

A Pedagogy of Possibility Towards Transformative Learning in the Special Collections Classroom

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Volume 9, 2023

Special Focus on The Place of Teaching in Academic Librarians' Work

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108531ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v9.40961>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians / Association
Canadienne des Bibliothécaires en Enseignement Supérieur

ISSN

2369-937X (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Richardson, L. & Dugan, H. (2023). A Pedagogy of Possibility: Towards Transformative Learning in the Special Collections Classroom. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship / Revue canadienne de bibliothéconomie universitaire*, 9, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v9.40961>

Résumé de l'article

En se servant de notre collaboration dans le cadre d'un cours d'anglais de premier cycle à titre d'exemple, où la salle de classe des collections spéciales sert de site d'apprentissage et d'activisme, nous démontrons qu'une juste combinaison des compétences et du travail des bibliothécaires et des enseignants, rendus visibles les uns aux autres et aux étudiants, crée les conditions nécessaires pour mettre en oeuvre une approche pédagogique transformatrice centrée sur l'étudiant. Cependant, nous avons d'abord dû reconnaître, réfléchir à et rejeter les dynamiques de pouvoir qui imprègnent la collaboration entre bibliothécaires et professeur.e.s. Nous exposons notre critique commune du pouvoir au sein de l'académie néolibérale corporatisée qui nous a aidées à outrepasser le partenariat conventionnel entre bibliothécaire et professeur pour ensuite expérimenter des pédagogies critiques transformatives ainsi qu'une praxis féministe et modeler et cultiver la confiance et la vulnérabilité interdépendantes, permettant aux étudiants d'agir en penseurs libres et créatifs.

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Using our work together on an upper-level undergraduate English course as an example, we illustrate that a just combination of librarian and faculty skills and labour, made visible to each other and to students, creates the conditions to enact a transformative student-centered pedagogical approach with special collections as a site of learning and activism. However, we first had to recognize, reflect on, and reject the power dynamics that pervade librarian-faculty collaboration. We will expound on our shared critique of power within the neoliberal corporatized academy that helped us get beyond the conventional librarian-faculty teaching partnership to experiment with critical pedagogies of possibility and enact a feminist praxis; modeling and cultivating interdependent confidence and vulnerability to empower students to be free and creative thinkers.

RÉSUMÉ

En se servant de notre collaboration dans le cadre d'un cours d'anglais de premier cycle à titre d'exemple, où la salle de classe des collections spéciales sert de site d'apprentissage et d'activisme, nous démontrons qu'une juste combinaison des compétences et du travail des bibliothécaires et des enseignants, rendus visibles les uns aux autres et aux étudiants, crée les conditions nécessaires pour mettre en oeuvre une approche pédagogique transformatrice centrée sur l'étudiant. Cependant, nous avons d'abord dû reconnaître, réfléchir à et rejeter les dynamiques de pouvoir qui imprègnent la collaboration entre bibliothécaires et professeur.e.s. Nous exposons notre critique commune du pouvoir au sein de l'académie néolibérale corporatisée qui nous a aidées à outrepasser le partenariat conventionnel entre bibliothécaire et professeur pour ensuite expérimenter des pédagogies critiques

transformatives ainsi qu'une praxis féministe et modeler et cultiver la confiance et la vulnérabilité interdépendantes, permettant aux étudiants d'agir en penseurs libres et créatifs.

Mots-clés : *bibliothéconomie critique · collaboration bibliothécaire-professeur.e · collections spéciales · pédagogie · pensée féministe Noire*

There are no innocent spaces; thus, all places are fraught with interests, both conflicting and contradictory. As feminists, we are not immune to these contradictions. We cannot concede the operation of this new world order to the will of corporate restructuring. This is what you have expressed in your desire to draw a map without a mandate for conquest. You have expressed a will to teach for justice.

— M. Jacqui Alexander. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*.

