abolitionist, published in 1822 and again in 1828, illustrates Sharp’s diligence in documenting the investigation and trial of the ship owner’s claim. Sharp’s observations detail much of the language of the case, and these notes continue to be one of the main sources of recovery work. In particular, Sharp’s notes emphasize how the ship owner’s claim to insurance hinges on the “necessity” of jettisoning the slaves (or cargo) for “want of water” (Hoare, 237, 242, Appendix VIII), an argument later invalidated based on evidence of a storm. Sharp’s record documents the owner’s defense, which, under insurance law, concerns the loss of “chattels or goods” not a humanitarian decision of “right or wrong” (Hoare 239). At the same time that Sharp refutes the dehumanization of the murdered slaves, his documentation still enforces an adherence to the logic of evidence and the objectivity of the law. This is reflected in Hoare’s insistence on Sharp’s account as “unquestionable authority” (361) and his record as an “authentic copy” (362) with “vouchers of fact” (363). Philip, too, borrows from and intervenes in the language of the law in her repetition of such phrases as “the that fact” (5), “contradicted/ by the evidence” (14), “authorize” (19), “the truth was” (24) and other conjugations of the logic of the trial whether in the legal transcript or Sharp’s account.
Sharp’s observations become part of the wider public memory of the slave trade. He later uses his notes and observations on the case to write to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty in 1782 to pursue the charge of murder, explaining:

I thought it my duty to spare neither labour nor expense in collecting all the information concerning this horrible transaction that I could possibly procure, for the sake of national justice, that the blood of the murdered may not rest on the whole kingdom, which already labours under too awful a load of guilt in tolerating the iniquitous Slave trade, whereby, amongst other evils, this most inhuman and diabolical deed was occasioned. (Hoare 362)

Through Sharp’s insistence on public documentation of the events of the case, the insurance trial becomes part of the legal and political history of England and the wider legal and political memory of the slave trade. As James Walvin states, “The legal and political arguments about the Zong inevitably spawned an abundance of contemporary paperwork: legal documents, press coverage, contemporary commentaries, shipping records, correspondences” (Walvin 2). Other historical accounts build from Sharpe’s documentary work, such as William O. Blake’s History of Slavery and the Slave Trade, Ancient and Modern. The Forms of Slavery that Prevailed in Ancient Nations, Particularly in Greece and Rome. The African Slave Trade and the Political History of Slavery in the Unite States, Compiled from Authentic Materials (1857). While no murder charges were ever fully realized, Blake shows how the abolitionist’s record of the case becomes public: “But though nothing was done by the persons then in power, in consequences of the murder of so many innocent individuals, yet the publication of an account of it by Mr. Sharp, in the newspapers, made such an impression upon others that new coadjutors rose up” (Blake 166).

As Sharp’s documentation of the event moves into abolitionist debate, Sharp is cast not only as a representative of the sanctity of British Law, but also as the arbiter of national representation. Prince Hoare’s account of Sharp highlights the abolitionist’s “humanity” within what Hoare sees as a
major national shift or change in British law: “Great and merciful God! Shall we not daily thank thee that this infamy no longer stains the page of our history!” (238). Hoare’s depiction of Sharp in the Zong case serves to reinforce the rhetoric of a new, “enlightened” morality in British nationalism and reassert the sanctity of the British legal system (240-5). Moreover, as the abolitionist movement adopts the details of the Zong case from Sharp’s account to advocate against the slave trade, it further proliferates the language of this history and its place in the life of the English legal system (Swaminathan 485). James Ramsay’s 1784 abolitionist tract expresses shock that the horrific events of the Zong would be spoken about so openly by the ship crew, particularly James Kelsall, as an issue of insurance (Walvin 177). Thomas Cooper’s *Letters on the Slave Trade* and Thomas Clarkson’s 1788 *Essay* also discuss the details of the Zong (Walvin 178, 195).

Free Africans in Britain were also involved in the transmission of this case. Ottabah Cugoano, a free African abolitionist, includes references to the Zong case in his book, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species: humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great Britain* (1787). Cugoano focuses on the atrocities and inhumanities of the system of slave trade, describing the loss of historical agency of the enslaved at the hands of the ship owners and traders: “They either consider them as their own property, that they may do with as they please, in life or death; or that the taking away the life of a black man is of no more account than taking away the life of a beast” (Cugoano 111). His memoir details his outrage against the toleration of slavery and the trafficking of human bodies as cargo under the law (Cugoano 114).

But African abolitionist tracts, although popular, were rare occurrences. When these narratives do exist, they are often situated and situate themselves in European or Western-centric traditions of literary practices. As Walvin notes, “First and foremost, they [the free Africans] were literate and devout, admired and respected by contemporaries for their learning, their writing and their Christian demeanor” (Walvin 181). In other words, the print transmission of the Zong case,
even as part of the record of free Africans, was still situated, for the most part, in Western narrative structures. As Rebecka Fisher illustrates, those public figures of African descent who adhered to or were allowed to adhere to the precepts of enlightenment—literacy, judgment, principle, materiality—became published authors (72). Thus, the transmission of this case through these different tracts, while cognizant of the dehumanization of the massacred slaves, continues to point to the archive’s erasures. The possibilities of documentary work are limited to the logic, precept, and structures of British law.

In contemporary scholarship, the Zong case and the surrounding print material continue to shape recovery work and its methods in the history of Transatlantic slavery. Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005) positions the Zong case as “central not only to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the political and cultural archives of the black Atlantic but to the history of modern capital, ethics, and time consciousness” (31). Baucom reads the case as part of an “actuarial historicism,” one that situates the Zong case in the wider discourse of “globalizing finance capital” (43). Baucom sees this history as a contractual modernity, built on the logic and actuarial science of legal discourse, Atlantic trade, and financial record keeping that gives way to a particular form of historicism. Still, there is also another historical perspective at work here that Baucom refers to as “melancholy witness” (243). This position or point of view represents the spectator or witness to the horrors of the slave trade and the affront to moral discourse, and works in opposition to “finance capital’s discourse of speculation” (243). However, even Baucom’s vision of the melancholy witness, which offers other possibilities of imagining alternative readings—refers back to Sharp’s view of the legal trial and his record of the events. The two views Baucom captures, whether spectator or speculator, are bound to the particular context of the propagation of British law. Even in Baucom’s contemporary revision or approach to this historical work, the methods rehearse the epistemology of these original
documents—the legal trial, Sharp’s notations, and abolitionist rhetoric—and limit the type of witness or relationship to history available.

