

## Creation of a Southwestern Authors Archive: Revisiting the LaVerne Harrell Clark Collection Ten Years Later

Erin R. Wahl

*New Mexico State University - Main Campus*, erinwahl@gmail.com

Pamela Pierce

*Oregon Health & Science University Library*, piercepa@ohsu.edu

Wendy Burk

wlburk12@aol.com

Julie Swarstad Johnson

*University of Arizona Poetry Center*, jswrstad@arizona.edu

Sarah Kortemeier

*University of Arizona Poetry Center*, ssk@arizona.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wahl, Erin R.; Pierce, Pamela; Burk, Wendy; Johnson, Julie Swarstad; and Kortemeier, Sarah () "Creation of a Southwestern Authors Archive: Revisiting the LaVerne Harrell Clark Collection Ten Years Later," *Journal of Western Archives*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol15/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Western Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usu.edu).



# Creation of a Southwestern Authors Archive: Revisiting the LaVerne Harrell Clark Collection Ten Years Later

Erin R. Wahl

Pamela Pierce

Wendy Burk

Julie Swarstad Johnson

Sarah Kortmeier

## ABSTRACT

This article details the processing of the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection by University of Arizona Poetry Center librarians, archivists, and interns, and the current status and next steps of the collection. The LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection, which contains thousands of portraits and candids of poets taken circa 1960-2000 by LaVerne Harrell Clark, the Poetry Center's first director, is deeply entwined with the Poetry Center's institutional identity. In addition, the authors explored ways in which the collection and the institution as a whole are positioned as uniquely Western and also of national significance. Those processing the collection became interested in the ways that this identity might affect other collections within the institution, such as the book collection and other archival collections. At the core of this exploration were questions about how the process of documentation and identity making occurs.

the ones who live in the desert,  
if you knew them  
you would understand everything.

—Lucille Clifton, “sonora desert poem”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The University of Arizona Poetry Center is a literary center of national significance, founded in Tucson in 1960 by writer and philanthropist Ruth Stephan.

1. Lucille Clifton, *Two-Headed Woman* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 26.

The Poetry Center houses a world-class library collection of contemporary poetry; a reading and lecture series presenting established and emerging visiting writers; Voca, an online audiovisual library of author recordings; and modest but important archival collections. This article is about the latter. The processing of the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection by University of Arizona Poetry Center librarians, archivists, and interns proved to be a fruitful exploration of identity on many levels. In working through the collection, we learned ways in which it and the institution as a whole are positioned as uniquely Western and of national significance. We became interested in the ways that this question of identity might affect other collections within the institution, such as the book collection and other archival collections. The LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection, which contains thousands of portraits and candid photographs of poets taken circa 1960-2000 by LaVerne Harrell Clark, the Poetry Center's first director, is deeply entwined with the Poetry Center's institutional identity and thus was an ideal place for us to explore these ideas. At the core of this exploration were questions about how the process of documentation and identity making occurs.

As we processed the collection, it became clear that the Poetry Center as an institution engaged with the concepts of national and Western identities right from the start, and something that LaVerne Harrell Clark experienced both as the Poetry Center's first director and as a photographer. There was some tension between Western and national identities for LaVerne as a photographer and author, for her subjects, many of whom were lesser-known and emerging Southwestern writers with countercultural identities rooted in the 1960s and 1970s, and for the Poetry Center as an institution whose establishment and flowering coincided with the dates of LaVerne's collection. We also learned about our individual identities, about the ways that the identity of a collection is composed of many influences and identities, not just the creator and the subjects but also the interacting librarians and archivists who work on the collection. In their article "Colophons and Annotations", Michelle Light and Tom Hyry note that "Different individuals make different decisions about what to retain and discard, how to preserve, restore, or create order, and what to highlight in descriptive systems. These decisions are influenced by opinions, intellectual backgrounds, and areas of expertise, which by necessity vary from archivist to archivist."<sup>2</sup> Our identities are, therefore, inseparable from the finding aid we created, and inform it more deeply than we likely imagined even as we wrote it. In fact, as we progressed through our work, we found that the collection and the ways that we discussed it had a full-circle effect in which our processing of the collection affected our understanding of the Poetry Center's library collection and exhibits program. We are writing about this experience to show that for archivists, acknowledging and negotiating questions of subjectivity and identity, accepting that a collection, an institution, a creator, a subject, or an archivist has more than one identity, and does not have to be an experience of conflict and confusion. Rather, the negotiating of

2. Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *The American Archivist* 65, no. 2 (2002): 217. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.65.2.l3h27j5x8716586q>.

multiple identities can lead to a significantly more holistic and complete experience with a lasting and positive effect on archival institutions.