ENTRENCHED hierarchies and power dynamics often plague librarian-faculty teaching partnerships, a seemingly intractable condition well-documented in the library literature.¹ Using our work together on an upper level undergraduate English course as an example, we suggest that a just combination of faculty and librarian skills and labour, made visible to each other and to students, creates the conditions to enact a transformative student-centered pedagogical approach with special collections as a site of learning and activism. Departing from the conventional aspects of a librarian-faculty co-teaching case study, we instead focus on how we developed and enacted a collaborative and feminist praxis geared towards transformative pedagogies. Further, we argue that a feminist praxis can reconnect the goals of critical librarianship² and pedagogy with the realities of teaching in higher education in the twenty-first century and that special collections is a particularly powerful site of learning and activism in service of this goal.

Our scholarly training created a shared affinity for *old books*. We were excited to share this affinity with students, and our desire to increase access to these materials was an important first step in transforming the course. Our intentional embrace of a feminist praxis “without a mandate for conquest” in the classroom, especially a classroom like ours that included artifacts of violent histories of Western Imperialism and colonialism in the Americas, had wider implications for how we worked with one another. However, the content of the materials required that we think deeply

1. Librarians tend to be the most vocal, if not the sole voice on the librarian-faculty issue from the earliest examples to the present time. According to Perez-Stable et al., in 2018 alone, over 240 articles were published in the library literature on the topic of “faculty-librarian collaboration” (Perez-Stable et al. 2020, 49).

2. Defined as such: “Critical librarianship acknowledges and then interrogates the structures that produce us as librarians, our spaces as libraries, our patrons as students, faculty, and the public, whose interface with the sum of human knowledge is produced, in large part, by us” (Drabinski 2019).

about our students including *why* it would be of value to them to work with these materials. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison isolates why this is a much harder but more important task when we desire to teach for justice. Discovery is too often an untroubled metaphor for scholarship. Isolating its power, but reframing its directionality, Morrison transforms this metaphor of scholarship: “I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest” (Morrison 1992, 3). Like many, we found inspiration in Morrison’s reframing of scholarship, especially when connected to “maps of empire, old and new” (Alexander 2005, 91).

Our experience working together on this course helped us realize a much broader point about the possibilities and pitfalls of librarian-faculty collaboration within our institution. These pitfalls are likely faced by others working in similar conditions. We chose to abandon professor-dictated learning objectives in order to embrace possibilities, drawing on the extensive work on transformative pedagogies articulated in Black feminist thought. Doing so enabled us to get critical about our own initial drive towards skills-acquisition and information literacies, and instead to center choice and access as key starting points. We also brought a critical and honest lens to faculty-librarian power dynamics and the traditional ways in which those roles are defined in classroom collaboration. This approach is labour intensive and requires careful and intentional attention to the power imbalances that structure our relative positions in the university, but ultimately allowed us to sidestep many of the issues and solutions discussed in the literature about librarian-faculty partnerships. We find that the solutions too often place the responsibility for developing a strong partnership solely onto librarians, including: additional training in order to better understand what faculty think about librarians (McGuinness 2006; Perez-Stable et al. 2020; Saunders 2012); to better listen to and speak the “language of faculty,” and reflect back their varying disciplinary and personal preferences for sources and methods (Vander Meer et al. 2012; Meulemans and Carr 2013; Saunders 2013); to enhance the demonstration or marketing of librarian value (Sanborn 2005; Walter 2018); and to incentivize collaboration for faculty (Becker et al. 2022; Wishkoski, Lundstrom, and Davis 2018). We are indebted to the work of our colleagues in framing the issues of partnering in higher education in such generative ways. Though these solutions are well-intended and document successes, they ultimately maintain an unequal power dynamic that defines institutional hierarchies by seeking to articulate and justify their value exclusively through the lens of skills-based learning.

Going back further in the literature on librarian-faculty partnership helps to elucidate why the genealogy and evolution of the interpersonal nature of the librarian-faculty problem is at once fascinating and heartbreaking. In 1981 Mary Biggs published a historical analysis in *The Journal of Higher Education*, in which she

explains that Western academic librarians and faculty initially shared similar educational backgrounds and perspectives on the library's role, but quickly diverged into separate professional entities, each emphasizing their distinct autonomy, and “stubbornly holding sometimes disparate visions of the library’s mission and communicating very little with each other” (Biggs 1981, 186). Biggs also names this pattern between “scholar-librarian and librarian-assistant” (185) as a root cause for the disconnect between faculty and librarians. Librarians’ identity has always been understood in relation to faculty; more aligned as scholar-librarian for their deep disciplinary knowledge and ability to understand faculty and less so as a distinct profession in service to faculty as “librarian-assistant” performing invisible day-to-day operations (186).