The wide circulation of the print details of the Zong influenced the abolition of the slave trade and ushered in, what James Walvin describes as a “seismic shift in public mood” (Zong 210). In his study, Walvin shows how the memories of the Zong, most particularly the image of the captive slave thrown overboard, continue to shape and represent contemporary dialogues of the slave trade. Walvin’s account, much like Baucom’s, shows how the public memory of the Zong continues to generate out of and around Granville Sharp’s account of the case and the transcript of the King’s Bench trial. Walvin notes his extensive use of Sharp’s materials deposited at the Gloucestershire Archive, Prince Hoare’s memoir, and the collection of Sharp’s published tracts at the Goldsmith Library of Economic Literature in London (216). Still, while Sharp’s archive propagates the public memory of the slave trade, these materials, and the larger system of archival record keeping that initiates and maintains the paper’s preservation, also define the boundaries of what can be known or recovered from this loss.

The Zong case, like many of the documents that record the history of the slave trade, reflects the limitations or implications of working with such archival material. This tension echoes in the efforts of recovery work in transatlantic slavery. Slave manifests, bills of trade, account books, and shipping documents both provide for historical meaning-making and are the same records that carry out the destruction of history. For example, Saidiya Hartman, in Lose Your Mother, notes that “the archive contained what you would expect: the manifests of slavers; ledger books of trade goods; inventories of foodstuffs; bills of sale; itemized lists of bodies alive, infirm, and dead; captains’ logs; planters’ diaries…” (17). Hartman’s review of the archive echoes Eduard Glissant’s assertion in Poetics of Relation that “the only written thing on slave ships was the account book listing the exchange value of slaves” (5). Moreover, other trial transcripts related to the slave trade, in addition
to those related to the Zong, function within this same historical duality. For example, the trial of Captain John Kimber for the murder of two female slaves in 1792 (London: Stalker) records the history of the atrocities on board the ship, but is also representative of the institution of slavery that creates historical loss.

Of course, emerging digital databases allow researchers to more extensively trace, examine, and analyze the records of the transoceanic slave trade. These databases give unprecedented and often open access to huge volumes of material artifacts. For example, one of the more extensive resources is The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces), spearheaded by David Eltis, which contains records documenting over 35,000 slave voyages. This database draws from numerous libraries and archives from “around the Atlantic world” in order to make sense of this systematic endeavor to traffic Africans to Europe and the New World (Eltis “About”). Because the slave trade was deeply embedded in legal, national, and economic systems, there is a massive amount of data on the trade that reflects careful record keeping practices (Eltis and Richardson 3). The residual evidentiary material creates a portrait of the wide system of the international exchange of “goods.” This database is populated with information from company accounts, private trading accounts, and archives of shipping companies including the Middlebury Company and Coopstand and Rochussen Partnership (Intro, Extending Frontiers, 23-24). Points of disembarkation, embarkation, and trade carefully record the documentary traces of humans as merchandise or as commodity trade items.
Searchable digitized indexes allow for new assessments of the extent of the trade, the geographic movements, and the number of voyages that constitute a more composite picture of the forced migration of Africans. In an introduction to research using this new database of trans-atlantic voyages, David Eltis and David Richardson explain how these databases also offer important insight into the types of documentary or print materials at work around the system of the slave trade. For example, Eltis and Richardson point to the explosion of English records after 1720 after the Treaty of Utrecht, which allowed for further expansion of the trade (25). This compendium of materials includes,

- Port books, a range of London newspapers reporting shipping movements, colonial sources, records of forts on the African coast, seamen’s sixpence records (a levy on wages paid into a fund to support infirm seamen), registers of Mediterranean passes (issued to protect vessels from the Barbary powers), and many private papers. (25)

While these records give us new means of understanding this history in terms of “long distance shipping activities,” “crew mortality,” and the “social as well as economic role of the slave trade” in
colonized regions (Eltis “Introduction”), the database also highlights the extensive loss and erasure of historical agency for captured Africans.

Because the erasure of African voices or African experience is part of systematic record keeping, the *Voyages* database has attempted to recover a non-Western or non-European vision of the trade. In January of 2009, the database directors formed the “African Origins Project” in order to “trace the geographic origins of Africans transported in the transatlantic slave trade” (“African Origins Project”). The website describes the project as a call for African scholars that would be able to identify and trace names of slaves back to cultural or regional territory. Interestingly, as an important shift in historiographic methods in the process of recovery opened by digital or multimodal forms of media, the “African Origins Project,” takes oral recordings of these names in order to better understand the historical representation of the enslaved individual. As explained on the website, “Eltis and Nwokeji played these recordings to informants in Nigeria and to members of the African diaspora in parts of North America, who were able to identify through these pronunciations the likely ethnic group from which the name derived” (Eltis “African Origins Project”). Still, even as the project helps to “properly interpret” or give representation to the African experience, the database continues to see historical processes as creation or collection of catalogues rather than an epistemological shift or recovery of this history from alternative means that might resist, even upset, index-able data points.

Because of the limitations the documents of the slave trade present to researchers to record or revise an African-centric perspective, a number of scholars have examined alternative archival sources, methods, and memory work. David Scott, in his introduction to an issue of *Small Axe* dedicated to “The Archaeologies of Black Memory” (2008), similarly calls for a “counter-memory,” or a way of “remembering against the grain of the history of New World black deracination, subjection, and exclusion” (vi). Scott also draws attention to the way in which the critical or
academic work of recovery hinges on the “assembly and re-assembly of the sources that make memory possible” (vi). At the same time, Scott continues to underscore the archive of slavery as an archaeological project: “without the impulse to collect, there would be no archive” (vii).

