Cultural Diplomacy and Fighting the Atheist Totalitarian “Other”: Modern Dancer Martha Graham, the Military, and Radio Free Europe

INTRODUCTION

The United States’ use of religion to fight Cold War battles heavily influenced the selection of cultural performances for export to Germany and later the Soviet bloc countries. Martha Graham, who combined religious themes and stories with her modernist technique in her choreographed works, was indeed a perfect fit for this aim. Her religious programming fought totalitarianism with its celebration of freedom of speech and individualism—and, through them, an American vision of liberal democracy.¹ Her performances in Berlin in 1957 and Warsaw in 1962 reflect this overarching agenda as well as how US goals evolved over time.

Dance was not the only medium in which religion was employed to foster an American concept of democracy. Religion was central to how the United States portrayed tensions between democracy and totalitarianism in both government-sponsored film and radio. Religious tropes advertised democracy through the condemnation of totalitarian genocide during World War II and the atheism of totalitarian rule during the Cold War. Most historians equate American propaganda efforts with the United States Information Agency and the State Department;

however, the military and Radio Free Europe, funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, also played a vital part in setting the American cultural agenda abroad.

Although Graham’s performances, as cultural diplomacy, would be considered “soft power,” they nonetheless met “hard power” objectives. While her earlier tours had emphasized the power of the American frontier in Asia and the Middle East, Graham’s tours to Germany and Poland under the auspices of the United States government reflected new American propaganda needs: the centrality of religion to social order and the humanism of liberal democracy. These needs were clearly articulated by military films and Radio Free Europe reports in the field.

BACKGROUND

Between 1955 and 1987, Martha Graham performed in over twenty-five countries under the auspices of every seated president of the United States. However, despite such governmental support, she was able to maintain her artistic independence. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, by contrast, tightly controlled artistic creations through mandates and funding. In order to emphasize this dichotomy, the United States government sought cultural programming for diplomatic missions that emphasized the democratic power of freedom of speech through religious expression. Martha Graham was thus an excellent choice. Among her early choreographic works were pieces like *A Florentine Madonna* (1926) and *Figure of a Saint* (1929). She was known to frequent bookstores where she studied biblical works.”²

In addition to her early choreography, Graham’s personal life also demonstrated the power of religious freedom and, therefore, democracy. With an interreligious heritage, Graham

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was advertised by the Office of War Information as a figure that “speaks for Americans.”

Her mother’s side was Protestant, harkening back to the Mayflower, and her father was of Irish Catholic descent. Graham’s attentiveness to and interest in religion, however, went beyond Christianity. Several of her works showed her deep respect for Native American rituals. She remembered going to church as a child and worshipping Native American rituals in the 1930s. Through Graham, America was represented as a religious melting pot in which people were allowed to worship freely. This concept was deployed in United States Information advance memos and the molding of programs for Poland, in particular.

Two works of hers in the 1950s were renowned for their embrace of religious themes. In 1950, she choreographed *Judith*, the story of a Jewish heroine from the Old Testament who slayed invaders to save her people, and in 1955, she composed *Seraphic Dialogue*, which told the story of Joan of Arc. The State Department saw promise in both. In Graham’s early foreign tours, her company had showcased “Americana”; however, these new works spoke to a desire to portray righteousness through religion.

However, before this message could be conveyed, she first had to prove that the United States was not a “bastion of hot dogs, bubble gum, Hollywood and greed,” as international critics scoffed during the Cold War. To do this, she positioned the United States as the bearer of Western civilization, with works based on the stories of Euripides and Sophocles and myths from the Western canon. She realized these narratives using fractured time, a modernist dance technique, and claims of “universalism” that echoed the Cold War trope that the United States was seeking the “hearts and souls of mankind.” In both narrative and technique, modern dance offered a freedom and universalism that could not be achieved with German dance or Soviet

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3 “Martha Graham: Biographical Data,” Office of War Information, RG 208. 5.2, 2.A, Records of the News and Features Bureau, National Archives at College Park, MD.
ballet. The German dance had initially been molded by the state.\textsuperscript{4} Russian ballet relied on a formalistic technique, had czarist roots, and told stories of sylphs and noblemen. While the Soviets tried to democratize the form with ballets based on stories on the communal farms, they were not particularly popular. Graham’s classical humanism won out.

