

**University Presses Can Be Effective Vehicles for Making Archives  
More Accessible and Well-known**

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**Abstract**

An editor-in-chief of a university press examines the case to be made for the unique positionality of university presses to reinvigorate the archival works in the holdings of both their own university special collections and other regional archives. This article describes the process of amplifying the works of two authors whose works had been archived and under-represented in print. The process by which two distinct publications were created and disseminated is documented. In the first case, a compendium is made from the work, selected by an editor who was mentored by the person whose work is held by the archive. In the second case, a much more well-known archive and author's work is amplified by the poets of the current moment, including Louisiana State Poet Laureate Mona Lisa Saloy. The results of these efforts brought renewed exposure to these works. These case studies show both the utility of this kind of work in connecting the public to the archive and discuss the intense use of bandwidth (human capital and funds for publishing) that are required to do this work in ways that are a credit to both archive and university press.

**Keywords:** archive to publication, archive accessibility, partnerships between presses and archives, publishing partnerships,

When I began working at the University of New Orleans Press in 2012, the press was in crisis, with its future uncertain. As we worked to stabilize the organization, a key issue that I wanted to address was how to make the Press more relevant to the city and region. In addressing this issue, the main question on my mind: now that we could take on new projects, what would we publish? While UNO Press had been mostly dedicated to poetry, my own interest (as well as the mandate discussed with the University leadership) was to publish work that would represent the region, Louisiana in particular.

### ***Case 1: New Orleans Griot: The Tom Dent Reader***

We started to think about what books we would like to see, and I thought about Tom Dent's *Southern Journey*. Approaching the 25th anniversary of his classic, the book was out of print. G.K. Darby, managing editor, and I started the process of securing the rights. When I met with Kalamu ya Salaam, who had been mentored by Dent, about the possibility of his writing the introduction for a new edition of *Southern Journey*, Salaam said to me, "I'll go you one better. Amistad has 21 linear feet of files of Tom's writing. Let's go there and make a compendium" (K. ya Salaam, personal conversation, 2014).

Salaam and I met with the Amistad Research Center, and they gave their blessing (and legal permission) to publish a collection culled from their stacks. Salaam spent weeks collecting both the published and unpublished work into one folder, six inches thick. From there, managing editor G.K. Darby fed the pages through a type-scanner, and we had a low-quality file from which to begin correcting and sorting.

In the end, after three years and multiple rounds of corrections by UNO Press staff and editorial conversations with Salaam, UNO Press editor Chelsey Shannon, and Dent contemporary and compendium contributor Jerry Ward, we had a 497-page behemoth: *New*

*Orleans Griot: The Tom Dent Reader*. The book was a testament to one of New Orleans's undisputed literary heavyweights, one whom most people in New Orleans had never read.

Salaam said,

As Ellis Marsalis reminded us, "We will be just a rumor if we don't leave something, and that is what Tom was at that point, not much more than a rumor to most people. But the book did more than what we set out to do. I don't think New Orleans was much aware of Tom Dent, before the book, and since the book... people have been asking me and visiting to interview me about Tom. (K. ya Salaam, personal communication, March 19, 2023)

Circling back to Amistad, I was curious what the feeling was at the archive about the process. Chris Harter, who was the deputy director of Amistad during the era in which we published the book, reflected:

"I think with the publication of the *Tom Dent Reader*, it continued to bring more notice to Tom, of course, but it also put him into the context of the Black Arts Movement, both locally and nationally. A lot of these pieces had never seen the light of day as published works, and what archives should be looking to do is to provide greater access to their collections so that publications, such as the *Tom Dent Reader*, that result from research within the archives can shine more light on the collections. I think that it is helpful — that ideally what we want to do with every collection is to have a way to showcase them. Working with UNO Press allowed us to further the public access in a way that the archive would never have had the resources to do on its own, i.e. publish a book of Tom's collected writings. (C. Harter, personal communication, March 21, 2023)

A secondary benefit to the archive was that among the papers on Dent's desk when he

died was a beautifully spun chapter about Mardi Gras Indians, and Salaam chose to include it in *Griot*. After publication, we received an amiable call from writer Jason Berry, “Why have y’all published my chapter and credited Dent?” The archivist had mistakenly attributed the chapter to Dent as writer rather than beta reader of the work, and we were able to correct the book for future editions and the archive was able to correctly attribute the chapter.