The Poetry Center started out as a small house on the University of Arizona campus, a cottage that could welcome writers to the desert. Ruth Stephan, a Chicago writer and philanthropist, began visiting Tucson in the 1940s, spending winters in the cottage that would become the Poetry Center's first home. In 1960, Stephan presented the property to the University of Arizona, to be used as a poetry library and as guest quarters for visiting writers; in November of that year, Robert Frost arrived by train to read at the Poetry Center's dedication. In an April 10, 1971 *Tucson Daily Citizen* article commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Poetry Center's founding, Stephan's mission for the Poetry Center was summarized as creating a place "where the spirit of poetry is to be maintained and cherished and where there will be a realization of poetry as the art of poets, not of critics."<sup>3</sup> Along with the gift of her property, Stephan donated several hundred books from her personal collection to serve as the backbone of the Poetry Center's library. The original collection emphasized contemporary poetry in English and translations of poetry from around the world. Within its general collection development goals, the Poetry Center's library has always left room for the spontaneous spirit that inspired its founding. Special collections libraries possess an ability to be shaped by each director. When LaVerne Harrell Clark was chosen as the Poetry Center's first director in 1962, her interest in western writers created something of a departure from the literary passions of the Poetry Center's founder and enabled the continued growth of the library.<sup>4</sup>

During the first decade of the Reading and Lecture Series, the Poetry Center worked on crafting and marketing its western image. One of the roadblocks the Poetry Center encountered was the perception of the Southwest from those outside the region. In a February 28, 1967 letter from Elizabeth Kray, executive director of the Academy of American Poets, to Lawrence Muir, head of the University of Arizona's English Department, Kray wrote, "After leaving Prescott, I puzzled over exactly what a New York institution could do for colleges so isolated from each as those in Arizona seem to be—isolated in more ways than one."<sup>5</sup> Kray does not elaborate on the various forms of isolation Arizona's colleges may be facing. Clearly, she was talking about more than distance. It is possible that Kray was alluding to a perceived cultural isolation. In the 1960s, Tucson faced a "Cowtown" stereotype in a state where the economy was still dominated by agriculture and mining. LaVerne's photographic collection became an embodiment of these tensions, as prominent poets from across the U.S. were photographed in recognizable Tucson settings, such as the University of Arizona campus and Sonoran Desert landscapes. To those visiting the region, the

3. "Ruth Stephan Returns for Center's Birthday," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, April 10, 1971, 3.

4. "History," University of Arizona Poetry Center, accessed December 2023, <https://poetry.arizona.edu/visit/history>.

5. University of Arizona Poetry Center Records (UAPC.01), Box 3, Folder 16, University of Arizona Poetry Center.

magic of the Southwest loomed large, a mythic and historic space framed by the stories seen in pop culture and media. At the same time, poets from the Southwest, such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Alberto Ríos, were also photographed in the unique region that nurtured their experiences and talent.

## The LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection

LaVerne Harrell Clark trained as a folklorist and novelist. She began taking photographic portraits of poets, being self-taught, during her tenure as the first director of the University of Arizona Poetry Center from 1962 to 1966, and she continued taking portraits of poets and writers throughout her life, until her health began failing in the early 2000s. Many of LaVerne's photos, whether taken during her time as director of the Poetry Center or in subsequent years, were of visiting writers in the Poetry Center's Reading and Lecture Series. In addition to retaining her own copies and corresponding with the poets portrayed in the photos, she generously shared her prints and negatives with the Poetry Center and allowed the Center unlimited use rights. Many other photos were taken at Southwestern writing festivals in or around Tucson, such as the Tucson and Bisbee Poetry Festivals, or were taken with Southwest-affiliated writers in the places that LaVerne visited during her travels. Other images are of writers snapped in other locations, such as Denise Levertov in the 1980s in New York; these frequently have a Tucson or Poetry Center affiliation, as in the case of Levertov, who made multiple visits to read for the Poetry Center. From the beginning, LaVerne's photos were closely tied to the Poetry Center, and she championed the Poetry Center through her photography for decades after leaving the directorship position.

In spite of this close tie and her generous sharing of images with the Poetry Center during her lifetime, the collection was very much LaVerne's own and would not have been possible without her force of personality. At one point, Poetry Center staff asked LaVerne's spouse LD how LaVerne approached poets to ask them if they would like to be photographed, and he responded that she asked them "directly," through face-to-face personal contact.<sup>6</sup> He continued:

We attended a lot of readings and conventions and conferences. She would talk up the writers and say, "I'm LaVerne Clark." Her personality was immediately appealing to most people, so she had an easy time establishing direct, warm contact. She occasionally approached strangers, but she didn't remain a stranger for long. She knew a lot about the writers she photographed. Sometimes I wondered how she knew so much. I don't know

