I.

Speaking of his own work, the poet Robert Duncan said, “I make poetry as [others] make war or make love or make states or revolutions: to exercise my faculties at large.”

If you stop to think about this word,

POETRY,

you might imagine a solitary reader rummaging through fat books of verse, searching for that perfect aphorism, or slim lines broken by rhyme, enjambed by mood, or perhaps shaped in those skinny rectangles we all immediately recognize as poetry. Maybe it’s all just flowery language, similes and metaphors, metered or unmetered verse. But this is poetry in its manifestly superficial essence, caught up in looks and sounds. What we fail to imagine is the actual root of this beautiful but useful art, which is similar in look but deceiving in principle,

POIESIS,

which means, generally, the process of making; production, creation; creativity, culture.

To take Duncan’s use of exercising the faculties, plus the work of making, production, creation, is to form the foundation of our generative and expansive notion of culture--something living, something in flux, purposeful. Purpose, for me, is the heart of poetry.

When I was very young, I thought a library was a place where books went to die. No one in my family, immediate or extended, owned or read books. Not even magazines or newspapers. Those books were an anomaly to me, a stranger. In the fifth grade, Mr. Parisi asked me to submit a story to a local competition after hearing me wax poetic to my friends, making up rhyming jokes on the spot. It placed first, out of thousands of entries, I like to think, which was a surprise to me because I had no idea what I was doing. But thereafter my teachers entrusted me with the word, asking me to read or recite my stories and poems in class, virtually inflating my ego to Shakespearian proportions.

It is, explicitly, this inflation of ego which gives me the audacity to suggest that poetry, specifically, has more than just its life on the page, in the ear, and that the ideation, crafting, composing, and the debating over, the criticism, the controversies and collaborations of poetry, have the unique ability to bring varied and sometimes disparate ways of thinking and doing together, to form possibilities of intermedia between disciplines and academic departments. This is an introduction to the Baltimore Poetry Library at Towson University.

After various iterations at, first the Towson Arts Collective, where the collection capped at about 150 titles, then at LitMore in Baltimore City, where we breached 1000 titles after a big donation from a local author, then in my co-conspirator Douglas Mowbray’s office, where it lay dormant while we looked for a new home for the quickly growing collection, then at the University of Baltimore, where it reached national acclaim, I decided to donate the roughly 6,000 volumes of poetry I’ve been collecting since 2003 to Albert S. Cook Library at Towson University. It is made up of single-author collections, anthologies, poetics, and criticism. It is also made up of handmade chapbooks and ephemera, objects, illustrated broadsides. It is even made up of baseball cards, flipbooks, hand-printed and -painted incunabula that defy categorization, including a small book with a birch bark cover.

Let’s get back to exercising those faculties...

The title of my talk is “Special Collections, Living Collections: Poetical Collaborations among Departments and Colleges.” The simple question is, “what is the efficacy of inter-disciplinary studies?” which leads us to the why: “Why study and research traditional disciplines in an untraditional manner?” I will use the problem areas of racism, climate destabilization, and psychotherapy to elucidate the obvious connections between traditional disciplines of study and their poetical resonances.

II.

*Citizen: An American Lyric* is a 2014 book-length poem and a series of lyric essays by American poet Claudia Rankine. *Citizen* stretches the conventions of traditional lyric poetry by interweaving several forms of text and media into a collective portrait of racial relations in the United States. In her critique of racism and visibility, Rankine details the quotidian microaggressions African-Americans face, discusses controversial incidents such as backlashes against tennis player Serena Williams, and inquires about the ramifications of the shootings of Trayvon Martin and James Craig Anderson. She intersperses her writing with images of various paintings, drawings, sculptures, and other digital media to “render visible the black experience.”

Here, poetry humanizes the plight of oppressed and unfairly treated peoples in a voice that is characteristically expansive. Imagine the potential of race studies, critical race theory, historical biases and how they play out in our daily lives, using an approach that is poetical (in other words, “this is how I see it”) coupled with rigorous, empirical research using comparative disciplines (sociology, criminology, philosophy) to produce a new kind of research, a new kind of saying that puts the individual consciousness back into the academy, via personal experience.