THE POSTWAR BATTLE: GERMANY

After World War II, cultural products, from military films to modern dance, played a significant role in conveying the evils of the Nazi state. The film “Your Job in Germany,” for instance, was produced by the War Department, Army Information Branch, for American occupation troops to demonstrate the righteousness of America.\textsuperscript{5} In explaining the atrocities of the Holocaust, religion became a vital part of the story; indeed, it is likely that films of concentration camps were shown before soldiers saw “Your Job in Germany.”\textsuperscript{6} These pre-screening scenes undoubtedly made a huge impression, as the real-life events had on even the most hardened generals. One of the most famous and toughest World War II generals, General George Patton, visited the Ohrdruf sub-camp of Buchenwald in 1945, along with General Dwight D. Eisenhower who would become president. Patton threw up when he smelled the forty dead bodies in a shed. General Eisenhower said, “The things I saw beggar description…The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering…I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give first hand

\textsuperscript{4} Lilian Karina, Marion Kant, Jonathan Steinberg, \textit{Hitler’s Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich} (New York, Oxford University Press, Berghahn Books, 2004). “Modern expressive dance found favor with the regime and especially with the infamous Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda. How modern artists collaborated with Nazism reveals an important aspect of modernism, uncovers the bizarre bureaucracy which controlled culture and tells the histories of great figures who became enthusiastic Nazis.”

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Your Job in Germany/Our Job in Japan}, 1945, 0270, [VHS], 32 mins, Film Library, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, Hungary (OSA).

\textsuperscript{6} The film text begins: “You have just seen some of the atrocities committed by the Germans.”
evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations to propaganda.”7 Graham travelled to Berlin with Judith under the Eisenhower administration.

Made for the troops in 1945, “Our Job in Germany” begins ominously: “Victory Leads to peace… Sometimes.” If left to their own devices, the Germans, because of their nature, could begin World War III. With vivid pictures of concentration camps in the film itself, soldiers were warned about the German personality, which included a “cult-like” antisemitism. The announcer stated that from the nineteenth century the Germans were “serving notice to all that their religion was higher. That their God was blood.”

Americans sought to counter such militarism and antisemitism through a denazification process that emphasized a humanistic religious righteousness. In 1957, when Graham was deployed to Berlin, she brought both anti-Nazi and humanist messages with the biblical Judith, which symbolically reprimanded the Germans for their transgressions. In the story, the titular heroine becomes outraged because her Jewish countrymen did not revolt against the invading Assyrians. She travels to the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, and promises him information about the Israelites. Judith gains his trust and charms him with her beauty, and he invites her into his tent. She falls in love with him, yet she remains faithful to her people. One night, as he lies drunk, she decapitates him and takes his head back to the Jewish people. The Assyrians disperse, and Israel is saved.

In Graham’s Judith, Holofernes does not appear; rather, when she vanquishes him, she appears with laurel leaves that signal Grecian victory. By not featuring an embodiment of the villain on stage, Graham allows him to take on an archetypal, eternal quality. Graham described

7 Neil MacGregor, Germany: Memories of a Nation (New York: Knopf, 2015), 469.
the loyalty of Judith in similarly universal fashion: “[S]he never lost her purpose, which was that he must die. ‘In desire,’ she says, ‘I intend to kill you.’”8 She added, “This means to me, ‘I am ready to do battle, I will do it, whatever I have to do.’” When speaking about the dance, Graham said she explored “the expression of man, the landscape of the soul.”9