6. Please note: LD Clark's name is frequently misspelled as "L.D." According to the family, the correct spelling of his name uses no periods; LD was his actual given name. We have used that appropriate spelling throughout this article, unless quoting from a source which has already used the other form.

if she made preparations before we went to certain conferences, but she always seemed to have knowledge of the person she was photographing.<sup>7</sup>

The close connection between LaVerne and the Poetry Center throughout the whole time she was taking photos gives the Poetry Center a strong knowledge of how and why she assembled the collection of her creative work, what her intentions were, and how she hoped the work would be used in the future. We know, for example, that she was intentional in how she communicated with authors and asked them to utilize her photos, that she chose the negatives she thought were best and marked them clearly, that she frequently kept up correspondence with authors long after their initial meeting and photographing, and any number of other details.

After LaVerne's death in 2008, her photographic collection of negatives, prints, and correspondence came to the Poetry Center through the gift of her estate and her spouse, novelist, and literary scholar, LD Clark. The collection was minimally processed upon receipt and placed into acid-free boxes with a box list for each. After this, the collection was assessed and the series arrangement determined by Deborah Shelton, photo archivist and former director of the Arizona Historical Society Southern Division, who volunteered her services to the Poetry Center for this phase of the project. The series arrangement followed LaVerne's organizing principle of sequencing poets alphabetically, A-Z. The bulk of the collection was divided into three series, distributed within the general alphabetical framework: Series I: Correspondence and Photo Notes, Series II: Photographs, and Series III: Negatives. Researchers will most likely search by author name and will want to see all materials related to a poet of interest, so this organization seemed the most logical, user-friendly approach, as well as representing the original order of the collection.

After Shelton's initial assessment and development of an arrangement scheme, processing of the collection was carried out by archival studies interns under the direction of then-Poetry Center Librarian Wendy Burk. Pamela Pierce, in summer 2012, and Erin Renee Wahl, in fall 2012, completed the bulk of the arrangement and description, with additional processing by José González in summer 2012. Processing of the A-Z sequence was completed in December 2012. Other materials—Series IV: Single Best-Choice Negatives, Series V: *The Face of Poetry* and *Focus 101* Negatives, Series VI: *The Face of Poetry* and *Focus 101* Book Maquettes, and Series VII: LaVerne Harrell Clark's Cameras—were added later and processed by archival studies intern Anna M. Streight in the spring semester of 2013.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most interesting things discovered early on in processing was that LaVerne retained all her negatives, but that most of the positive images remaining in

7. LD Clark (husband of LaVerne Harrell Clark) in discussion with University of Arizona Poetry Center staff, 2012; paraphrased here.

8. "LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection, Collection Number: UAPC.02," University of Arizona Poetry Center, [https://poetry.arizona.edu/files/uapco2\\_finding\\_aid-2023.pdf](https://poetry.arizona.edu/files/uapco2_finding_aid-2023.pdf).

her possession, with some exceptions, were outtakes. The reason for this is that LaVerne sent the best positive images to the poets, along with a form letter stating that she would be happy to provide additional copies of the image to the poets at cost. She also, at this time, let them know her terms as far as rights and reproductions of the photos. The correspondence contains many exchanges of this kind. Some developed into rich exchanges in which poets sent LaVerne personal letters or their CVs. Occasionally, letters were retained in which poets expressed their dissatisfaction with the images or with LaVerne's method of operation as a photographer. Interestingly, LaVerne retained all of this correspondence, allowing archivists to experience the personalities of the poets and occasional flashes of conflict or identity dissonance, as we will describe below.

### Context Setting: "Western" and National

When one of the authors, Pamela Pierce, first presented about LaVerne's work at the Western Literature Association conference in 2012, she was interested to learn that many of the questions that the audience had were about the Poetry Center as an institution being peripheral in a geographical sense—not only being in the Southwest, but also being a little bit off the main campus. The geography of the Poetry Center—its location and situation in the Southwest—may have been one of the attractions that led to LaVerne accepting the job as its director. In November 1960, LaVerne first received the news that she would become the first director of the Poetry Center while she was in Mexico conducting research on D.H. Lawrence with her husband, LD.<sup>9</sup> As an author, Lawrence was known in part for his fascination with the western half of the U.S. In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence wrote, "Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom."<sup>10</sup> The myth of the "wild west" questioned by Lawrence would prove to be a valuable marketing tool for the Poetry Center, even as the organization simultaneously sought to distance itself from being categorized as western. The geographic and cultural icons of the Southwest are frequently represented in LaVerne's photographic archive. At the same time, the poets invited in the early years of the Poetry Center were primarily of national rather than Southwestern significance, as the Center sought to establish a reputation on a national stage. A bigger focus on regional poets would come later in its tenure.