A more contemporary but similar reading of this phenomenon identifies systemic, structural causes linked to the “gendered nature of librarianship... traditional campus hierarchies and cultures that privilege research over teaching roles...and traditional campus roles that separate scholars from service providers (e.g., librarians)” (Julien and Pecoskie 2009, 152). In terms of librarian-faculty instruction partnerships, librarians’ experience is one of “asymmetry” in which librarians are “dependent” on the generosity of faculty “gifting” time for library instruction (152).

Julien and Pecoskie's analysis is promising and seems aligned with our project, however the authors argue that resolving the librarian-faculty conflict is “fundamental to improving information literacy instruction” (152). Our goal is different. We do not seek solidarity among faculty and librarians based on the importance of information literacy. We argue that the framing of information literacy as “crucial” here, and in many other similar articles, underestimates the possibilities for collaboration and elides the question of labour that creates these issues in the first place.

Our goal remains, instead, a feminist one: to foster transformative learning that is research-oriented but also student-directed. We seek to create conditions where students can access the materials of special collections directly and choose which skills they need to develop in order to research the past on their own terms. These skills do not need to directly map onto a broader set of defined standards. Special collections provides a space to enact multiple possibilities for research, especially if approached from a flexible, critical, and equitable stance.

Foregrounding student choice aligned with our shared goal of teaching for justice fostered a collaborative and equitable partnership, decoupled from the issues outlined above that define librarian-faculty partnership. We found our inspiration in the work of Black feminist theorists such as Audre Lorde, June Jordan, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, whose writing helped us to define for

ourselves and our students a praxis that is oriented towards possibilities rather than instantiating norms. For this reason, we emphasize that our approach is site-specific and flexible, reflecting our particular interests and the resources available to us at our institution. We recognize that our outcomes may not be easily replicated; we recognize the important material conditions that shape what is possible for librarian-faculty collaboration, including our own. However, we share the details of what we accomplished in the hope that such specificity could spark a generative starting point for others seeking collaboration in different contexts.

Background and Context

We both work at The George Washington University (GW), a private non-profit R1 institution located in Washington, DC. Leah Richardson is Director of Archives and Special Collections (part of the GW Libraries) and has been at GW for eight years. Holly Dugan is an Associate Professor of English and has been at GW for 18 years. The course discussed here is an upper-level undergraduate English Renaissance literature course working with the rare book collection housed in GW Libraries' Special Collections Research Center. The libraries' rare book collection is modest (~ 60,000 titles) but functions well as a teaching collection. Special Collections has an active instruction program serving around 50 distinct courses over hundreds of sessions each year. The students in the course are predominately (but not exclusively) privileged white women; some are Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary; some are students of color; some are first-generation college students; and many require accommodations that are and are not recognized by the University's Disability Support Services (DSS). Few come with any understanding of what constitutes the Renaissance. Most have had little to no experience handling books older than the twentieth century. For these reasons, emphasizing student choice as a pedagogical approach is also practical: it fosters an inclusive environment, empowering students to become educational advocates for themselves by cultivating an ethos of trust and attention to their different capacities, interests, and personal histories.

Our hope was that shared labour could make this experimental and ambitious approach much more feasible. We met a lot during our first iteration of the course in 2018. This work required a significant upfront investment of our time to refine details based on critical discussions around the course content and assignments, the physical objects/rare books, and the pedagogical potential of the library classroom. Holly was interested in encouraging students to work with rare books even if the titles³ available in the collection were outside the domain of the course focus. Leah was looking to build special collections' instruction program to include more rare book courses, actively seeking faculty to partner with. In particular, Leah sought to find ways to disrupt traditional notions of rare book scholarship, similar to what Amanda Stuckey

3. See the rare book selections for the course here: <https://go.gwu.edu/engl3430books>

achieved in merging disability pedagogy and liberation bibliography in the special collections classroom (Stuckey 2022), but with an explicit attention to librarian and faculty collaboration and labour that makes this type of object-based learning possible.