Yet the choreographic subject was not all: the set and music amplified the rhetorical message. The set included an Isamu Noguchi-sculpted tent with a royal sheath over it to signify Holofernes’s bed chambers. To enhance the propaganda value in postwar Germany, Graham altered the set for this particular performance. In earlier presentations in the United States, Holofernes’s tent had been draped with a royal purple sheath. For the Berlin performance, Graham changed it to mustard yellow, the color of the star the Jewish people wore under the Nazi régime. As Graham’s lead male dancer, Bertram Ross, later wrote that he had been “pleased that Martha chose to take [Judith] to Germany, and told her how right it was that she was going to Germany with a dance about a nice Jewish girl who saved her people.” When he noted the significance of the mustard yellow fabric, Graham was “overjoyed.”10 In addition, the music, commissioned for Judith specifically, also served well. William Schuman, of Jewish descent, was a self-described “foe of forgetting”; he was a staunch believer in preserving the memory of

8 Martha Graham, Blood Memory (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 221. NB: The author has published an article disputing the “autobiographical” authenticity of the book. Quotes are acknowledged to be reliable based on interviews and recordings unless otherwise noted.
9 Graham, Blood Memory, 4.
10 Bertram Ross, “Draft—Martha Graham’s Biography,” Bertram Ross Collection, Box 13, Folder 9,140-141, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division (NYPL-DD). The first company Graham danced for, Denishawn, had “Arian Quotas.” Many of Graham’s finest early company dancers were Jewish. In Graham’s autobiography, although certainly promoting her own skills as a dramatic dancer, she recalled being proud because she had been identified as Jewish by a woman in Israel after she had performed an Old Testament work (Graham, Blood Memory, 72). In the postwar years, “Graham would not buy a knife if it was made by Germans” (Ethel Winter, interview with author, October 16, 2010. Transcript available upon request).
the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{11} For Graham, the composition, the set, and the score made for \textit{Judith} would contribute to the process of denazification begun by the Allies after the war had been won.\textsuperscript{12}

Martha Graham also brought specific political memories of the Nazi state itself with her. In 1936, Graham had received an invitation from Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, and Rudolf von Laban, internationally recognized as the most renowned movement theorist of the period, to perform during a festival of dance to precede the Summer Olympic Games in Berlin. The Nazi officials promised to celebrate Graham alongside German masters trained by Laban, who would choreograph segments of the opening ceremony. Given the international status of German expressive dance during the interwar period, the invitation to join a festival during the weeklong celebration should have been difficult for Graham to turn down. Yet she refused, remaining steadfast to her principles. In an eloquent letter that cited her inalienable differences with the German Reich, she wrote to Laban that “[s]o many artists whom I respect and admire have been deprived of their right to work, and for such unsatisfactory and ridiculous reasons, that I should consider it impossible to identify myself, by accepting the invitation, that has made such things possible.” She highlighted the discrimination that her own troupe members, many of whom were Jewish, would face: “In addition, some of my concert group would not be either welcome in Germany or willing to go.” She concluded, making her political differences clear, “This refusal is directed only against the practices of the


\textsuperscript{12} Dance Panel Minutes, International Exchange Panel, October 1957, Box 101, folder 14, see also Box 93, folder 20, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville (DP/IEP); Bertram Ross, “Draft—Martha Graham’s Biography,” Bertram Ross Collection, Box 13, Folder 9,140-141, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division (NYPL-DD). The first company Graham danced for, Denishawn, had “Aryan Quotas.” Many of Graham’s finest early company dancers were Jewish. In Graham’s autobiography, although certainly promoting her own skills as a dramatic dancer, she recalled being proud because she had been identified as Jewish by a woman in Israel after she had performed an Old Testament work (Graham, \textit{Blood Memory}, 72). In the postwar years, “Graham would not buy a knife if it was made by Germans” (Ethel Winter, interview with author, October 16, 2010. Transcript available upon request).
In 1957, the incident was well remembered by the German artistic community, the intelligentsia, and the German dignitaries in the audience. In 1957, the incident was well remembered by the German artistic community, the intelligentsia, and the German dignitaries in the audience.