In turning to climate change, climate catastrophes, there are a number of writers who practice ecopoetics. Poetry aspires to reveal the world for what it is. Ecopoetics reaffirms the world in its complexity and proposes an engagement with—or attunement to—an original world: one dynamic and rich and devised of a continuum of interrelations, an overlooked/missed world rarely registered in our everyday, natural attitude. As a discipline poetry is vigorous, imaginative, and alternative; it opens up clearings in our mental conception of the world, providing us with new paths of investigation, and it makes available other possible worlds to those commonly offered to our understanding.

Ecopoetics extends this art form (poetry) with the intention of foregrounding an investigation into ecology. As a discipline ecopoetics investigates how the human is situated within its habitat; how “home” is defined and built; where (or whether) borders exist between body and world, human and other, space and place; and how sense activities, physical presences, memory, and moments of thinking locate and assist the human desire to navigate the self in the world. Ecopoetics thus contributes to the dissident project of resistance to dominant cultural modes of thinking.

Like psychoanalysis, poetry is possible because of the nature of verbal language, particularly its potentials to evoke the sensations of lived experience. These potentials are vestiges of the personal relational context in which language is learned, without which there would be no poetry and no psychoanalysis. To further that elaboration, a poem might be presented to illustrate the sensorial and imagistic potentials of words, after which the interpersonal processes of language development are explored in an attempt to elucidate the original nature of words as imbued with personal meaning, embodied resonance, and emotion. This view of language and the verbal form allows a fuller understanding of the therapeutic processes of speech and conversation at the heart of psychoanalysis, including the relational potentials of speech between present individuals, which are beyond the reach of poetry. In one sense, the work of the analyst is to create language that mobilizes the experiential, memorial, and relational potentials of words, and in so doing to make a poet out of the patient so that she too can create such language.

III.

The examples above are merely starting points for an interdisciplinary approach to academics. What I’ve yet to approach is the academic library’s function as the locus of possibilities between non-literary, non-arts departments and poetics.

The question is, “why the library?” Simply put, the library is a repository par excellence: not a mausoleum but a living museum of findable, useable, interpretable materials. In the spring of 2023, Cook Library will unveil its newest collection, the Baltimore Poetry Library, spanning 6,000 titles in various media and complexities of presentation. Housing it in one space will allow the Towson academic community to exist and work in collaboration without the limitations of departmental walls.

In my own vision of the Baltimore poetry library, I dream of the limitlessness of cooperation between minds and bodies:

imagine students in the Languages department studying the history of regional poetics and poetries employing their peers in the History department to work on best research and evaluation practices, ethnographies, and perhaps studying regional dialects and unknown writers...

imagine students in the music department setting poems as scores for jazz vocalists, or longer serial poems like *Omeros* by Derek Walcott as librettos for orchestral pieces, or even using experimental sound poetry to accompany instruments in the avant garde tradition...

imagine students in psychotherapy and counseling utilizing poetry workshops as writing therapies for their clinicals and pre-med studies...

imagine students in AI developing technologies wherein computers learn how to compose and recite poetry...

imagine students in the Art department illustrating poems and works by students in the English department, and laying out and hand-making book designs to encompass the works of these budding writers...

One of the most rewarding experiences in my life was organizing the “It Takes a Village” workshop in Baltimore City. Partnering with The Village Learning Place, an independent library that catered to school children and its neighbors in the Charles Village area, we developed a writing program that showed young boys and girls how to compose and write poems, edit them to perfection, lay them out with the help of book design software, then publish their work in an anthology which they read from and gifted to the community at a book release and signing party. Here, from start to finish, was a chance to empower the children to say, in their way, in their own time, “this is how I see my world.”

Ultimately, I see the library as an incubator, a place where people from many different backgrounds, disciplines, dialectical communities, nations, and affiliations come together to share how they see the world, and how to see each other as equals, as poetical partners in the struggles and joys of everyday life.

Poiesis, the process of making anew, of seeing anew, and of unmaking the old biases and prejudices that keep us moving backward, blind and dumb and deaf to each other. The library, the center, the heart of all poetries, incubator and liberator.