We lacked specifics initially; we only knew that we wanted to do something bold and honest with the course content, the rare materials, and the physical and metaphorical spaces of the library and the academy. What we were searching for were “new terms for learning,” terms that freed us to “put down and discard the unnecessary in order to pick up that which is necessary” (Alexander 2005, 8). When we expressed and modeled these terms to ourselves and to our students, we found we could easily work to empower them through object-based learning, teaching students how to engage with the materials of the past on their own terms in order to transform the present. Because the initial goal of our partnership was open-ended, we found it was easy to remain positive and focused. Working with the resources we had available to us, resources that are unique to our institution and its idiosyncratic history, we developed assignments that would enable students to engage with historical materials on their own terms and become motivated by their own questions and concerns, political and academic. Their choices inspired us, even when they were, by some definitions, specious. As we’ll discuss below, others far exceeded what we thought was possible, reflecting not only tremendous student research skills but also persuasive critiques of archives, access, and power.

Imagining Faculty-Librarian Solidarity

Our attempt to enact a feminist praxis required acknowledging the overlapping power dynamics embedded in our classroom, including the structures and histories that implicitly and explicitly position librarian and faculty roles in gendered and hierarchical ways. This is not to say that there were no boundaries on our individual roles; Holly was still the instructor of record, but Leah was not limited to only teaching information literacy skills. Essential to this partnership was a reimagining of both of our roles in productive ways especially when those reimaginings supported student-directed learning.

Critical librarianship and critical pedagogy are aligned in that both seek to question established parameters of knowledge creation by cultivating “a conscious effort and interest in looking reflexively at the values, practices, and structures” that define libraries as working and learning environments (Ketchum 2020, 1). Such radical goals, however, are incompatible with the realities of librarian-faculty partnerships in most university library settings. As Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith argue, most learning outcomes in university courses are defined by professors with little input from librarian partners; most are also linked to “skill” development aimed at forming a flexible and contingent workforce (Eisenhower and Smith 2010,

307). Such conditions make librarian-faculty co-teaching challenging and the goals of critical library instruction nearly impossible to achieve (306). Patti Lather, building off Elizabeth Ellsworth's *Teaching Positions* (1997), tackles the impossibility of implementing a critical pedagogy with her "praxis of stuck places" (Lather 1998) which requires an embrace of impossibility as "precisely the task: to situate the experience of impossibility as an enabling site for working" (495). Refusing to accept the bleak reality of our fixed roles as faculty and librarian within the "bureaucratic structures of a corporate university" (Eisenhower and Smith 2010, 306) however accurate⁴ it may be, and inspired by Lather's "praxis of stuck places" we ask: what might an attempt to get *unstuck* require and look like for a librarian-faculty teaching partnership?

Foremost it requires faculty pay closer attention to these conditions and to "the forms of subjectivity [librarians] employ in the classroom" (316). As previously stated, librarians are acutely aware of the specific and material features and impact of the tensions endemic in librarian-faculty teaching partnership. Faculty are less so, which is key to acknowledge. These features almost always revolve around expectations for librarian labour and the boundaries of the librarian role as educator. As such, rather than force into predetermined course learning objectives The Standards (ACRL 2000), Framework for Information Literacy (ACRL 2016), or the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (SAA and ACRL 2018), or having to convince Holly of the "value" of information literacy, we simply rejected an established literacy standards-based approach full stop. This includes analyzing information literacy as a strategy to defend the relevancy of libraries within real and alarming budget cuts in higher education.⁵ Within the "internal economies" of the academy, information literacy is a currency through which librarians gain legitimacy by aligning with the corporate goals of the institution (Nicholson 2021, 101). Information literacy "enabled librarians to define for themselves a teaching location within the academy" (Drabinski 2014, 480). A consequence of this act has bound librarians solely to the domain of information literacy and established a limited range for librarians to be and be seen as educators. Librarians are victims, to some extent, of a self-imposed banishment to the fringes of the "curricular table" (483). The good faith efforts of the information literacy movement to improve the status of librarians has had the opposite effect in many institutions; cementing the place of librarian-educators distinctly apart from and lesser than faculty. We have diminished the identity and power of librarians

4. Smith and Eisenhower's analysis is particularly incisive for our work, as they directly describe working conditions at GW. The problems they name and isolate have only become more pressing since they first published this article in 2010.