This concept of a counter-archive or counter memory persists in driving alternative approaches that often blur the line between creative and evidentiary histories. Saidiya Hartman, in “Venus in Two Acts” (2008), searches for a means of recovery and expression that exceeds or extends the boundaries of the horrific violence enacted by the documents of slavery pinned to “quantitative matters,” “issues of markets,” and “trade relations” (4). Hartman explores the possibility of a “counter-history” to rewrite the chronicles of the slave trade (3). Hartman questions how academic work can find the more “furtive communication” that might exist outside the constraints of a legal transcript (10). Hartman asks, “And how does one tell impossible stories?” (10). Of course, part of Hartman’s answer to this question is through her own attention to form. Hartman suggests that the structure of her essay exhibits a methodology grounded in imaginative or creative re-visioning as a mode of readdressing the horrors of the slave past embedded in the logic of archival documents. Her use of “divergent stories” from “contested points of view” challenges the concept of an “authorized account” (11). She describes this method as a collapse of hierarchical discourse:

By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a “recombinant narrative,” which “loops the strands” of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl’s story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present.
Hartman’s use of the word recombinant actually echoes Philip’s use of this same term in the Notanda section of *Zong*. Philip describes a recombinant narrative, a term she borrows from the visual artist Stan Douglas, as a work that loops, switches, reorganizes, and challenges our “‘need for linear narrative’” (Philip 204). However, an important difference between Hartman and Philip’s use of this term is that Philip calls her own poetic sequence a “recombinant anti-narrative” (Philip 204).

For Philip, whether it is the trial transcript or the Sharp archive that allows for the language of this history to be collected, transcribed, and analyzed, the records of this case are also what block or occlude historical agency for the “afterlife” of the massacred slaves (Philip 197). Philip reflects on this quandary of historical perspective in the “Notanda” section:

What did, in fact, happen on the *Zong*? Can we, some two hundred years later, ever really know? These are the questions I confront. Although presented with the ‘complete’ text of the case, the reader does not ever know it, since the complete story does not exist. It never did. All that remains are the legal texts and the documents of those who were themselves intimately connected to, and involved in, a system that permitted the murder of the Africans on board the *Zong*. (196)

For Philip, the “complete” story of the *Zong*, told through these records, does not exist. Rather than proliferate the history of loss, Philip counters this residual documentary university by shifting towards an African epistemology of historical work in order to represent, what she calls, a “critique of the European project” (197).

In the initial poetic sequence of *Zong*, Philip disorders the language of the legal record and opens the language of the trial to alternative systems of meaning making. Philip dismembers its logic by breaking the composition of the words on the page, destroying syntax, and compromising the intelligibility of this historical record. Throughout the series of poems, Philip fractures the use of the language of the legal record to foreground the incomplete and otherwise suffocated and
strangled utterances of the drowned Africans. For example, the first poem of the series presents the fragmentation of the word, “water,” which was arguably the most central piece of language in determining the outcome of the case.

Figure 33, Snapshot of the full poem "Zong! #1" NourbeSe Philip ZONG!/pg. 3
The validity of the insurance claim rested on proving Collingwood’s assertion that there was a shortage of water on board the ship thereby directly influencing the captain’s decision to throw the slaves overboard to preserve the remaining crew and cargo. If water was not available, these murders were acceptable under the insurance law. The word “water”, then, represents the language of the law as well as the larger economic and juridical system of the transatlantic slave trade. Philip’s appropriation of “water” and her rupture of its letters produces a more oral and tonal pressure on its pronunciation and emphasizes the very real and violent atrocity of the drowning slave and the destruction of historical representation under this law. As can be seen in Philip’s visual use of page space, the poetry severs the language of the law from any singular reading as water breaks into “our,” “good,” “one,” and “day” and spreads these words across the page. In this active representation and resistance to the word “water,” the poem works within and against the rational logic or literate order of the law’s understanding of necessity and reshapes the poetry through the fractured tones of the drowning slaves.

Throughout the text, Philip’s poetry continues to confront the order and objectivity of the legal record by intervening in the methods at work in proliferating the public memory of the Zong. The poem, “Zong! #11,” which begins with the line, “Suppose the law” (20), reframes a reading of the legal record—the only public marker of the case—as a loss.
The poem pulls apart the language of the law into two separate columns and accentuates the representation of the more active presence of the verbs “is,” “does,” “would,” and “be” in opposition to the word “not” on the left-hand side (20). While the poem’s structure retains the linearity of the legal record, the poem’s language points to other ways of reading the law. In this sense, the structure points to the tension between viewing the legal record as documentation of the slave trade and viewing the legal record as what destroys the testimony from the Africans on board the Zong. Through the repetition of “suppose,” Philip’s poem also accentuates the concept of supposition and with it the possibility of other modes of representing this event.

The poem, “Zong! #,” which begins with the line, “clear the law /of /order” (50), fractures the logic of the law.
The poem’s directive at the top of the page to “clear the law of order” signals a means of disturbing the recovery of the history of the Zong and the wider project of recovering transatlantic history. It reflects Philip’s desire to find something other than the opinion of the law and the representation of legal truths that can give voice to the Africans on board the ship. Considering the fact that no manuscript documents the identity of the slaves—the ship’s bill of goods, which may have at the very least documented their names, is famously lost—Philip’s poetry calls for an alternative means to historical work by dismantling the rational order of the law. In the poem above, the “no,” or the silence of an un- or non-documentated past, can be given voice and “proved” once
the reading of the law is cleared. Philip suggests an alternative discourse that might capture the proof of the “negro” experience outside of the opinion of a law that qualifies and quantifies human life as cargo or commodity goods. This is not only an interruption of the logic, but of the legal structure as well. Similar to Susan Howe’s poetry discussed in the previous section, the visual resonance of Philip’s poem—I cannot, for example, easily recreate her line breaks and spacing on this document—signals the disruption of not only the language of the law but its physical reading structure. The language is broken and transformed into new arrangements.

