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**Curation: A Multimodal Practice
for Socially-Engaged Action**

Curatorial Statement

By Maria Novotny and Ames Hawkins

As with so many curatorial and socially-engaged practice projects, this one is rooted in a relationship -- a professional connection that evolved into a creative-critical collaboration. Ames and Maria first met in 2015 while both were presenting at the Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference in Tempe, Arizona. A year later, Ames invited Maria to be part of the [Cultural Rhetorics Exhibition](#), and our paths crossed once more at the 2017 Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference in Dayton, Ohio. Throughout these encounters, we shared with each other updates on our individual projects -- Ames's project [These are Love\(d\) Letters](#), Maria's project [The ART of Infertility](#). While each project is--and remains--uniquely tied to our personal experiences, we found commonality in our approach to our creative and scholarly endeavors through curation.

The intention for this special issue is to present for consideration the relevance and power of curation as a rhetorical method. We do not claim that we have the same training or credentials usually associated with the professional moniker of curator. What we do have is experience with initiating, organizing, participating in, funding, and sustaining socially engaged arts projects that have required us to engage in sustained, considered, academically informed curatorial practice. This experience--framed with, through, and by our own scholarly training in cultural rhetorics, queer rhetorics, feminist rhetorics, and public rhetorics--becomes a kind of expertise. Not in terms of what we definitively know about curation, but expertise in the ways we in writing and rhetoric studies might practice curation as a rhetorical method in order to invite public participation around social issues, reorient and challenge dominant narratives, and enable constellational, rather than linear, ways of knowing.

In discussing how we could mimic our shared orientation to curation, we found ourselves evaluating which academic journals were best suited to support such a project. We ended up working with the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* for two main reasons. First, we understand curation as situated within and with respect to the multimodal. Curation may or may not work with multimodal objects such as digital pieces or online texts. However, curation involves the curator's body in relationship with a wide range of artifacts, materials, and texts in order to design, frame, and

position engagements and experiences for viewers of an exhibition. In other words, curation is at its core multimodal practice. Second, rather than describe the curatorial process in alphabetic text, we encouraged submissions that demonstrate a digital orientation to curation. Curated projects are often place-time specific and presented in a particular, localized context. While we do not mean to suggest that physical installations are any less relevant, there are limitations in terms of impact. A multimodal and digital journal offers an affordance of wider circulation and increased physical and temporal access.

For this special issue, we have endeavored to situate ourselves not only as co-editors, but as co-curators. All throughout this project, it has been our goal to make sure we were employing the practices of curation through our work. As a first step, we created [a multimodal CFP](#) and encouraged submissions that would curate, rather than solely describe, the objectives of other creative projects. Then, we reviewed the 43 proposals with the intention of selecting for the issue those projects most clearly connected with and to embodied curatorial practices that would most benefit from and embrace the affordances of multimodality. Such a selection process underscores the contribution this special issue attempts to make to writing and rhetoric studies, which we acknowledge are already taking up the term 'curation'.

'Curation' is a generative metaphor and descriptor for many writing and rhetoric practices. Take, for instance, scholars such as Krista Kennedy (2016) and Pamela Van Haitsma (2019) who write about curation from a digital and archival perspective. In technical and professional communication, research projects investigating how to curate digital literacies are being conducted by Ann Duin, Jason Tham and Isabel Pedersen (2019). In community-engaged projects, curation is also seen as a tactic to facilitate more equitable models of participation as seen in Tobi Jacabi's (2016) work. Such scholarship has introduced new discussions related to the potential affordances of applying curation to rhetoric and writing studies. In this special issue, we present a more traditional--one might say 'museum studies'--representation of curation, offering viewers exhibitions of academic scholarship rather than descriptions evoking curation to discuss such scholarship. In this way, we have positioned our special issue as one that pushes beyond descriptive analyses of curatorial approaches to, with, and within archives, toward designs, installation, and creative-critical projects that emphasize embodied practices, creative

processes as research methodology, and the physicality of pedagogy. To learn more about how we view our approach as situated in connection and extension of prior writing and rhetoric studies conversations, we invite you to [view our abbreviated bibliography](#).