5. Recent cuts to West Virginia University's budget demonstrates, in our opinion, the limitations of this approach, especially as it does not address corporate restructuring of universities. Skills will not save our libraries or our academic programs. For more information on the situation unfolding at WVU, see: <https://library.wvu.edu/collections/faq>

as educators in order to make library work legible and valued in the corporate university.

The framing of information literacy skills as “crucial,” and the warning of the potential danger should students not acquire these skills, demonstrates a common short-coming in librarian thinking that undervalues librarianship. At worst, this line of thinking participates in enforcing a corporate approach to learning and the quantification of knowledge in higher education. Not only does such an approach reinforce the idea that students are “library resource consumers,” (Saunders 2013, 145) it also circumscribes the purpose for acquiring such skills, connecting them to corporate norms. Such an approach has been described as reinforcing a carceral logic in higher education, linking the development of academic norms to respectability politics and norms used elsewhere to police communities. The “policing of knowledge production,” even on a syllabus, is linked to a broader “policing” of dissent (Rojas Derazo 2014, 191). That information literacy provides a systematic approach to creating a more well-informed public, better able to identify truth from non-truth, emphasizing “the acquisition of skills over intellectual maturation,” (O’Connor 2009, 80) sets it precisely at odds with a commitment to teach for justice. A pedagogy of possibility urges students to consider more than just the learning objectives and outcomes—to question specific and transferable skills—asking: Whose system? Whose truth? What structures create, sustain, and benefit from the acquisition of these “skills”?

Moreover, our version of a pedagogy of possibility diverges from “critical information literacy” (CIL) insofar as the latter remains bound to an evidentiary/disciplinary paradigm drawn from the social sciences. Though indebted to the important work found within CIL studies, we remain skeptical of evidentiary models as reinforcing hegemonic norms. Instead, we draw upon Black feminist theorists who seek to challenge the instantiation of power in such norms, especially as they are enforced in academic contexts like ours. We want more options for ourselves and our students, including possibilities that emerge through solidarity; a solidarity that importantly “plots a course towards collective self determination” (Alexander 2005, 17). Such paths are not without the rigor that critical information literacy demands, but we seek instead to connect it to an emancipatory project that requires a different kind of accountability to the self and the collective. As Alexander explains, it also requires a “courage” to embrace a “freedom whose texture consists of honesty and discipline” in order “to forge structures of engagement which embrace the fragile and delicate undertaking of revealing the beloved to herself and to one another” (17).

We sought to provide students with an opportunity to connect the materiality of print culture, especially the inherently political nature of books, with the materiality of their own lived experiences, forging connections between the matter of the past

and the realities of the present through research opportunities in special collections. We believe that this objective cannot be articulated or achieved through skills-based benchmarks. Nor could our objectives be achieved without one another; modeling a practice of solidarity with one another was a key component of the course, transforming its objectives and, importantly, its outcomes. Such solidarity begins with a comprehensive understanding of the realities shaping faculty-librarian partnerships (Downey 2016, 129). However, in CIL such an understanding is often used to bolster a call for disciplinary norms (133). Information literacy, even when framed as critical information literacy, tends to downplay the role of students in this process and overemphasize the role of administrative support. Such top-down frameworks, in our opinion, fail to offer transformative possibilities, positioning students as consumers of skills-based learning rather than researchers capable of transformative action.

Reflection-Action-Reflection

The first iteration of this course was in 2018 with three subsequent iterations. Each iteration builds upon the last and we make time to connect before each session to discuss the plan for that day and then again at the end of the session to reflect and make adjustments going forward. For our first iteration of the course, we crafted five library-focused sessions that took place in special collections (see appendices). These lessons were ambitious and provocative, a welcome departure from approaches that Holly and Leah had delivered in the past. The first session was held on the first day of the semester and intentionally met in special collections to highlight the significance of this place, its objects, and its staff to student learning. We decided to eschew the traditional “working with rare books” orientation and intentionally deemphasized “proper handling” of materials so as not to create an atmosphere of stature or surveillance. We displayed a range of manuscripts and books that illustrated major moments in the history of western printing⁶, but the main highlight for this class was the “Blindfold Book Test.”⁷ Designed to illustrate that students already know quite a lot about books and their physical qualities, willing students are blindfolded and handed books from different genres. They are asked to examine the books using all their senses except sight and are asked some questions to help them think about the genre (i.e. “Does this seem like a book you could carry around with you? Is it heavy or light?”). We used a children’s board book, a travel dictionary, a mass-produced paperback novel, a kitchen appliance instruction manual, and a textbook. Most of the students could guess the exact genre of a book based only on its tactical and physical