Since 1925, Tucson has hosted a February rodeo, which enables the community to celebrate a classic idea of the West based on cowboys, wild horses, and bucking bulls.

9. Gail Browne, Rodney Phillips, and University of Arizona Poetry Center, *The University of Arizona Poetry Center: Celebrating 50 Years* (Tucson: University of Arizona Poetry Center, 2010): 2.

10. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking Press, 1964).

This celebration has at times contributed to Tucson being perceived as a cow town.<sup>11</sup> LaVerne shared this perception. In her essay reflecting on the start of the Poetry Center, LaVerne wrote about the willingness and need to improvise: “This was counsel that cut both ways, I can say, the best being the freedom to make my own decisions, but coupled with the responsibility, too, of instilling in a rodeo-oriented town a fondness for poetry and the willingness to support an institution dedicated to promoting it.”<sup>12</sup> Raised in Texas, LaVerne would have carried her knowledge of rodeo-oriented towns with her to Tucson. Throughout its development, the Poetry Center has negotiated the changing nature of “western” while working to create a national reputation.

Defining the idea of “western” and its place of influence in the U.S. West has occupied scholars for decades, offering an opportunity to naturalize policies of westward expansion, fitting them into a national narrative. Newspapers and artists like Frederic Remington and Charles Russell used images to create the idea of the western. In his 1967 essay, “History, Myth and the Western Writer,” Wallace Stegner, author and then director of Stanford’s Creative Writing program, defined the West as a location where nostalgic hopes could be realized, and the present and future homogenization is challenged. At one point he writes: “I would love to believe that there is some spirit, attitude, faith, experience, tone, something, that binds all small-w western stories together as manifestations of a coherent regional culture. And yet I confess I have doubts: in order to get an unum out of our pluribus, do all of us define ‘West’ and ‘western’ too narrowly, forgetting what does not fill our bill?”<sup>13</sup> In *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing*, Krista Comer notes that by looking at the history of literary westerns, Stegner observed “a focus on the romantic frontier past rather than the urban present, a marked attention to western landscape,” as well as a nostalgic tone shaping the recollection of the past.<sup>14</sup>

In the introduction to her edited volume *Open Spaces, City Places*, Judy Nolte Temple notes that there are three main ways writers of Southwestern literature represent the region: “One tactic is to draw on collective past traditions, to create literature steeped in mythic experience.... Other writers have chosen to turn their attention to the past and present wondrous open spaces of the Southwest.... A third route...attacks the development of the Southwest head-on, humor barely hiding the

11. Rian Bosse, “Rodeo’s Tradition Rides On, Growing in Arizona and the West,” Cronkite News, published April 26, 2016, accessed December 2023, <https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2016/04/26/rodeos-tradition-rides-on-growing-in-arizona-and-the-west/>.
12. Browne, Phillips, and University of Arizona Poetry Center, *The University of Arizona Poetry Center*, 4.
13. Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985): 187-188.
14. Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999): 40.



rage.”<sup>15</sup> C. L. Sonnichsen continues this discussion of the identity of the west in his concluding chapter of that same book, adding that, “The idea that cities have played a major role in the development of the western states has had new emphasis in our time.”<sup>16</sup> Sonnichsen acknowledges the increasing role of cities in forming a western identity—a role that the Poetry Center benefits from and contributes to as Tucson grows and the Center grows along with it. As an institution, the Poetry Center is engaged in the same process of looking to the past and shaping the landscape to advance contemporary goals of progress that Temple identifies and Sonnichsen expands upon.

The genre of the western continues to rise and reform itself throughout the decades.<sup>17</sup> In the early 1960s, the years LaVerne was director of the Poetry Center, *Bonanza* dominated the airwaves and shaped popular perceptions of “western.” The most recent scholarship on the western focuses on its adaptability: “Its movement from one medium to another (from books to radio to film to television), its ability to be combined with other genres (science fiction, musicals, melodrama, zombie films) and to create new hybrid forms, and its potential for including voices and experiences in hybrid forms that the classic Western often excludes.”<sup>18</sup> By changing and evolving, the western has occupied a central literary and cultural location at the national level. The Poetry Center has taken a similar course of development, using shifting ideas of what is considered western to shape a national literary reputation.

In the west, identity can be claimed through the shaping of discourse about landscape and the public articulation of space. In *Landscapes of the New West*, Comer describes the methods female writers have employed to write themselves into traditional male discourse about colonization and conquering of western lands. Comer writes, “Female writers’ engagements with landscape representations, as I see them, evidence female attempts to access public space, public discourse, public issues, public life, and public power.”<sup>19</sup> LaVerne possessed the opportunity to shape the space the Poetry Center would occupy within the western cultural landscape and in a national cultural setting. Comer argues that regionalist literature grew in the late 1960s and ‘70s in part, out of response to postmodernism. Regionalism may have offered a way to ground meaning in the landscape—an approach that may have been

15. Judy Nolte Temple, *Open Spaces, City Places: Contemporary Writers on the Changing Southwest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994): ix.