Out of this rupture, Philip’s poetry searches for alternative means of accessing the history of the Zong from the perspective of the African slaves. In an interview, “Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive,” Philip calls for “new tools to do the work” (Saunders 70). As part of these “new tools,” Philip considers what it means to recover the African perspective. In the section titled “Ferrum,” a long poem that extends across nearly fifty pages of text, Philip embeds the following supplication: “kin of the sea/ how do I ge/ t this to y/ ou if only I c/ ould write on wa/ ter […]” (171). In acknowledging “kin,” Philip proposes a mode of historical recovery, one which can construct alternative relationships to the past that extend beyond the relationship to the documentary record as a scholar or researcher. Instead, she considers what it means to write on the water that buries the dead or erases their historical representation. She finds a different mode of writing through her poem that can retrieve an alternative relationship to the past, one that can rearrange the epistemological structure that keeps the voices of the Africans on board the ship silent.

III. “If If If Only Ifa”

Philip’s poetry confronts the objectivity and order of the legal record through the insertion of the language and structure of West African Ifa divination verse into the body of her poem. The
resonance of “ifa” throughout the poems opens the possibility of other forms of meaning making from the perspective of the West Africans.

Philip’s invocation of Ifa in the poem shifts the logic of the legal verdict “if”—the postulate or basic assumption of truth—to “If If only/ ifa” as another or alternative form of truth. In the transcript of Gregson v. Gilbert reprinted in Philip’s text, “if” is part of the logic for determining the captain’s justification for throwing the slaves overboard for lack of water. Lord Mansfield’s decision declares: “There is weight, also, in the circumstance of the throwing overboard of the negroes after the rain (if the fact be so), for which, upon the evidence, there appears to have been no necessity” (Transcript Reprint in Philip 211). The legal language, “If the fact be so,” postulates that
if there was rain after the storm, then the claim that the loss of the slaves was necessitated by lack of
water is invalid. Therefore, Mansfield rules on a retrial for the case of the payment of costs. “If,” a
word that introduces a conditional phrase, may challenge the grounds of necessity, but it continues
to support the logic of a legal system that reads this case as an insurance trial rather than as a trial for
massacre or murder. Philip’s translation of If to Ifa in the body of the poem challenges the
reasoning and belief elicited by the word “if” in the legal terms of the case. Instead, Ifa offers
alternative possibilities centered in West African epistemological systems that might extend beyond
British law. In doing so, Philip’s invocation of the word Ifa widens what determines or provides for
the history of this case. Divination functions as a window to historical recovery; it is a tool for
reconstructing this history as an intercultural relation.

Philip’s turn to Ifa systems in the poetry is not surprising. Ifa is an important Yoruban
religious and cultural system in West Africa based on ceremonial orature practices and recitation of
divination verses or poems. Enslaved West Africans brought this Yoruban tradition of worship to
the “New World,” and variations of its form can be seen in the African diasporas and the Caribbean
from Louisiana Mardi Gras street rituals (Jackson 143); Cuban Orisa worship (Marcuzzi 183); and
African American folk traditions and even musical traditions such as hip hop (Hunter 211). Ifa can
be an important means of understanding the transmission of West African knowledge systems into
the “New World”. Ifa religious ceremonies manifest in New World circuits. For example, in Cuba,
orisa worship, which corresponds to divination practices, appears in Santeria worship (Falola and
Genova 11). The “ipanodu festival of ifa diviners,” appears both in Nigeria and Cuba (Falola and
Genova 12). Even particular Gullah festivals in the Carolinas exhibit characteristics of Yoruba rites
and rituals including some language use, craft making, and religious worship.

This dispersal of Yoruban cultural rituals can be thought of as a rich, albeit non-written West
African cultural archive that allows researchers to recover the transmission of traditions in the New
William Bascom, in one of the major scholarly accounts of divination practices, Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa, describes Ifa as both the god of divination and the system or practice of worship and spiritual counsel. The divination is based on particular *odu*, the memorized literary corpus, and *ese*, the specific poetic verses in that corpus that are recited through the casting and reading of sixteen palm nuts (Bascom 3). As a practice, Ifa divination is an intricate religious performance or ceremony that is meant to guide clients or participants through their everyday life. Though there is no exact way to perform the ceremony—in fact, the practice is particular to context, conditions, and locale—in general, a client or inquirer comes to the Babalawo, the priest, to seek advice or guidance over a pressing issue, concern, or crisis, or to settle a dispute (Bascom 11). Philip Peek, in his examination of African based epistemological possibilities in Reviewing Reality: Dynamics of African Divination, represents divination as a form of problem solving or as a means of gaining both insight on one’s history as a reflection of the present condition of life (1). For example, a client might inquire about ill-health, marriage, divorce, changing professions, financial difficulties, death, loss, and any un-reconciled quandary. The priest casts a divining chain usually made of palm nuts, brass, and cowry shells and reads the symbols. Depending on the symbols, the babalawo matches it to a memorized ese verse (Bascom 11). These poems give guidance on the question at hand in hopes of answering or solving the problem of the client and recommend certain sacrifices or actions on the part of the client. For Philip, the confrontation of historical erasure as part of the archival inheritance of transatlantic slavery creates the predicament or crisis of working with the same materials that are part of (or in promotion of) the massacre. To that impasse, Ifa practices suggest a possible if limited alternative.

Ifa ese verses constitute what Wande Abimbola, another major scholar on African divination ceremonies and a historian of Yourba literatures, language, and culture, describes as “historical” poetry (20). Bascom similarly describes Ifa poetry as an “important corpus of verbal art,
including myths, folktales, praise names, incantations, songs, proverbs, and even riddles” (Bascom 11). Therefore, the Yoruba see Ifa as the “voice of the divinities and the wisdom of the ancestors,” and, in this way, it functions as the “repository” of cultural, spiritual, and historical beliefs (Abimbola v). Ifa relies on the use of song, poetry, and incantation rather than written documents (Falola and Genova 9). In its oral structure, Ifa is constantly changing depending on who recites and the purpose for the recital. Noel K. Amherd, another Ifa historian and transcriber of Ifa verses and rituals, defines the ifa texts as the “philological ‘ancient written monument’ said to be a corpus containing the totality of Yoruba culture” (qtd. In Falola and Genova 9). And yet, because of the fluidity and flexibility of the form, this cultural monument challenges totalizing forms or logic that dictate authentic or original histories; thus, for Philip, Ifa aligns with her method of anti-narrative or recombinant anti-narrative in her intervention in the trial transcript.