6. See the rare book selections used in this course here: <https://go.gwu.edu/engl3430books>

7. Credit to Ian Gadd, Professor of English Literature at Bath Spa University for introducing the Blindfold Book Test activity to us.

aspects, demonstrating that they already have an understanding of, and the language to describe, books as physical objects.

In session two, Holly led a brief discussion about the opening of Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* with the goal to invite students to think more deeply about the space in which they find themselves and the functionality of its systems. Pizan's book opens with a dream vision for a new kind of library (Christine 1998, 1). Confronted with misogynist books in her library that do not represent the truth of her experience, Pizan reimagines what a library could be (Christine 1998, 2). Pizan's blueprints for a feminist library are by no means liberatory; she imagines it as an urbane, wealthy, feminine citadel—*une cité des dames*—rather than a utopian common open to all. Yet Pizan's allegorical dream of a library that can reorder power to disrupt a status quo provides us with a useful starting point with a tremendous act of labour, as someone must first clear the field in order to create space for new knowledge (Christine 1998, 16). Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* introduces the creative possibilities for libraries as places of transformative learning, but also the absolutely vital need for a “critical” approach to both librarianship and feminist theory that acknowledges labour and belonging in spaces of learning.

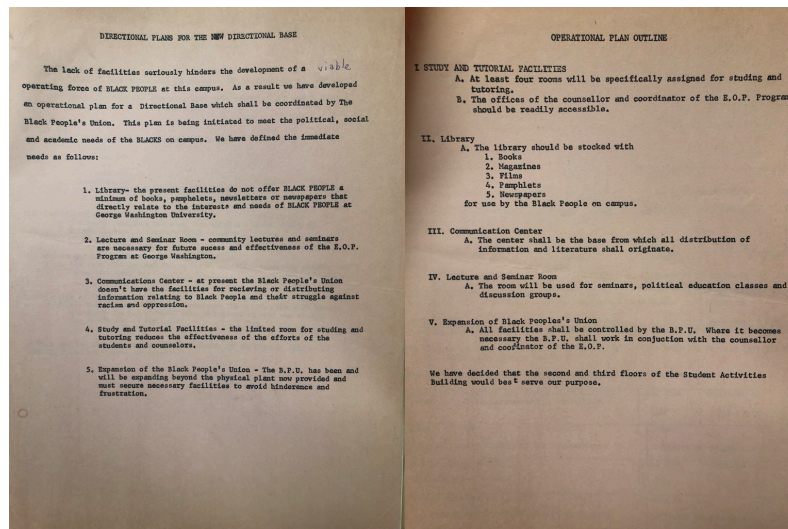


IMAGE 1 Lady Reason clears the field and helps Christine to assemble the city, illustrating an acknowledgement of labour. Image credit: By Master of the City of Ladies - The Yorck Project (2002) 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei (DVD-ROM), distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH. ISBN: 3936122202., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=155105>

From there we invited students to begin active research. We asked them to think about how the adjective “rare” modifies the noun “books” and how this fosters a power relationship between the books and readers. We asked students to consider the space that we were in, where it is located in the library and what they needed to do in order to access it. We then encouraged them to get used to handling the books. Students were given a list of specific elements of early printed books and were tasked with finding examples of these throughout the 15+ books we had selected for this session. This was not a graded assessment and they were not required to find all the