As co-curators of this special issue, we found ourselves drawing upon our experiences in running our own critical-creative projects. We embraced this curatorial knowledge to mentor and push our authors to focus on the aspects of their projects that would enable them to challenge traditional, academic scholarship and reimagine the organization, structure, and design of their pieces. Our critical-creative mentorship took on a variety of approaches. In some instances, it meant frequent phone calls with authors to discuss and unpack drafts of the curated work. For others, it meant facilitating a roundtable-like discussion outside of a Starbucks at the CCCC in Pittsburgh. For others, it was a series of Skype calls and email exchanges in which we invited authors to think beyond the content of their pieces and imagine and reimagine the viewer experience in terms of the form of the piece as well. The result, encapsulated in this special issue, is offered as a curatorial assemblage of critical-creative scholarship.

Assembled for viewers are ten different pieces, as well as a curated bibliography, each of which discusses the role of curation using a particular lens, in a distinctive form. We see these individual works in relationship with one another in physical and intellectual space, like multiple distinctive objects assembled into a single mobile. Depending upon where you are and how you look at it, you may identify different connections and relationships. No matter where you stand, you're invited to consider the movements, gaps, juxtapositions, and relationships among the different elements. For instance, from one angle, you might see a set of works that endeavors to offer us definitions of curation (McCarthy, Roullion, and De Hertough; Vinson and Dutta). Take a step to the right and those that feature new work produced through curatorial practices come into view (Hammer and Sieber; Jackson; Lambke; Schneider and Pryor). A step to the left, and attention might constellate on projects that emphasize the relevance of curation to community engagement and social activism (Hammer and Sieber; Jackson and Bratta; Lambke; Vinson and Dutta). Move right underneath and you might see a constellation of pedagogical and institutional/administrative connections (Sota Vega; West-Puckett and Shepley). Step back and you could have a clear sense of the ways these projects encourage us to reframe and expand our understanding of tenure

and promotion to include curatorial work (McCarthy, Roullion, and De Hertough; West-Puckett and Shepley). Walk around from the perimeter and you may notice a thread among pieces that evoke autoethnographic methods in their work (Jackson; Jackson and Bratta; Schneider and Pryor; Soto Vega). Move in toward the collection again and you might recognize connections between pieces that explore and examine installations and artistic engagements using curatorial practices as their critical lens (Hammer and Sieber; Moynihan and Flemming; West-Puckett and Shepley). We also acknowledge that this mobile is not only visual, and suggest that if you close your eyes you may be able to recognize an unanticipated combination of sonic curations (Hammer and Sieber; Lambke; Soto Vega).

The point is that while we are able to create groupings and categories for you as a reader, and do offer these groupings as co-curators might, there are likely many other relationships here for you to discover. As you explore, we invite you to get lost in the pieces. Look through them as you might wander an exhibition or gallery. Consider not only what these pieces say, but how they make you feel. Not only what they look and sound like, but how they invite a sense of engagement with the topics presented, the experiences provided. Step back for a moment and return to the special issue, this time evoking the lens of a curator. Consider the special issue layout, the juxtaposition of pieces and ideas, how the orientations assemble various arguments about curation, multimodality, and socially-engaged practice. How may curation reorient your work, your teaching, your collection of data? What affordances may curation provide? How may curating your scholarship shift the audiences to whom you speak, shift the purpose of your scholarship, or cause you to wonder how your work may take on a different form? In other words, what rhetorically gets undone or reimagined through curation? How does the undoing open space for a recreation to offer something new?

We ask that you ponder these questions in the hopes that we as a field embrace curation as a methodological practice with deep rhetorical roots. For us--and for those in this special issue--curation offers exciting vantage points often not visible in traditional academic scholarship. And as scholars, departments, and institutions continue to call for renewing partnerships between communities and universities, we find curation to be a tool to assist in grappling with the messy entanglements of moving towards socially-engaged public work. In this way, we hope that the pieces

exhibited for you here may begin to move you towards moments to take up such action.