Indeed, Graham’s performance was met merely with polite applause. “Unfortunately [Graham] failed to achieve the maximum effect,” began one reporter the next day. Her “pantomimic style is very limited in the idiom of the dance,” concluded another. Judith was likened to an “archaic ceremony.” Back at home, the New York Times concluded, perhaps euphemistically, “The critics were not altogether favorable.” However, a government representative in New York was not dismayed: the performance should be considered a success, it was argued, because “25%-50% of the audience came from the Eastern sector to attend.” The humanitarian modern dance that represented freedom of speech, religion, and democracy through “universals” that united mankind had pierced the “Iron Curtain” at least.

1962: THE “IRON CURTAIN TOUR”

Despite poor reviews in 1957, Graham had exposed her art to the Soviet bloc. Her company was chosen for another European tour in the late fall of 1962, including a stop in Poland. By 1962, Graham’s modernism could fight shifting artistic trends in the Soviet-dominated countries. Indeed, a Radio Free Europe memo reported in “East Germans on Abstract Art” that although abstract art was

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13 Martha Graham, Scrapbooks, Box 311, Martha Graham Collection, Performing Arts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (MGC-LOC);
14 Claudia Jeschke, discussion with the author, 2010. Notes available on request.
16 DP/IEP, October, 1957.
17 Author interview with Linda Hodes, a dancer on the 1962 tour. New York City, February 19, 2016.
accused of using “the tail of a donkey,” simple forms could be applied as long as they did not “smuggle” in Western forms.\textsuperscript{18} The Soviet Union was searching for a new “humanism” for artistic projects. This became an opening for United States cultural exports that addressed “humanism” through religion expressed in modernist forms.

In the same year that Graham left on tour, a military film for public consumption emphasized the importance of religion, this time not to fight against the Germans, but rather to fight the Soviet communist threat. In \textit{Red Nightmare}, religion and the church become a trope for the individual freedom that underlies democracy. The film describes “the nightmare of a small-town American who finds his community taken over by communists.”\textsuperscript{19} The narrator describes a town “Behind the Iron Curtain” that is a mock-up by the Soviets of a small American pastoral city. As the camera pans the town, the announcer declares, “These Russians are studying the American institutions.” As he concludes that values are “the very heartbeat of America,” the camera ends with a shot of a white church spire.

Cheerful music begins as Jerry, an ordinary American factory worker, comes home to a rather large middle-class home. His wife, Linda, kisses him fondly. Two children, roughly ages five and eight, come running in playing “Cowboy and Indians.” They take their father prisoner. “I am one of the good guys,” he pleads, and they let him go. Jerry has a glass of cold whole milk and remarks that he will not go to a union meeting because “nothing ever happens.” At a family dinner, his eldest daughter, in her early twenties, comes home with her boyfriend. They announce that they are to be married in the local church. The father tells them they are too young. After a slight tiff with his wife over the engagement, he goes to bed and has a dream: his

\textsuperscript{18} HU OSA 300-3-1, RFE/RL Research Institute, 3 German Affairs, 1 East German Subject Files, 801-804, box 12, “Culture – Formalism,” “East Germans on Abstract Art,” Dec. 18, 1962, folder 804.
\textsuperscript{19} “Red Nightmare,” 1962, 0268, [VHS], 25min., OSA.
town has become controlled by the Soviet Union. The announcer says, “Freedom has suddenly vanished.”

When Jerry comes home from the factory in his dream, the family is already eating and cold to him. Linda stares blankly into the screen; they do not kiss. Marriage is gone. Jerry talks about not attending meetings, she insists he must do what the party says. The daughter’s fiancée enters as a communist officer and shows Jerry a warrant to take the daughter to a communal farm. He protests. When his daughter descends the stairs, she announces that she wants to free herself of the bourgeois life.