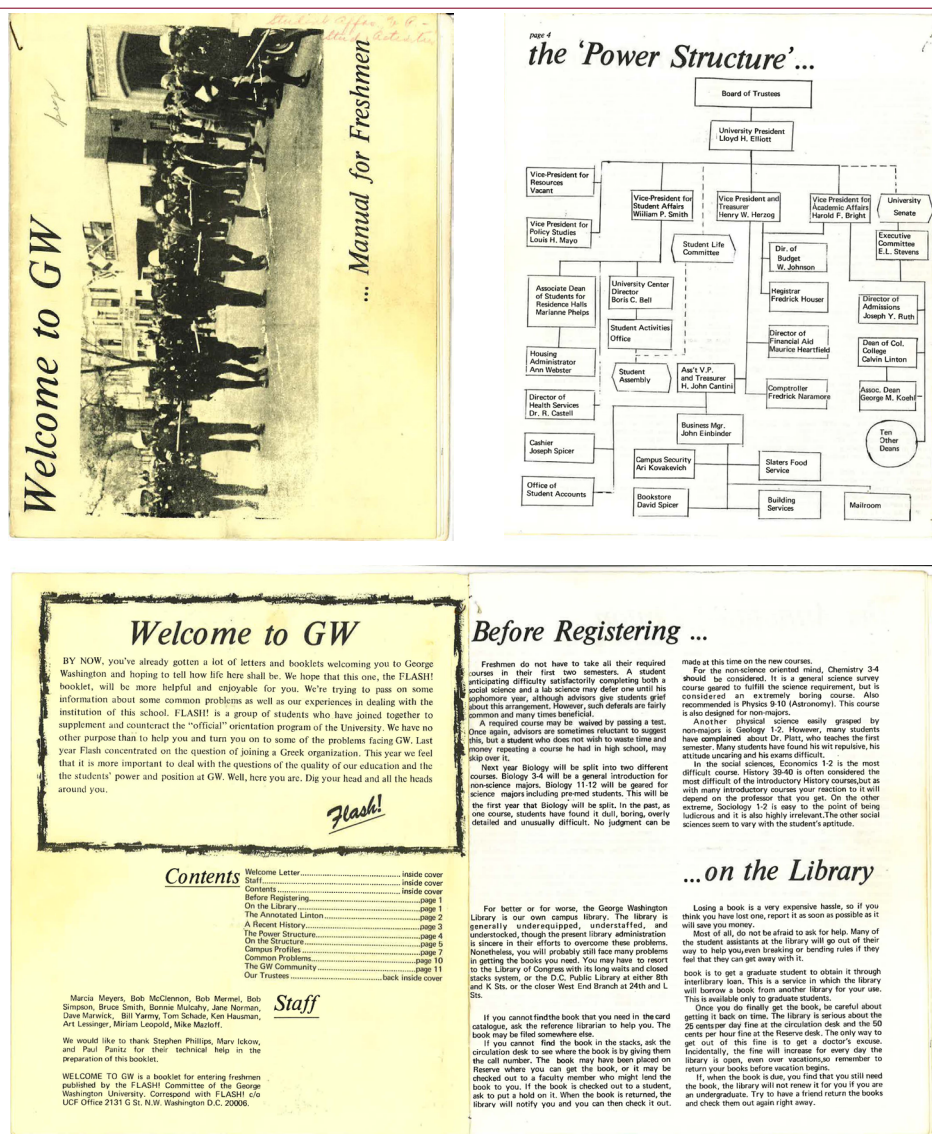
examples. The specific elements were merely scaffolding to help them open the book and turn the pages with purpose and wonder. We encouraged them that they were going to walk away with many more questions than answers. We also reminded them that this will likely be true at the end of the course as well, as these records can only tell certain kinds of histories. Others have been violently excluded or erased and lost through neglect (Fuentes 2016, 1).

The third session focused on the library as an institution, the role of academic libraries, and how academic library collections, including archives, are developed and monitored. It was perhaps our most ambitious session of the course at this point. For this session we vastly expanded our selections to include Nazi-looted books that contained both Nazi stamps and Offenbach Archival Depot⁸ stamps indicating that it had been recovered; a 16th century Inquisition-censored Hebrew prayer book; library acquisition records, some dating back to the early 19th century and others from the last few years from the University Archives, and a number of contemporary bookseller catalogs. We also included materials from the University Archives that speak directly to students and histories of student resistance. These include a document from the late 1960s from the Black Peoples Union that addressed the ways in which the University was failing its Black students (see Images 2 and 3) and a file from the same time period found in the Office of the President's records labeled "Student protests," which contained a student-produced zine of sorts meant to serve as an alternative to the university-published student orientation guide (see Images 4, 5, and 6). These materials demonstrate the importance of special collections as a record of both institutional histories of resistance and of power and authority.