There is no exact statement in Philip’s text that identifies the origin of her interest or practice in Ifa divination rituals. However, several details and clues point to Philip’s connection to the West African spiritual practice. In several interviews, Philip describes how she adopts NourbeSe as a Benin name from Nigeria, which geographically can be thought of as the epicenter of Yoruban culture. In addition, Philip’s statement on the front cover of Zong! speaks to the oral transmission of the story and reflects West African ancestral worship. She declares that the text is part of an oral transmission of the event: “as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng” (Cover). In an interview, Philip describes this entity as a representation of an ancestral spirit (Melory “Witnessing”). These examples show her interest in other entities and forms of spiritual practice around the composition of this history in poetic form.

Philip’s interest in Ifa as a repositioning of an African centric worldview arises in several places in the text. In the acknowledgement section, Philip cites Kofi Anyidoho for helping Philip obtain “spiritual permission for this work” (xii). Anyidoho is a scholar of African Oral literatures
who sees oral literature as a means of rethinking African methodology. He looks at the study of oral literatures as a crossing of the “analytical faculty of the intellectual” with the “synthesizing faculty of the artist” (Anyidoho “Power” 958). This intersection of the analytical and the creative is part of what Anyidoho sees as a reclaiming of knowledge production through an African perspective, particularly in viewing ritual and ceremony as an important academic discourse. Anyidoho’s scholarly work rethinks entry points into the African past and believes that the full story is “neither in the official archival records or library acquisitions of formal historical studies” (“National Identity” 1153).

In the acknowledgements, Philip also recognizes the source of her use of Yoruba names that appear in the first section of poems: Modupe Oduyoye’s *Yoruba’s Names*. Oduyoye is an important scholar in Yoruba language and religious discourse. In particular, he is known for critiquing a monolingual approach to understanding the Yoruba language and presenting a more comparative philosophy of language (Ogunsola “Review”). Finally, at the end of the acknowledgments, Philip makes another gesture to the spiritual reflection at work in her poems: “I thank my Ancestors for bestowing the responsibility of this work on me, Ase” (xii). Ase is the Yoruban word for the power to make things happen or to change the present condition.

In terms of epistemological revisions in the history of African American literary study, Philip’s reference to Ifa rituals in *Zong!* echoes other prominent twentieth and twenty-first century methodological studies in the history, culture, and literature of Africa and the diaspora. Henry Louis Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey* examines Ifa as an interpretative art in his study of African American literary criticism. Through the Yoruban god Esu, Gates argues that there is a uniquely “African mode of reading” characterized by its ambiguity and indeterminacy. Gates, like Philips, shows how these African traditions represent an alternative history or record of experience. For example, Gates is interested in how these cultural figures transmit historical claims. He declares, “What is clear is
that Edu’s role as the first interpreter survived the Middle Passage…” (Gates 16). In a similar approach to anti-colonial forms of historical recovery, Wole Soyinka’s study *Of Africa*, and many of his previous studies for that matter, point to Yoruban spirituality and divination ceremonies as “accommodating” practices that resist singular readings. Soyinka describes divination as a method that resists any exclusionary approach to knowledge making and instead embraces a more multiple and evolving intellectual mode (Soyinka 152). According to Soyinka’s reading, “Ifa emphasizes for us the perpetual elasticity of knowledge” (Soyinka 153). Philip’s desire to open alternative possibilities of the language of the law takes form in her use of Ifa, or, to echo Soyinka, Ifa offers Philip a means of reading the “perpetual elasticity” of this language as she translates the legal document into other forms.

Philip signals her entry into Ifa through the repetition of various words and entities of the Yoruban tradition. The first example of the presence of Ifa ritual occurs in the third section of Philip’s poems titled “Sal,” or salt. Here, the italicization of the word, “oba,” conjures divination practices.

Figure 37, Snapshot from “Sal,” NourbeSe Philip ZONG! pg. 59

Oba is a Yoruban word that refers to the king or monarchy of a region, or one who has authority or power in decision-making (Osuji 119). The image of the oba appears in a number of divination verses as a ruler in the kingdom of *Ile Ife*—the origin of Yoruban culture. The oba is often
portrayed as a client in a number of verses (Bascom 125). Throughout much of the sequence of the poems near the end of the text, Philip repeats the phrase “the oba sobs” in different forms: “the oba sobs/again ifa” (60) and “the oba/ sobs again” (70). This repetition of the image of the crying or mournful ruler signals what Nerys Williams calls the “tragic breaking down of the Yoruba king or ruler,” a fracturing of the complex structure of Yoruban power systems, within the slave trade (Contemporary Poetry 90). The presence of the “oba,” however, also signals Philip’s shift towards other means of knowledge seeking in this history through her shift to the order of ifa divination in Yoruban communities.

Philip’s repetition of the word “ori,” which literally means “head” in Yoruba, is another significant echo of the language of ifa divination verse. For example, the poem presents the word “ori” as part of the re-telling of the events on board the Zong:

![Figure 38, Snapshot from “Sal,” NourbeSe Philip ZONG! pg. 74](image)
In the snapshot of part of the poem above, Philip places the word “ori” across the almost nursery rhyme or mariner rhyme of “row row row the raft”. Here, the language of Ifa orature transplants the language of the English nursery rhyme. Ori extends into the word omi, or water in Yoruba, as Philip recasts the massacre and drowning of slaves in terms familiar to Ifa. Moreover, symbolically, the word “ori,” carries important meaning in this West African cultural tradition that recasts the event through the agency or power of the slave’s knowledge system. Ori can reflect individual or personal spiritual destiny. Ifa scholar Noel Amherd describes “ori,” as “a conceptual term that literally refers to one’s physical head but signifies possibilities in one’s life that manifest through choices made and acted upon” (Amherd, *Reciting* 52). Moreover, Amherd explores how “ori” can refer to many aspects of one’s individuality. He explains how the idea of the head “conceptually embraces the hybridity of agency within finite circumstances” (Amherd, *Reciting* 52). Similarly, Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie, in the article, “I Got a Home in Dat Rock: Memory, Orisa, and Yoruba Spiritual Identity in African American Literature,” describes how “ori” is a “complex, multivalent term suggesting simultaneously the physical head, destiny, potentiality, the quality of a person’s character, the ancestral guardian spirit, and the individual’s personal deity or orisa” (Zauditu-Selassie “I Got…” 381). Ori also refers to the interconnectedness of unique individuals. In other words, Ori, in Ifa rituals, defines the uniqueness of a person as well as that person’s role or function in the larger ecosystem or environment around that individual (Amherd, "Isese Heritages” 166). For example, Odu verses capture that sense of the individual as part of or connected to a communal experience: “If one ori improves/ Its improvement will affect two hundred others” (Amherd “Isese Heritages” 175). As a representation of the singular as part of the many, “ori” asserts the agency of the individual as well as the surrounding system of those that may be affected or influenced by this figure. In the previous poem, Philip positions “ori”—the unique identity or
imprint of the individual and the larger community or culture—against the phrase “gin nig”—a
dehumanizing categorization of the individual within the slave trade.

A word that functions with a similarly multivalent characteristic in Philip’s poetry is “ase.” I
mentioned Philip’s previous use of Ase, similar to an “amen,” in the acknowledgement section. In
the poetry, the term reappears, and, like ori, brings agency or life force to the drowned slaves.

On the one hand, the poem presents the horrors of the massacre—bodies and limbs are
thrown overboard and the sharks surround the slaves to feed on the “gore.” On the other hand,
within this scene, there is a “frenzy of ase”. Ase, in Ifa divination, in addition to its use as an
“amen,” refers to the “divine” or “vital” power of creation (Shangodoyin and Ojo 77, Hunter 215).
In other descriptions, ase is the “vital life force that leads to transformation […] [it] gives life and
efficacy to all things, innervating and sustaining all physical and spiritual life. Ase exists in the shape
of the spoken word as well as in blood, water, and seed, and in everything that lives” (Zauditu-
Selassie 371). By adding “ase” to the scene above, Philip restores a physical and spiritual force to
the loss. For Philip, the legal text determines what is or is not admissible as evidence or as life (199).
Ase, which Philip defines in her glossary in *Zong!* as, “may it manifest” (184), admits other readings or modifications of the scene. Through this reading, she “conjure[s] the infinite(ive) of to be of the ‘negroes’ on board the *Zong*” (199). Philip summons the life force or historical agency by conjuring “ase”. Through this term, the slaves become and are given life within the language of divination.

In addition to the use of particular words or phrases, stylistic and structural elements of Philip’s poem also point to the influence of Ifa divination poetry. Ifa divination verses are often characterized by stylistic repetition and word play. Repetition in an Ifa poem emphasizes the important message of the verse and, as Abimbola asserts, “embellish[es] rhythm” (Abimbola 29). Part of this repetition also extends into “word magic” or word punning between similar sounding words. For example, Bascom gives the example that “water (omi) is sacrificed so that the client can breathe (imi)” (Bascom 130). In *Zong!*, the poetry similarly evokes both repetition and word play as the poem breaks and slips between the languages heard on board the ship. For example, Philip shifts several times between omi, a Yoruba for water; mio, which suggests “dios mio”; and “o my god” in English below. These terms are set within the already discussed wordplay of “If/ifa can if”:

![Figure 40, Snapshot from “Ferrum,” NourbeSe Philip ZONG! pg. 129](image-url)
Philip’s repetition and play between omi, mio, and o my god, creates a heteroglossic language formation and highlights the density of perspectives or ways of interpreting this event on board the ship. Philip discusses the wordplay she creates between English and Yoruba—a fusion between the language of the law and the Africans on board the ship—as a view into the “post post-modern world” where “we are, indeed, multiple and ‘many-voiced’” (205). This word play is not only theoretical, however, but also regenerative as Philip stages a symbolic undoing of drowning’s strangulation in the recovery of breath and its outcomes: life.

The visual structure of *Zong!* also reflects the aurality and tonal emphasis of Ifa poetry. Ifa divination poetry frequently repeats certain lines and certain vowel sounds:

- Omi ti ajipon o
- Uwa Edu ma toro
- O ma toro lee ni o
- Omi ti ajipon o
- Uwa Edu ma toro  (Amherd 52)

Or, in English translation:

- The water gathered early in the morning is cool
- The life of Orunmila is settled
- It continues to be settled
- The water gathered early in the morning is cool
- The life of Orunmila is settled (Amherd 52)
One can see the emphasis on the repetition of “omi” (water), “ajipon” (cool), and “toro” (settled) as well as the repetition in Ifa of tone from the “o” of omi and toro. Sound functions as part of the Ifa verse (Amherd 146, 153). As Amherd states, “’The nature and combination of the consonants and vowels, as well as the tonal pattern of this word, together suggest to the ears of a cultured Yoruba the impression of a textile that is very rich in motifs and colours, an epitome of the baroque’” (Amherd 146). Though the transcription of ifa poetry is always variable and rarely takes any standardized or official version, visually, the poems are often portrayed with the following structure or look:

![Figure 41, Snapshot from “Ogbe Meji 8,” Bascom, pg. 152](image)

Philip’s poetry mirrors not only the structure above, but also the oral or rhythmic qualities of Ifa. In doing so, Philip creates a verse structure that refracts the English version of this history into the visual discourse of Ifa divination poetry.
Philip’s tonal patterns transmit the history of the legal record into utterances that reflect ifa sound patterns and, thereby, symbolically, Philip gives voice to the Africans who are silenced in their death (Philip 168). Philip explains this conversion in her journal,

In Zong! The African, transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human. Through oath and through moan, through mutter, chant and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation to not-tell the story…. (Philip 196)
These utterances, captured in Philip’s mirroring of divination verse, echo the concept of sound in Ifa where “[u]ttering is agency” (Amherd 153). Rather than historical loss, Philip’s use of ifa shifts the two dimensional structure of the legal record (in print) to the performative, sensuous, tonal, and rhythmic ritual of historical work.