On Sunday, Jerry tells the younger children that it is time to go to church and Sunday school. Yet the children are packing their bags with their mother to go to a communal school: Jerry has not taught them to be good communists. He now raises his voice: “This is going to be a family again and you’re going to Sunday school and you’re going now,” where you will find out “what the truth is all about.” He takes both children by the arms; they struggle to get free as the son declares, “There is no Sunday school anymore.” Jerry drags them to church, which has been turned into a museum. “What happened, what have they done?” he cries. He throws items to the floor, reminding the museum curator, formerly the pastor, that the products on display are American. He is subsequently arrested. His wife, his daughter’s boyfriend, and the pastor all testify against Jerry and he is sentenced to death without a trial. He is shot.

Jerry awakes to find himself home. He kisses his wife. She reciprocates. The son wants a space helmet, and his father says, “I think we can put you into space.” The father says the eldest daughter can get married, but the boyfriend says they will marry after he “does my hitch in the service.” The family has a picnic after church. As freedoms are described by the narrator, there is
a shot of marriage in a church. The narrator professes the American belief in human dignity and the freedom “to worship God.”

The film made for American consumption merely stated what had been a concern and propaganda tool for over a decade—Graham clearly went to Poland for a reason. Radio Free Europe (RFE) had been providing reports on religious repression in Poland and responded aggressively with programming. 20 A dire RFE report in 1950 stated, “Until 1950, the college in Kolobrezg had provided for lessons in religion. Despite voluntary attendance frequented them. In 1950, teaching of religion was discontinued, and it may only be resumed if the pupils asks for it; but few pupils would dare ask for it.” 21 According to Red Scare, the youth provide hope for the future. And the future seemed grim.

A glimmer of hope in 1951—the reconstruction of the Church of St. Mary—was soon dashed. 22 The next year, a communication noted that a “drastic governmental action shut down in a single day all Junior seminaries.” 23 Painstaking numerical surveys elucidated the seriousness of the problem. A 1953 communiqué reported, “Soldier not allowed to marry in church,” echoing the ruptures in the institution of marriage portrayed in Red Scare. 24

In 1956, a confidential source told RFE interviewers that “Radio Warsaw Listeners Demand Religious Program.” 25 The stage was set. With government backing and the need to

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21 NA, “Youth: Organizations,” 31 August 1951, Item No 5977, OSA.
emphasize the power of freedom of religion, Graham again went to Europe, with her repertory changed to accommodate the message and desires of the people, according to RFE.

*Seraphic Dialogue,* which opened evenings in Warsaw, explores the three aspects of Joan of Arc—Maid, Warrior, and Martyr—with three separate dancers. Graham studied St. Joan using historical manuscripts to prepare the work. The dance retells a story of religious persecution, drawing on the idea of a universal human narrative in which the righteous become victimized. Displaying the idea of Joan as an everywoman, Graham said, “I had no grounds to go on except what I imagined went on in her heart.” Graham demonstrates the character’s multifaceted nature when she hears the voices of St. Catherine, St. Michael, and St. Margaret, and herself in martyrdom. Joan relives the three aspects of her personality without linear narrative, thus modernist in form. The Isamu Noguchi set became an integral part of the work. Graham said that it was “a cathedral without limitations, like no other cathedral in the world.” Noguchi called it “his geometry of faith.”

**THE Fallout**

Although surely Martha Graham did not create an artistic sea change, by 1963, the situation in Soviet bloc countries regarding performative output was beginning to shift. In 1963, coping with de-Stalinization and socialist realism in art, officials sounded much like Martha Graham when they extolled on the merits of the “art of truth,” “for mankind and for the dignity of man.” *Neues Deutschland* printed articles that discussed the need for East German art to

7e0556dd5457, accessed June 1, 2016.
26 Martha Hill, *Interview with Martha Hill,* conducted by Agnes de Mille, 2 sound cassettes, 100min., 18 January 1984, cassette 2 (45 min.), Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library, New York City, NY.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Graham, *Blood Memory,* 220.
“appeal to the German soul.” Although artists who practiced individualism “are rudely pulled down from their wall,” nevertheless, “[e]veryone has the right to determine what to do.”31 By 1965, the showing of abstract art at the Biennale in Rostock made some believe that it “vandalized the exhibit hall”; others, however, applauded it. It “set a precedent.” The reporter continued, “We feel allied with the humanist content.”32 By 1965, abstract art began to appear in Poland.33 East began to meet West.