### ***Other Ways of Measuring the Impact of the Process***

While entirely subjective, the process of consulting the archive whose work was amplified by publishing is valuable: did the work actually amplify the reach and awareness of the collection and the archive? Did it enhance or damage the reputation of the writer and institution? Salaam’s and Harter’s responses indicate that both the editor and the institution believed that the process had been helpful, but what about other ways of measuring impact?

In the case of *New Orleans Griot, the Tom Dent Reader*, there are several other ways of measuring the amplitude of the impact: book sales, critical response, and range of distribution of copies.

In the case of book sales, the numbers speak: in the four years since publication, *Griot* has sold more than 600 copies, a respectable but not overwhelming number. To put it in context, in the year it did the most in sales for UNO Press, it was the fourth best-selling book we published.

In terms of critical reception, however, *Griot* was tremendously successful: it received superlative reviews in *Kirkus*, (*New Orleans Griot*, 2017), *64 Parishes* (Robinson, 2018), and was featured on *The Reading Life* (Larson, 2018).

Kristina Kay Robinson (2018), writing in *64 Parishes* wrote:

University of New Orleans Press’s most recent volume, *New Orleans Griot: The Tom*

*Dent Reader*, edited by one of BLKARTSOUTH's most gifted writers, Kalamu ya Salaam, is a literary celebration of the Black imagination. A close look at a people's epic journey across the world, Tom Dent's work across various genres, including fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and drama, tells the story not just of loss but also of the retention of Africa in the daily lives and practices of Black New Orleanians.

But in terms of amplifying the reach of Dent's legacy, it was the adoption by One Book, One New Orleans as the city-wide read of 2020 that really reintroduced Dent to the collective literary history of the region (Coviello, 2020). With a year-long campaign by the organization to create a collective conversation about a book, Dent's memory was alive in the city. There were events at Dillard University, Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, Words and Music, and the University of New Orleans, along with virtual events every month. Dent's face was on posters and the book was featured on the radio and in bookstores. And in the wake of that year, we began to see Dent being adopted in courses about New Orleans literature. He is now regularly considered among the biggest names in New Orleans letters.

Let the record show that we did not succeed on every front: by searching WorldCat on March 22, 2023, (as I write this) 51 libraries have physical copies of the book, while 33 are lending the ebook. I am not sure whether to be cheered by this number or disappointed, though. My main reflection is that our goal to have Dent in every Louisiana Library has fallen short, with only eleven libraries in Louisiana (mostly university libraries) having copies. This, in spite of the fact that we mailed every Parish library acquisitions department a copy of the glowing review from *64 Parishes*. Still, considering that 51 more outposts have copies of the book, it is that much more accessible and disseminated than it was when most of these libraries had no material at all by Dent.

**Case 2: *I am New Orleans: 36 Poets Revisit Marcus Christian's Definitive Poem***

In 2018, with the Press in better shape, the University of New Orleans began a restructuring, moving the Press both physically and bureaucratically into the Earl K. Long Library, on the second floor. As we began to inhabit the new office, we began to spend more time in the Special Collections, located just above us, on the fourth floor, where visitors are greeted by the sight of Marcus Christian's printing press. The Special Collections is the home of the Marcus Bruce Christian Collection, which is measured in hundreds of linear feet at UNO, and where Christian was a professor at the end of his life. In fact, his unpublished work has always been at the center of people's ideas about what UNO Press should publish. The reasons for Christian's work never having found a publisher are storied and speculative, ranging from lack of funds to print, to refusal to trim a thousand-page manuscript, to fear that his job at Dillard would end if the work were published (Redding, 1991). Looking through the archive, though, I was left with more questions than answers about how to build a book from the material. A credible publication would require editing and notation that would take several years to do well. So Chelsey Shannon and I, each time, would make the mutual decision not to undertake publishing Christian.