16. C. L. Sonnichsen, “Partnerships: A Sort of Conclusion,” in *Open Spaces, City Places: Contemporary Writers on the Changing Southwest*, ed. Judy Nolte Temple, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994): 137.

17. Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 11.

18. Michael K. Johnson, “Introduction: Television and the Depiction of the American West,” *Western American Literature* 47, no. 2 (2012): 124.

19. Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999): 28.

perceived as reassuring and permanent. However, landscape fluctuates and changes in meaning, partly out of response to the desires of individuals to become a part of the cultural life of a location. By taking photos of the Poetry Center's visiting writers posed in iconic Southwestern locations, such as the saguaro forests of the Sonoran Desert, LaVerne wrote a more expansive narrative for the Center, using regionalism as a stepping-stone to a national reputation.

Currently, the Poetry Center emphasizes its role as a location of national literary significance and as an organization that celebrates the West. LaVerne's passion may have started with an interest in the oral tradition surrounding horses in Navajo and Apache culture. In 1966, she published *They Sang for Horses*, the culmination of her research.<sup>20</sup> Her relationship to the Indigenous identities of the Southwest (and other cultural identities such as Latinx identities) is complicated by her own identity as a white writer and photographer. LaVerne's photographic collection makes clear that both she as an individual and the Poetry Center as an institution respected and sought to support the important work of Indigenous and Latinx authors. LaVerne had the privilege of photographing renowned Indigenous authors such as Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, and Ofelia Zepeda, and Latinx authors such as Francisco X. Alarcón, Rudolfo Anaya, Juan Felipe Herrera, Demetria Martinez, Alberto Álvaro Ríos, and Benjamin Alire Sáen—all at the early stages and/or multiple points of their careers. Her portraits of Indigenous and Latinx visiting writers are reminders that “Western” is not a single identity.

## Defining the Collection: Creator, Institution, and Archivists

The LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection presents an excellent case study of how creators, institutions, and archivists may define and value a collection in different ways. The traditionally expressed value of the collection, on the part of both its creator and the institution that houses it, was as a unique aggregation of records notable for its high-quality images of what is a relatively scarce commodity: portraits and candid photographs of contemporary poets. Therefore, the first value placed on the collection was in regard to its image value and the unique aggregation of so many portraits of poets in one collection, including regional and emerging poets whose images may not be captured in any other collection.

This was conditioned by the fact that a long tradition existed between LaVerne Harrell Clark and the Poetry Center, in which LaVerne freely provided her portraits of poets to the Center, particularly photos taken at Poetry Center events. LaVerne and LD faithfully attended Poetry Center functions until their retirement to LaVerne's hometown of Smithville, Texas, in 1999; her role as the Poetry Center's (un)official portrait photographer endured for decades after she left the Center's directorship. For

20. LaVerne Harrell Clark, *They Sang for Horses: The Impact of the Horse on Navajo and Apache Folklore* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1966).

more than 50 years, the Poetry Center has made use of these images in the building's "Wall of Poets", showcasing portraits of poets taken throughout the organization's history in its photo binders, on its website, on its online audiovisual archive, Voca, and now through a digital database of LaVerne's photographs. We also know from LaVerne's correspondence within the collection, as well as her published books of portraits, *The Face of Poetry* and *Focus 101*, that she actively promoted herself as a portraitist and desired to have her images of poets in wider circulation.

With such a longstanding history of focusing on the image or face value of the collection, as well as its aggregate value, it was a welcome surprise to note that the archival interns processing the collection not only became its first researchers, but also created alternate ways of defining the collection's identity and its value. As a Western literature scholar, Pamela Pierce framed the collection in terms of its narrative reflecting LaVerne's identity as a writer, as a photographer, and as the Poetry Center's first director. This narrative reflected the tensions between LaVerne's perceptions of the Poetry Center and of her own work as western versus national. Pierce also looked at the way that LaVerne organized a network of Western writers through her photography activities. These questions and ways of framing the collection were completely new and, as we will see in the sections below, had an impact on the Poetry Center's understanding not only of the collection, but also of its own history.