One final note: we would be remiss to not mention the multiple individuals that helped see this special issue through. First, thank you to Christina Cedillo, who worked closely with us to prepare a multimodal platform for this work to appear. Her commitment to offering an innovative publishing space made this special issue possible. Second, we are grateful to Jessica Jacobs, who has provided continual support for usability considerations, as well as components of the visual design. Third, we recognize and thank the students enrolled in Maria's English 444 Technical Editing Class during the Fall 2019 semester at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Their final project required comprehensively editing and user-testing pieces featured in this special issue, and their close readings and experiential reports to the authors elevated the experiences you see here. Finally, a huge round of applause to the authors in this special issue. They've worked on their pieces for nearly a year -- many of them designing, coding, and creating multimodal experiences. This, we as curators know, is often invisible labor that must be recognized as influencing the academic arguments presented in each piece. We are grateful for their engagement in receiving our feedback and pushing themselves to reposition their work beyond traditional text towards multimodal argumentation. Without them, there would be no special issue.

Curation Bibliography

By Maria Novotny and Ames Hawkins

This bibliography aims to locate some scholarly histories, practices, and purposes of curation. While not comprehensive, we view this short bibliography as a methodological reorientation for the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Curation in rhetoric and composition is not new. For instance, scholars have begun to critically situate and apply curation to [technology's influence on the production of information literacy platforms](#) (e.g. Kennedy). Curation also frequently appears when discussing [archival projects](#) (e.g. VanHaitsma), and recently has been deployed as a method to facilitate [community literacy](#) (e.g. Jacobi). Veering a bit more broadly, technical and professional communication scholars have begun pedagogically-focused research projects seeking to build students's [digital literacy through curatorial practices](#) (e.g. Duin, Tham and Pedersen). Other pedagogical approaches suggest [the technical communicator as a curator](#) of activist syllabi, offering accessibility and usability advice (e.g. Bivens, Cole, and Heilig). Clearly curation has and continues to be taken up as a useful term to describe many rhetoric and composition practices. Noting such connections, our objective for this bibliography is to offer a new understanding of the potential of curation. Specifically, we share how the two of us have come to curation as a relational and publicly engaged practice, one which we argue has yet to be discussed in rhetoric and composition scholarship.

As shared in our collaborative curator statement, the two of us met while curating our own projects — *These Are Love(d) Letters* and *The ART of Infertility* — at a 2015 academic conference. What emerged from that meeting was a shared methodological stance as to how we understand and use curation in our work. We understand that others in rhetoric and composition may use the term curation more metaphorically to describe selection and arrangement processes pertaining to crafting, organizing, and producing written work. Others rely upon curation to articulate how they analyzed rhetorical content in an archive. We, however, approach curation in terms of the physical, relational, spatial, and temporal practices usually connected with and to the selection, arrangement, and engagement of visual, performative, and multimodal art as commonly understood with respect to a museum or gallery setting.

As curators our bodies move, arrange, and position materials for public display. Such engagement requires that we work collectively within and alongside communities by collecting pieces from particular communities and/or working with curatorial communities to arrange and assemble opportunities for curatorial display. In turn, this process allows for curation to be a method for facilitating opportunities for public pedagogy. This sort of embodied curatorial engagement and practice emphasizes the importance of relationality and community-centeredness that adds to and extends current conversations about curation currently existing in the field.

Our experiences, then, of doing curatorial work are informed not just by institutional spaces where we do our work, nor the communities we work alongside to showcase their work, but our own bodies and the stories we carry. This, we see, distinguishes us from other curatorial approaches in the discipline.

