

(UN)FINISHED THOUGHTS: APPROACHES TO CONSERVING TRANSITORY STATES IN THE WORKING DOCUMENTS OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS



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INTRODUCTION



(Left) Image of Gwendolyn Brooks
Courtesy of Nora Brooks Blakely.
(Below) "We Real Cool" written in 1959 and published in "The Bean Eaters," her third collection of poetry, in 1960.

"Nothing that happens to you is inadmissible—anything that happens anywhere, anyhow, is valid material for poetry. Love, light, loss, liberty and laceration."
Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917-2000

Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the most influential American poets of the 20th century. She began regularly publishing her early works in the poetry column of the *Chicago Defender* when she was only 17 years old. Encouraged early by established writers such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, Brooks went on to chronicle her experiences and observations of Black life, labor and love in South Side Chicago during the Depression. In 1950, Brooks was awarded the **Pulitzer Prize for Poetry** for her work *Annie Allen*, making her the first African American writer to receive a Pulitzer.



Brooks' poem "We Real Cool," was published in her 1960 poetry collection, "The Bean Eaters." Possibly her most famous poem, it perfectly captures the youth and rebellion of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1968, Brooks became the **Poet Laureate for the State of Illinois**—a position she held until her death.

Brooks was an avid record keeper. Like her experiences, nothing that she wrote—**letters, grocery lists, food diaries, annotated pictures, homemade chapbooks and more**—was inadmissible. Her singular, often editorial marginalia and labelling existed on most items she saved. **Moreover, the purposes of her retained materials transformed over time.** Brooks wrote verses on her grocery lists, pasted clippings onto other clippings, bundled photographs in albums, one behind the next. She created new layers of meaning by reworking drafts of poems already published. Middles became beginnings, beginnings became ends. And while the idiosyncrasies of a creator/collector might be present in any modern archive, Brooks' papers are especially indicative of how fully she embraced the notion of the **"working document"**—**words and thoughts in a permanent state of flux.**



Brooks kept a meticulous record of everything she ate, and occasionally added verse fragments, grocery shopping lists and notes about news. Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

CHALLENGES

In setting out to stabilize Brooks' "working documents" several salient issues came to fore.

- The physical state of her papers was problematic. Many of her most important drafts were created with **poor, inherently unstable materials**, including dye based inks on embrittled paper, deteriorated composition books, and newsprint.
- Aspects of Brooks' creative process and composition style included physically tearing or otherwise eliminating lacunae or entire pages, either to remove them completely or reorder them elsewhere—a form of **"intentional damage."**
- As an archival collection in the RBML, it was important to the curator to **rigorously maintain the final state** of the objects as they were acquired to reflect the lives that they had lived in Brooks' possession. This meant that any conservation treatment undertaken had not only to be rigorously documented, but also clearly distinguishable from the original material.

Moreover, the Gwendolyn Brooks collection was still mostly uncatalogued in 2017—due in part to the challenge of imposing a logical system of organization for user access on what was Brooks' own **meaningful and organic dis/order**. In selecting early treatment plans and pathways, it was vital to establish a **close relationship of communication between curator and conservator** in order to make long-term care decisions that would not risk erasing or obscuring the heart of the material—Brook's own care and keeping decisions made during her lifetime.

APPROACH #1. Conspicuous Repairs Published Verses (Defender)



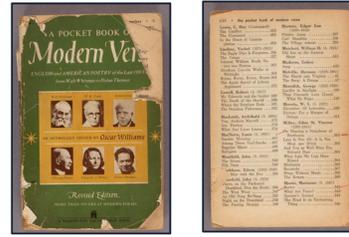
After treatment photo with detail of additional white linen thread visible along original black sewing



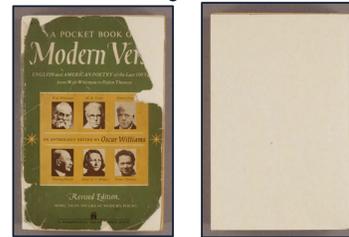
The end of the new thread was secured by tying a square knot around the existing knot, and reinforcing with undiluted wheat starch paste.

This scrapbook was **handmade by Brooks** and is full of her early poems published in the *Chicago Defender* newspaper. It is constructed out of a single folded gathering of machine-made, wove paper and covered with a wax crayon. The sewing is unsupported via 4 sewing stations, with two square knots tied on the outside of the cover. In addition to mending and guarding, an extra length of thread was added to the existing sewing and secured around the outside knots to provide additional strength. In order to make **sure new and old repairs remained distinguishable**, the new thread was white linen for easy contrast against the original frayed black cotton.