Erin Wahl, as she continued to process the collection, framed a research narrative related to Tucson and the Southwest's literary landscape. She was drawn to poets in the collection about whom little is known—those, for example, who were photographed in the 1970s and 1980s as emerging writers, and who may still be living but who have little to no internet presence or publishing history. In some cases, Wahl could find no other record of the person's literary history than their presence in LaVerne's collection. Through this research, Wahl had a direct impact upon the Poetry Center's collections, connecting them more solidly with LaVerne's work as a photographer, and with the local literary landscape. By the time LaVerne's collection was being processed, the Poetry Center had already attained the national reputation it was moving towards during LaVerne's tenure. The work Wahl did, particularly in identifying regional poets and writers missing from the collection, created an opportunity to bring the past forward and return to the identity with which the Center began. For many at the Poetry Center, filling these gaps became an exciting reminder of their local impact, as well as their national one. Wahl thus provided a lens for the Poetry Center to frame the collection's value not just in terms of its images of well-known poets, such as Ai or Lucille Clifton, but also in terms of its preservation of a unique Western literary history that in some cases may not be preserved anywhere else.

### Influence of the Collection on the Poetry Center's Institutional Identity

For anyone who comes to the Poetry Center and sees the "Wall of Poets", browses the online exhibits, or listens to a recording while browsing photographs of poets on

Voca (the online audiovisual archive), LaVerne Harrell Clark's images are indelibly associated with the Poetry Center. In many ways, they are the face of the Center's first 50 years of history and, as the title of LaVerne's book suggests, they are even *the face of poetry*.

In spite of the ways in which the LaVerne Harrell Clark collection has always been a part of the Center's institutional identity, its full value in reflecting and shaping that identity was not fully realized until the collection was processed. Prior to the processing of LaVerne's collection, her photographic work was most prominently displayed as part of the Center's "Wall of Poets", a gallery of portraits of visiting authors spanning the 60-plus years from the Center's founding to the present. Processing the collection opened up new avenues of connection and visibility for LaVerne's photographs. As archivists but also as researchers, Pierce and Wahl uncovered links between poets in the collection. They searched for and found unusual stories that reflected the Center's and Southern Arizona's history, such as the story of the "Deport Poets" T-shirt that Jared Carter was wearing in a photograph of the Bisbee Poetry Festival in 1982.<sup>21</sup>

Through processing and researching the collection, Pierce and Wahl found, amongst the more well-known authors, a unique set of artists who were not as well known. Most of these authors had a strong connection to the Southwest or West. Not all of the authors in the collection were strictly poets. Also included were fiction writers, creative nonfiction writers, teachers of English, composition and creative writing, radio hosts, writers of critical essays, and quite a few authors who had "day jobs" as varied as doctors and dentists to copyeditors. There were many authors who had only published in literary journals (i.e., they had not published a book), or who had self-published their work, and even those who had been creative writing students but had not seemed to publish at all, or if they had, no easily obtainable record remained of their accomplishments.

When Wahl would find a poet not represented by a poetry monograph in the Center's library collection, she would keep track of it and occasionally update the librarians, along with providing background information about the poet, in case she felt it would benefit the library collection to have the author present. In this way, the archivist molded not only the library's collection, but also the way the library and archives could potentially interact with each other. This attempt at identifying and filling in potential gaps in the library's collection was also a good way to ensure a researcher's ability to cross-reference LaVerne's collection with the Poetry Center's library collection. Say you are a researcher interested in the poets Burgess Needle or Paul Malanga (both Southwestern poets based in Tucson at one point) or Carol Merrill. The Poetry Center holds a copy of Burgess Needle's excellent account of the 4th annual Bisbee Poetry Festival as well as copies of the literary journal *From a Window*, which was begun by Paul Malanga and classmate Bobby Byrd (the latter of

21. Burgess Needle, *The 4th Annual Bisbee Poetry Festival: A Personal Response* (Phoenix: Brushfire Publishing, 1983).

whom went on to form Cinco Puntos Press) while they were students at the University of Arizona in the 1960s, and a copy of C. S. Merrill's only published book that details (in poetry, of course) her time working as Georgia O'Keefe's personal assistant.<sup>22, 23, 24</sup>

One of the most important things that processing the collection did for the Poetry Center was to underscore its important dual identities as a Western and as a national literary organization, at a time in the Center's history when its national prominence was growing and taking precedence. In 2007, the Poetry Center moved into the first landmark permanent home for poetry, which remains the only such building in the Western United States.<sup>25</sup> Without the move to the Helen S. Schaefer Building and the climate-controlled archives space that it provided, the Center would not have been able to house a collection like the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection. Likewise, the Poetry Center's national presence, which the new building enhanced, has helped expand its reach and consider opportunities for digitizing the collection and giving it a global audience. Interestingly, however, the opportunity to process the collection has more than anything helped the Poetry Center to discover the potential of the collection to illuminate the organization's roots as a Western literary center.