In the column against publishing Christian: he needed little publicizing. The legend of Marcus Christian was well-known and well-told, and the archive is widely-known and widely-consulted, with a lengthy narrative about its history and contents in Marilyn Hessler's 1987 "Marcus Christian: The Man and His Collection."

Still, the idea of re-animating Christian's work spoke to many people. As recently as March 8, 2023, while speaking at his book release event for *New Orleans: A Literary History* at Octavia Books, author T.R. Johnson, unbidden, implored UNO Press to publish Marcus

Christian's unpublished book (G.K. Darby, personal communication, 2023) .

In 2019, during my monthly call with Salaam, he mentioned an idea that he had been thinking through: having a collection of living poets (and Tom Dent, always still Dent) "revisit" Christian's most renowned poem: "I am New Orleans." It seemed like the solution to the problem that had been troubling our minds, and we collectively decided to move forward with the anthology.

Six months later, the manuscript arrived, and editor Chelsey Shannon started the work of ordering the poems, and we started to imagine how the book would live in the city. We received permission from upstairs to use Christian's image on the cover, and permission to publish the poem with which it is most linked.

We imagined a series of readings, gathering the modern poets in places that had been homes to Christian: UNO, Dillard, Bookstores ... and then Covid came and shut down the city. It was into this emptiness that *I am New Orleans: 36 Poets Revisit Marcus Christian's Definitive Poem* began its publishing sojourn. With a grant from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, we commissioned video artist Weenta Girmay to create a few short videos from the material. The results were astounding: Sunni Patterson's contribution to the collection, "My City Ain't for Sale," went viral, viewed more than 200,000 times on Facebook alone (W. Girmay 2020a). The ensemble reading of Christian's poem coupled with the modern visuals (W. Girmay, 2020b) makes the work feel fresh, closer to modern poetry than to the Whitman I usually have associated with the poem.

The book did well for a poetry anthology; as of this writing, it has sold more than 300 copies (as a comparison, our other two poetry anthologies have both sold under 100 copies). It was honored by the Schomburg's grant, the second installment of which allowed us to produce a

video, *The Past, the Present, & the Boundless Future': Black Poetry in the Crescent City & Beyond*, which has been viewed 650 times, and drew a live crowd of 100 across all platforms (University of New Orleans Press, 2020).

I went and spoke to Connie Phelps, Professor and Librarian at the University of New Orleans' Louisiana and Special Collections:

I thought that it was wonderful and I thought that it brought it to people's attention again, introducing it to people who might not have known of Marcus Christian. The assortment of different views increased his reputation. I think of myself as a protector of his reputation, and thought this [book] did that. (C. Phelps, personal communication March 23, 2023)

And as a final measure of the success of the dissemination of *I am New Orleans*, the book is held in 40 libraries worldwide, though only four are located in Louisiana.

### **Final Thoughts**

As a point of comparison of ways that a university press can be a conduit for the work living in archives, these two case studies indicate two possible ways forward. The materials stored in the archives of the region are prodigious, and most are not the lucky beneficiaries of editors who have the time and energy to do the work Salaam did (without advance payments of any kind). That said, many of the archives of the region steward works that speak strongly to modern audiences and are able to remind us that the struggles of the region are a strong through-line into our modern era. The structural barriers of race, class, gender, and sexual preference have been considered by our literary predecessors, and their investigations into the experiences of their times are remarkably relevant in these times. As Robinson (2018) wrote in *64 Parishes*

It is a dilemma currently faced by more and more Black artists born in New Orleans and

choosing to base their practices here: a neoliberal nightmare in which Black Aesthetics are being choked by nonprofit funding models, while the traditional social structures used to sustain the community are being dismantled daily by gentrification and displacement. As we head into this tricentennial celebration, it is Dent that Black artists, Black people, and all people who find themselves in residence in New Orleans should be reading *now*.

While archives have the responsibility to do the work making the work accessible to the public, it is clear that university presses are uniquely positioned to help archives, in isolated cases, succeed in their mission of archival dissemination.

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