Through the use of Ifa, Philip’s poetry creates an alternative repository of knowledge that emphasizes ceremony and ritual. Philip’s summoning of Ifa ceremony in her poems presents a mode of accessing history that resists archaeological pressures that fix categories. In the journal section, Philip discusses alternatives to the history of a “rightly worded contract” (191). Philip’s use of Ifa challenges stable forms of archival categorization and instead presents a constantly evolving and shifting form captured in ceremonial practices. Because Ifa is an intertextual and performative archival repository of cultural and historical knowledge, it resists modes of preservation that reflect stasis, authoritative or authentic histories. Even the “rightly worded” history of the practice is difficult to maintain. Amherd, Ambimbola, and others speak about the difficulty of transcription of ifa verse and the variability of those transcriptions. In fact, many Babalawo, Ifa priests, resist transcribing Ifa (Amherd 16, 17, 44) and see these as western efforts to force Ifa to adhere to a fixed cultural apparatus. Under these efforts, Ifa is difficult to name an “authentic” or archivable transcript of the performance of Ifa ceremony as it constantly shifts articulation depending on social, historical, and individual context. As Amherd asserts, “Copying would be a meaningless endeavor, truly” (Amherd 40). In fact, rather than authenticity, mimicry or exact reproduction, multiplying the experience is far more important in spiritual and historical maintenance of Ifa practice (Amherd 40). Ifa poetry is characterized by “dijointedness, polyvocality, incompleteness,” and, therefore, “no final model can ever be affirmed” (Amherd 137-8). Instead, the performance is always changing or reinterpreted for a client and, therefore, resists fossilization of its schemes at the same time that it mirrors the fluid and ever evolving traces of cultural and historical content (Agbali 308).
In *Zong!,* the poetry invokes the ceremonial practice and distorts the language of the written record—even the practice of transcription of this history—and opens multiple views or means of reading, hearing, and performing the text.

Figure 43, Snapshot from “Ferrum,” NourbeSe Philip ZONG! pg. 172

Here, Philip uses the poem to evoke the African voice and perspective of the massacre. The written word—“I see you to write write all time me me…” at the top of the page—shifts into the call for Ifa. The poem reflects what Philip claims in the journal is a “cacophonous representation” through a performative ritual. Philip refers to this multi-dimentionality of the poetry as a “fugal palimpsest” (204). This way of characterizing the contractual language of the legal transcript of the case challenges its sense of “authorial intention” and opens the possibilities of knowing or experiencing an alternative history through divination verse (204).

Throughout her discussion of the composition of the poetry, Philip reads her ceremonial gestures as an embodied experience—one rooted in African historical performances. Philip refers to
her poetry as “crumping”—an African American dance form characterized by twisting and contorting (205). She says of crumping and the language of her poem: “…the text forces you—me—to read differently, bringing chaos into language or, perhaps more accurately, revealing the chaos that is already there” (205). Philip’s discussion of crumping reflects Diane Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire*, an examination of the connection between archival histories and performance in her study of the Americas. Taylor attends to performance as a method or strategy of transmitting social and historical knowledge. In particular, Taylor’s attention to performance as historical work shifts away from the validation of narrative to assert other paradigms of archival meaning making. As Taylor explains, “The many uses of the word performance point to the complex, seemingly contradictory, and at times mutually sustaining or complicated layers of referentiality” (Taylor 3).

As a performative ritual, the presence of Ifa in Philip’s *Zong!* reflects a sense of history and historical work as a complex, shared co-presence. For example, Amherd argues that Ifa divination rituals consist of “multiple, simultaneously overlapping voices, each resonating within the utterance of the contemporary babalawo whose voice is just one of many” (Amherd 164). This idea that the performance gains meaning and continuity to the past through the dynamics of performer and client is echoed in Peek’s introduction to *Reviewing Reality: Dynamics of African Divination* (10). In *Zong!,* co-presence emphasizes continuity with the past rather than mastery of that past. Philip describes her own work with the language of the legal transcript and the shaping of the poem as a mutually referential relationship, “The words suggesting how to work with them—I look at them and certain words leap out at me, asking me to choose them; a sense at times of doing something for these hidden people, these lost kin…I burn incense…”(Philip 195).

Part of the ritual specific to Ifa or West African spiritual ceremony is the receptivity of ancestry and ancestral voices as part of this recovery. Philip asserts in her journal section, “The ancients walk within us” (Philip 195). This is echoed again when she turns to the spiritual influence
or intervention in this archival work. Philip describes a moment in her writing where “[…] suddenly a piece of paper floats down, apparently from nowhere—it contains notes I had earlier made on the Bantu view of death and the afterlife of ancestors—those who have died but continue to work on behalf of the living” (Philip 197). This small anecdote suggests Philip’s push beyond an archaeological inventory or catalogue of the past by combining the material (archival) and the imaginative and spiritual aspects. For Philip, the retrieval of this past from an African perspective of the slaves must include an integration of the spiritual: “The spirit in the text and of the text is at work. Working against meaning, working for meaning, working in and out of meaning” (204).

Philip’s description illustrates, once again, this sense of multiple epistemologies of historical meaning making at work that resist any linear narrative or portrait and, in many ways, makes claim to this past through a West African point of view.

Philip’s invocation of the multi-dimensional and multi-inclusive performances of Ifa also creates a sensual or affective relationship to the record of this past, even one that can produce or affect healing. Amherd calls Ifa an “affective intent of orature” (Amherd 152). He describes how Ifa divination verses are part of a larger experience surrounding and drawing from both the material and spiritual world:

In these transcriptions of ese Ifa, the lines I am writing are not lines, together they are not stanzas, the sentences do not convey the performer’s rhythms, and so on. They were originally a flow of sounds and actions that linked themselves to people, entities, circumstances, fluids, powders, carvings, cock crows, smells, and more that together formed a unique sensuous context during the particular performance. (Amherd 153)

Philip’s repetition of the “Oba sobs” throughout the poem to the last line similarly opens the emotional or affective response to this history as part of the ceremonial practice. Like Howe’s sense of the tactility and beauty of the archival document, Philip’s invocation of Ifa stimulates the “felt
experience.” However, in addition to the a larger or more expansive dimension to the sensory stimulation and aesthetic of the archive, Philip’s turn to Ifa’s more sensuous offerings suggests the possibility of healing as part of the process of recovery.