## Processor's Journal and Colophon: Exploring the Identity of the Archivist

Several aspects of how we chose to process the LaVerne Harrell Clark Collection were also conducive to exploring the identity of the archivist. In many ways, this grew out of the same identity exploration process described above. The Center keeps a small staff, bolstered by graduate assistants, interns, and volunteers from various departments around the University of Arizona campus and from outside as well. The library occupies the main building space, but the Poetry Center does more than just act as a library space. Classes, both university classes and Poetry Center-specific classes, are held in the conference rooms, along with special events. Writers are welcomed and housed in the Lois Shelton Poet's Cottage adjoining the Center; and there is a small but serious archive where some of its dearest treasures are housed.

The smaller size of the Poetry Center's archives means that the interns had an opportunity to focus specifically on the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection, which allowed them the time to go into great depth processing and

22. Needle, *The 4th Annual Bisbee Poetry Festival*.

23. Paul Malanga and Bobby Byrd, eds., *From a Window, 1965-1966*.

24. C. S. Merrill, *O'Keefe: Days in a Life* (Albuquerque: La Alameda Press, 1995).

25. "Building," University of Arizona Poetry Center, accessed December 2023, <https://poetry.arizona.edu/visit/about-poetry-center/building>.

researching the collection to present it in the best way possible via its organization and the finding aid. The opportunity to do this level of detailed work is rarely afforded to archivists these days. It was a rare opportunity for Pierce and Wahl. The process of processing was documented by each of the interns working on the collection through the utilization of a Processor's Journal. This was a strategy developed by Pierce as part of her internship requirements and continued by Wahl. The idea behind the Processor's Journal is that any snags, successes, amazing finds, or whatnot would have a place to be recorded. This was saved so future archivists working on the collection would have a possible source of information long after Pierce and Wahl had moved on. This strategy may be most recognizable by the term colophon.<sup>26</sup> We were interested in developing a colophon for LaVerne's collection because of several factors, among them: the closely connected nature of LaVerne and her collection to the Poetry Center's history, the deep influence on community and place in both the collection and the Poetry Center, and the position Pierce and Wahl had as archival interns that allowed the grace of doing extra research into portions of the collection that is not typically afforded to archivists working in the profession. The creation of a colophon also reflects the Poetry Center's institutional style and spirit of trying new things and addressing its subjectivity by acknowledging where it lay within the interns and librarians working with the collection. In the end, the colophon and Processor's Journal was not added to the already expansive finding aid but is available for those who wish to see it.

## Digitization of Best Negatives

In January 2014, Wahl returned to the Poetry Center to work out the digitization of selected images in preparation for online access. At that time, only a few images from the collection were available online in the Poetry Center's digital exhibits both on its website and on the Arizona Memory Project. The contributions were small, with photographs being chosen by interns or uploaded when an opportunity arose. With quality images of some poets being quite rare, even the few images available online were sufficient to attract the attention of a variety of nonprofit and educational institutions seeking to reproduce the images. LaVerne herself was very interested in seeing her images reproduced and used by her poet subjects. Therefore, and with the support of LD Clark, the Poetry Center planned to digitize several images of every poet in the collection, guided in many cases by LaVerne's own choices of "best negatives," which she carefully ranked in numerical order and documented on her photo envelopes. In 2016, the Poetry Center launched an online photo gallery to display 1,000 digitized negatives from the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection. This project was led by then-Library Director Wendy Burk, who worked with software developers from the Poetry Center's institutional home, the University of Arizona College of Humanities, to design a web interface that would display the images in an easy-to-use format. Each image in the online gallery is

26. Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, 216–30.

individually described using elements from the Dublin Core metadata schema, and the gallery is searchable by photo subject, photo title, photo location, and photo year. All images in the gallery are available for public use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives license. The gallery showcases rarely seen portraits of such literary luminaries as Tomas Tranströmer, Lucille Clifton, Alice Notley, Joseph Brodsky, Joy Harjo, Seamus Heaney, Juan Felipe Herrera, Adrienne Rich, and many others. These images are among the Poetry Center library's most widely used assets.

Besides being notable for its specialized focus on contemporary poets, and the extent of its digitized items, the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection is also important for the use of Creative Commons licensing for thumbnails and medium-resolution images. Archival collections with overlapping areas of focus (poets and writers from the mid twentieth century to the present) are held by major American universities and literary centers; they include the Robert Giard Papers (1972-2002) at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Allen Ginsberg Papers (1937-1994) at Stanford, the Woodberry Poetry Room photographs of poets collection (1959-2000) at Harvard, and the Poetry Project's online photo archives (1970s to the present). Digital access to these collections, as is typical across archival institutions, ranges widely, both in terms of the number of items digitized per collection and the extent of metadata provided. With the exception of the Woodberry Poetry Room collection, copyright for each of these collections remains with the photographers or their estates; reproduction rights thus cannot be granted by the holding institutions themselves. The Poetry Center differs from most peer archives in this respect, having obtained copyright in the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection from donor LD Clark in addition to the physical materials. Two factors—the initial transfer of copyright for the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection to the Poetry Center, and Burk's subsequent decision to apply a Creative Commons license to thumbnails and medium-resolution images—allow the Poetry Center to make these images available for more widespread public use than is typical for photographic archives.