APPROACH #2. Visible Compensation to Areas of Significant Loss Pocket Book of Modern Verse



Before treatment, with significant damage to the front cover and missing back cover.



After treatment. Compensation and stabilization was done with white Twin Rocker wove paper, laminated between layers of tissue to achieve the correct thickness and connection.

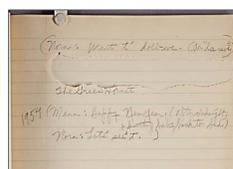
A *Pocket Book of Modern Verse* was Brooks' personal copy and contains many of her own notes, reactions and other marginalia. Because **the value of this copy comes from its connection to Brooks herself**, the curator emphasized that she wanted the worn state of the volume to remain completely evident while also stabilized for handling. Several options for toning and integrating the areas of loss compensation were proposed by the conservator, but ultimately a white, untoned paper was selected to make **both the original damage and subsequent repair as obvious as possible** to the user.

APPROACH #3. Maintaining Evidence of Intentional Damage The Life of Lincoln West Notebook

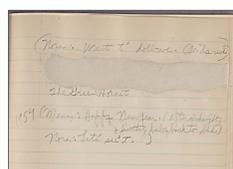


One of Brooks' many composition books, containing notes for Brooks' poem "The Life of Lincoln West." Also inside the notebook—several of her tissues. Nora Brooks Blakely said her mother always carried tissues. Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

Brooks' archives contains numerous notebooks—spiral bound, loose leaf, and composition books—that she kept for various uses. The notebook featured was started in 1954 and contains notes for Brooks' poem, *The Life of Lincoln West*. When it arrived in the lab, the minimal binding was seriously compromised, the front third of the text block was torn out, the sewing was broken and failing and the embrittled paper had minor but numerous edge tears. Additionally, it also had lacunae, like the one pictured below, which were selectively removed. **The author's clear intent was to edit her pages by physically removing content.** However, the top portion of the remaining paper appeared to be at risk for further damaging during handling. A simple mend (pictured below), using a thin, untoned Japanese tissue was applied to stabilized but not conceal the original state of the notebook. Additionally, the Kleenex tissues which appeared to have been used as bookmarks, were rigorously documented and housed separately.



Before treatment image of a page of The Life of Lincoln West. Obvious, selective removal of a section of writing via torn damage.



After treatment. Lacuna was filled with thin tengucho tissue to stabilize for handling, but retaining the evidence intentional damage.

CONCLUSIONS

These treatments and treatment approaches, though basic in methodology, are challenging to our established notions of how conservation should (or more aptly, should not) be perceived. **For one thing, they seek to avoid adding a layer of conservation "interpretation" over the original object by being not just visible, but in some cases jarringly so.** They are also not satisfying, in the conventional sense, in that they do not conclude with a beautifully reintegrated, whole-looking object. In fact, the purpose of these treatments is somewhat the opposite—to **simultaneously honor both the "damage" to this collection as a function of its life, and the need for its use in perpetuity as a research collection.** To arrive at these approaches was a result of close communication with the curator who had intimate knowledge of Brooks' and her papers, as well as a clear idea of how she wanted them to be understood in the future—that is, as though Brooks herself was presenting them to us.



"The Life of Lincoln West" Notebook on view for the exhibit, along with several other items from her personal archives.

A view of the Gwendolyn Brooks' inspired mural at the National Poetry Foundation



In Chicago, for "Gwendolyn Brooks: Matter in the Margins" Curated by Anna Chen. The exhibit was on view from June to September 2017..

FUTURE PATHWAYS

Today, most of the Gwendolyn Brooks papers remain unprocessed still. **Each of her works, in whatever state of (un)finishedness it's in, represents a transitory moment of her creative process, a thought becoming or transforming.** Seeing a collection in its raw and uncatalogued state is something that is both exceptional and exclusive to the people making early decisions about the collection for the long term. But that is soon to change as the collection begins to be cataloged. With that in mind, now is the time to consider how to mediate the cataloging and preservation practices towards more holistic approaches. As library curators and conservators, imposing information order is part of our permanent identities. But what are we losing by doing so? A collection is only uncatalogued once, and the traces of the author/collector can easily be lost once ingested into a library system, governed by finding aids and record series numbers. So what new approaches can we apply? What new frameworks for considering modern archives can we create? **Close collaboration between allied professionals will be key to forging the pathways towards new, creative stewardship practices.**

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