CONCLUSION

While the connection between Martha Graham’s modernist religious works featured in 1957 and 1962 alongside anti-totalitarian military films and RFE’s emphasis on religion as a sign of freedom could seem coincidental, the overall message was clear: freedom of expression was brought only by democracy. Freedom lodged itself in humanism and the universalism of men and women’s souls to be free to worship as they pleased. This message could be told through modern, avant-garde artistry through cultural exports, films constructed by the military, or Radio Free Europe, and, better yet, the combination of all three.

33 HU OSA 300-3-1 Box 12, 300 RFE/RL Research Institute, 3 German Affairs, 1 East German Subject Files, FROM: 801 Culture: Awards, 1956-1966, TO: 804 Culture: Formalism, 1956-1972. Folder 804, “Continuing Indications of East German Liberalization in Art and Literature,” Aug. 17, 1965
Collections Consulted: Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest


HU OSA 300-3-1; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: German Affairs: East German Subject Files, Archival boxes #11 / No. 3, 1956 – 1957, boxes 11, 12, 13, 14.


OSA Film Library
Your Job in Germany/Our Job in Japan, 1945, 0270, [VHS], 32 mins.
Red Nightmare, 1962, 0268, [VHS], 25min.
Your Crusade for Freedom, clips, 0604, [DVD] 6 mins.
Inside Russia, 1941, 0272, 0272, [VCR], 1.15 hours.
Face to Face with Communists, 1951, 0269 [DVD], 26min.

Collections Consulted: Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest


HU OSA 300-3-1; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: German Affairs: East German Subject Files, Archival boxes #11 / No. 3, 1956 – 1957, boxes 11, 12, 13, 14.


HU OSA 300-50-5 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: Polish Unit:
Miscellaneous Subject Files, Archival boxes #1 / No. 1, 1953-1953, folder, textual, “Zawadzki: Fight with the Church in Poland.”


**OSA Film Library**
*Your Job in Germany/Our Job in Japan*, 1945, 0270, [VHS], 32 mins.
*Red Nightmare*, 1962, 0268, [VHS], 25min.
*Your Crusade for Freedom*, clips, 0604, [DVD] 6 mins.
*Inside Russia*, 1941, 0272, [VCR], 1.15 hours.
*Face to Face with Communists*, 1951, 0269 [DVD], 26min.

**RFE Digital Files**
HU OSA 300-1; General Records: Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute and HU OSA 300-50; Polish Unit.


"Church Blocked by Police in Sasin," 4 May 1951. [Electronic Record]  
http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:64d8fdd4-3690-45aa-94e3-7c6d8a4b80bd, accessed May 26, 2016.


"Number of Theology Students Decreased Tremendously", 25 April 1951. [Electronic Record]  
http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:0b3296da-8625-4b24-95b6-4025c24e6c2b, accessed May 26, 2016.


"Church of St. Mary in Warsaw Reconstructed", 26 April 1951. [Electronic Record]  
http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:1f345a14-0346-4420-ac5c-393d920d2c84, accessed May 26, 2016.


"Monasteries Closed", 8 May 1951. [Electronic Record]  
http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:85a07e9a-97b8-49f0-adda-9982c2fa01c6, accessed May 26, 2016.


"Radio Warsaw Listeners Demand Religious Program", 18 December 1956. [Electronic record]  
http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:1e04731c-ac29-4b46-8269-7e0556dd5457, accessed June 1, 2016.


"Religion Classes at the College in Kolobrzeg Abolished", 31 August 1951. [Electronic record]  
http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:d90b0070-c69a-441b-9f1c-e04c68b8980d, accessed June 1, 2016.

Other Archives Consulted:

Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library, New York City, NY

John F. Kennedy Presidential Papers and Museum, Columbia Point,
Boston, MA.

Library of Congress, Performing Arts Division, Washington, DC.

National Archives at College Park, MD.

Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AK.