## The Future of the LaVerne Harrell Clark Collections

Since 2016, the Poetry Center's library staff have highlighted images from the online gallery in blog posts on the Center's website as well as on Voca, the Center's online audiovisual archive of recorded poetry readings. In response, public interest in these images has been strong. Digitized LaVerne Harrell Clark photos have appeared in textbooks, biographies, articles, web portfolios, posthumous collections, and museum exhibitions around the world. The Poetry Center has, for example, facilitated the appearance of these photos in a biography of Indian poet A.K. Ramanujan, an online class covering the work of Black feminist pioneer Lucille Clifton, an Oprah Winfrey television special on former U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo, and numerous other scholarly and educational projects. Since the Poetry Center uses a Creative Commons licensing model for the gallery, these photos also frequently crop up in delightfully surprising corners of the Internet. Library staff recently spotted LaVerne

Harrell Clark photos in the *Havana Times*, in *The Independent*, on Wikipedia, and in numerous blog and social media posts.

Given the public's steady interest in the Poetry Center's digitized historical images, Library staff are currently considering how best to pursue further digitization efforts. The Poetry Center has roughly 17,000 undigitized images in its archival collections overall, and the difference in visibility and public access between the Poetry Center's digitized and non-digitized photo collections is stark. Digitized images in the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photo Gallery are indexed on Google Images, and the regular stream of photo permissions requests the library receives suggests that these assets are both discoverable and useful to the public. The Poetry Center's non-digitized photos, on the other hand, are not particularly discoverable: they are currently classified as an archival collection and minimally described in an online finding aid, but this level of description has proven insufficient for the internet era. The public is largely unaware that these non-digitized photos exist, as evidenced by a complete absence of permissions requests for this material to date. In effect, the Poetry Center's digitized images are visible to the public and widely used, but the institution's much larger collection of undigitized photos remains invisible, and therefore functionally inaccessible. Digitization and internet access have enabled a subset of the LaVerne Harrell Clark Photographic Collection to have a life far beyond the Poetry Center. What creative or scholarly endeavors might the public accomplish, given access to more of the Poetry Center's images in digital form? The digitization and development of online infrastructure for a greater portion of the Poetry Center's historical images is the library's next major anticipated digital archives project. By opening more of the archive to the public through digitization and online access, the Poetry Center will enable new research, new storytelling, and new imaginings around 20th and 21st century poetry in English.

As efforts towards further digitization expand the collection's reach, the Poetry Center is already considering ways that LaVerne's photographs will continue to inform the institution's identity in the years to come. LaVerne had an extraordinary gift for capturing personality in her portraits. They are all more candid than posed; the viewer readily sees the authors in the collection as human beings rather than as icons. LaVerne's photographs portray the landscape of contemporary poetry as the incredibly diverse space that it is. For these reasons, her photos make it easier for audiences to see poetry as a living, vibrant, cross-cultural expression—an artform practiced by people who look just like us, all of us, not just long-gone white men in cravats. The Center's most recent institutional strategic work centers around creating a culture of belonging. LaVerne's photographs help show that this is not a new concern, but a carrying-forward of work begun by the Center's early leaders. Current Executive Director of the Poetry Center Tyler Meier has mused,

As we launch into a world where most of the text we'll interact with on a daily basis will be made by an algorithm instead of a breathing person (on the web, in marketing, in our inboxes, etc.), I think the collection will take on a new and pointed resonance that LaVerne likely didn't consider when



she started it (and maybe that even we couldn't anticipate even 10 years ago). There will be an even stronger future need to understand the full human dimension behind what the art form has and will aspire to.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

LaVerne Harrell Clark's photographic legacy is one of the guiding forces of the University of Arizona Poetry Center's history, and a source of traditions still upheld at the Center today. Throughout the experience of processing the collection, the idea of what LaVerne created at the Poetry Center as its first director and unofficial "official" photographer guided archivists, librarians, and interns as they went. The final processed collection not only does justice to LaVerne's complex identity and legacy, but also weaves a tale of the Poetry Center's early years and the writing scene in the region. One thing this article makes clear is the deep love for the collection that those who worked with it (and are still working with it) have developed. Considering the trajectory of the collection in the ten years since its first round of processing was completed, the future of LaVerne's collection, and the Poetry Center's engagement with archival material, is bright.

27. Tyler Meier, Email to the authors, September 14, 2023.