Maria's curatorial work originated out of her dissertation project at Michigan State. There, she was interested in developing a project that examined how members of the infertility community wrote or created multimodal pieces about their reproductive losses. As a patient, Maria understood that many infertility experiences go unseen. Art, however, can transform those invisible losses into material realities. As she developed relationships with her infertility community, Maria wanted her dissertation to not just offer a rhetorical argument but contribute to some of the commitments she shared with her community. What resulted was *The ART of Infertility*, a traveling patient art exhibit which she co-directs and co-curates with Elizabeth Walker. The project frequently exhibits in public art galleries. Such a locale is intentional as it serves as a form of public pedagogy, inviting the general public to witness the challenges of living with infertility. In this way, Maria understands curatorial work from an embodied and relational framework as she literally carries and arranges physical pieces of patient artwork for public display. In her current position, as an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, she draws on her curatorial knowledge to train graduate students in their Public Rhetorics & Community Engagement program who are committed to public scholarship.

Ames works at Columbia College Chicago, a college of communication and media arts in an urban center. Ames's connection with curation was nurtured within this institutional context where Ames has co-created and co-taught a range of courses focusing on art activism. Through this work

both in and beyond the classroom, Ames began to better understand the rhetorical power and impact of repetition and accumulation in large-scale socially engaged arts practice. These experiences inspired a wide range of creative and scholarly work motivated by a desire to create new knowledge through scholarly practices that incorporate creative process as a research methodology, curation being just one of them. The result of this work has been the publication of a range of critical-creative scholarship, in both print and digital formats, such as *These are Love(d) Letters*, a work of literary nonfiction, and “Exhuming Transgenre Ties,” a multimodal digital piece. Ames is a multimodal composer who uses writing and art to explore the interstices of alphabetic text, image, and sound in order to theorize the power and pleasure of queer(ing) form. Ames’s practice of queer rhetorics is a lived practice of queering scholarly forms.

Knowing our own orientations to curation, we offer you an abbreviated, interdisciplinary, and – yes -- curated bibliography arranged to understand curation as a relational, engaged, and community-centered practice. Curation’s history and origin in museum studies, art, and art history influence our decision to construct an interdisciplinary bibliography. For those new to this particular orientation to curation or interested in its uptake in your practices, we hope this bibliography will inform your orientation to curatorial work. Our attempt is to offer scholars a glimpse into how we have made sense of curation as critical-creative scholarship, both in rhetoric and composition and more broadly as a practice that may facilitate socially-engaged action. As such, you will notice that we have included pieces from this special issue — a move we see as extending the conversation. And, as with any project seeking to do interdisciplinary work, there are categories and entries that no doubt overlap. We acknowledge our inability to make visible these overlaps, and invite you all to weave together your own orientation to this curated landscape.

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Socially Engaged Curatorial Projects

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- [Exquisite Uterus Project](#)
- [Migrant Quilt Project](#)
- [One Million Bones](#)

- REDress Project
- Soul Box Project
- Stop Telling Women to Smile
- The ART of Infertility
- The Clothesline Project

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Project Activity and Land Acknowledgement

The pieces in this collection are from scholars and activists across North America. The work in this special issue took place on the traditional and sovereign homelands and peoples of the Potawatomi, Menominee, Ho-Chunk, Odawa, Ojibwe, Sac and Fox, and Mascouten; Miami, Inoka, Menominee, and Sac, Fox; Waco, Keechi and Tawakoni; Muscogee (Creek) Nation; Algonquian, Iroquois, and Sioux; Narragansett, and Wampanoag; Mashpee Wampanoag, Aquinnah Wampanoag, and Nipmuc; Canarsie; Pennacook. The curators, writers, and artists of this special issue pay our respects to these individuals, both past and present, who have stewarded this land throughout the generations. We are collectively grateful for the opportunity to live, work, and share ideas on these lands.

In addition, we would also like to acknowledge pieces that share with us sacred stories and marginalized ways of knowing, specifically those offered here by the Iowa Peoples of Oklahoma, DiaspoRican community, and the Black community of Kansas City, Missouri.