IV. “How do I read a work like this?”

Philip’s incorporation of Ifa into Zong! challenges the stability or centering of Western archaeological practices of the Black Atlantic archive by presenting a poly-historiographic method. Like Rukeyser’s and Howe’s, Philip’s poetry presents a critique of archival narratives by opening the stability of the legal text and offering new methodologies of reading the document through poetry. In Zong!, Philip uses poetic form to continually reshape new readings and therefore new relationships to the archival record. In this structure, Philip opens other possibilities for performing academic work by confronting the stability of archival texts. And yet, Philip also notes the limitations of these recovery projects when they are embedded in Western or Eurocentric archival practices.

For Philip, the limitations underscore her desire for alternative forms of historical work that resist Western archaeological practices. Through the representation of Ifa divination, Philip’s poetry presents a new cosmology of archival production and meaning making that includes African spiritual practices. It is a methodology that overlaps, overwrites, and blurs official records. Through Ifa, Philip can revise the historical representation of the “non-being” of Africans on board the ship and the “New World” philosophy of logic and order (197) to one that makes language more opaque through its multiple, and often spiritual, layers.
In fact, Philip frames this printing as a ghostly, spiritual act. Towards the end of “Notanda,” Philip describes how her laser printer creates “superimposed” pages, where one page is layered onto the next (206). She again uses the word “crumped,” to evoke this merging and overlapping of layers (206). She suggests that there is no logical or rational reason for the overlap, and alludes to the serendipity and spirituality of such a printing. Philip’s printing creation mirrors the verse-driven invocation that superimposes layers of the legal transcript with Ifa divination, and, in doing so, allows Philip to point to a means of viewing the past that not only traces the diaspora within the transatlantic but models diasporic methods of historical work.

Ifa, itself, is representative of diasporic crossings. These crossing are captured in Joni Jones description of the Orisa as a diasporic figure: “[t]he Orisa, cosmic forces that manifest around the world, are inherently diasporic. The wind, the river, the thunder, the oceans, the mountains, and the
trees cover the planet and do not claim allegiance to a single source other than the impetus of the life force itself” (323). Echoing this similar sense of diasporic crossings, Philip maps out the methodological route during her composition of the poem from Ghana to Liverpool (202-203). This is a cosmos that may not have a fixed typology but that can represent a repository of historical and cultural knowledge making.

What does it mean to recontextualize the work scholars and researchers do in the archive by adopting the epistemological position of the subject or culture under study? Philip’s *Zong!* suggests that the performative characteristic of poetry (as well as its visual performance) enacts a critique of Western notions of scientific work in the archive and reorients the legal record and the history of transatlantic slavery in West African spiritual practice. Through Philip’s invocation of Ifa within the structure of the poem, the rigidity of the legal document and the historical claims composed from its language are open to a more affective and ceremonial method. Philip’s work, like Rukeyser’s and Howe’s, reflects Mona Livholts’ avocation of the “intersectionalizing” of writing that challenges “researchers to grasp complexity in their studies” by showing the “intimate relations of research questions, lives and locations, shifts and changes” (Livholts 9).

Philip’s use of Ifa disturbs this principle idea of historical or even academic authority. Sacred and spiritual rituals preserve cultural histories as well as serve to unite the viewer or participant with the past. In this case, Philip finds in Ifa an alternative to reading the past that can access the historical representation and experience of the African slaves on board the ship. Through Ifa, Philip positions the participant in communication with history as part of the present condition rather than enact a claim to authority or an authorized view of this history of the legal transcript. Philip’s poem opens up a very pragmatic question: how can these practices be woven into contemporary systems of recovery work? Through *Zong!,* Philip models a synaptic view of working with archival records—a structure of signals and synapses of historical perspective working in
conjunction or together, working within collections and as ceremonial rituals—that embraces different practices inherited from multiply located historiographic systems.

V. A New Cosmos of Archival Recovery

When researching Giordano Bruno in my first chapter’s study of Muriel Rukeyser, I came across the text “Turning Traditions Upside Down” (2013). On the front cover is a picture of a memorial to Bruno where the artist, Alexander Polzin, has sculpted Bruno upside down with his hands crossed in front of him and his feet reaching to the top of the roof. The introduction to the book explains that the tragedy of Bruno’s life may be seen as “a radical symbol of the human struggle for knowledge, rising to the challenge of freedom of thought at the risk of losing ground. It is upside down, therefore, that Alexander Polzin’s sculpture shows Bruno” (2). This image is symbolic, in many ways, for Muriel Rukeyser’s, Susan Howe’s, and NourbeSe Philip’s rewriting of the archive and archival practices and, literally, turning them upside down. Poetry, in the Renaissance, framed a way of thinking about these New Cosmologies. Similarly so, these contemporary poets usher in a new cosmos of thinking about the archive by breaking and decentering its universe—of systems, qualifications, and mechanics—in order to confront what makes “logical sense” and open it to new paradigms. However, as the passage states above, new paradigms can often result in losing ground. Rukeyser’s biography is such a case where the out-of-print book comes with an errata slip listing the errors that mark these pages. For Howe and Philip, their work, is less invested in deconstructing the disciplines of the university—let’s say between science and poetry—than they are curious about bringing their methodological critiques into different forms. Moreover, for Rukeyser, Hariot’s papers exemplified an endless number of possible connections and extensions through time. Everything, the reader gets the sense, can become
connected to anything and everything. For Howe and Philip, the archive was impossible to complete, even if it could, in the case of Philip’s intervention in the legal record through Ifa, provide community or healing. Through each of the poet’s work, however, the experience of the manuscript page, of the struggle of reading, and of the difficulty of proving, is felt through the body of the poem. Rather than comprehensive histories, each of these case studies in this dissertation show that this work continues to move and transform, as will the histories they depict.
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