IMAGES 2 & 3 Two page document displayed for students in library session three: "Directional Plans for the New Directional Base," undated, circa late 1960s, Black People's Union, RG0056: GW Multicultural Student Services records, box 1. Special Collections Research Center, GW Libraries.

8. Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) was one of the United States Army's collection points for cultural material that had been looted by the Nazis throughout Europe.



IMAGES 4, 5, & 6 Three images from the student produced publication “Welcome to GW” found in RG0002: GWU Office of the Presidents Records, box 69a, folder 4, Special Collections Research Center, GW Libraries.

In the fourth library session, students learned about information architecture, cataloging and descriptive practices, collection development, and library “neutrality.” The goals for this session were to demonstrate the inherently political and human labour of libraries (O’Connor 2009, 82) and its attendant flaws, in collection development and description. Students looked at specific books from multiple perspectives including their corresponding catalogue records, some in “raw” MARC data format demonstrating how descriptive information morphs in its various instantiations. We showed particularly stark examples of harm in the catalog to illustrate how the ideologies of settler colonialism and indigenous erasure (de Jesus

2014) are part of the architecture of information access through the (mis)application of subject authorities. Students were also shown how to report inappropriate or outdated subject headings or other descriptive elements to be reviewed and remediated by library staff, empowering them to make active contributions to the work of libraries.

In the fifth library session students selected a specific book to use for their book biography assignment. We adapted our assignment from Sarah Werner's syllabus on Books and Early Modern Culture. Werner's assignment asks students to write a "biography" of a book in the collection, studying specific aspects of its history, printers, authors, readers, and collectors (Werner 2014). We drew from this adding two key components: we asked students to synthesize their research findings in a clear and accessible way so that their peers could understand its history and we encouraged them to focus on the parts of the biography that they found most interesting. We scaffolded the assignment to ensure feasibility and emphasized that this was a process-based assignment and that we were asking students to practice new skills. We would reward their initiative and help them develop those skills without a risk of failure. Holly provided comments on the written work and Leah met with students one-on-one to help guide them in their research into provenance and institutional histories; we both helped students in class to trust in and develop their curiosity. The success of the assignment was its emphasis on student choice and empowering students' expertise. Their expertise was derived from their own skills and interests and generated for our classroom community.

Pedagogy of Possibilities

Black feminist pedagogies provide a transformative model that emphasizes agency and choice as a foundational component of resisting not only the corporate campus but also campus policies that police access as well as student attention. Poet and Scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs argues that many of the pedagogical practices developed by Black feminist teachers like Audre Lorde and June Jordan were designed for Black students, who were also "student survivors of internalized imperialism" and police brutality (Gumbs 2014, 239). Gumbs describes this approach as "pedagogical possibilities," (239) offering students other learning options, including the option to "not police themselves towards privilege" (253). We found that phrasing to be especially useful for shaping our own goals for student research. We wanted to equip students with the skills they needed to ask their own questions about power and the past and how both converge in our university library's special collections.

The library—as a location and as a system of resources—can feel liberatory to students and for this reason it can be a powerful site for self-directed research

pathways. Ta-Nehisi Coates describes college classrooms as “a jail of other people’s interests,” whereas “the library was open, unending, free” (Coates 2015, 48). Coates’ emphasis on the library as a symbol of freedom and the classroom as a “jail” became an important ethos for our approach, especially when we connected it directly to our goal of expanding student engagement with special collections. Though we embraced the symbolic freedom of the library as a space of possibility, we tried very hard to push against the idea of the library as the sum of its collection, emphasizing instead that it functions as a system of knowledge created by people, reflecting both their work and values—emancipatory and oppressive. Its history is a history of power and authority and we decided to make this a prominent focus of our course.

To do this, we embraced what M. Jacqui Alexander defines as “palimpsestic” time, an approach to history that connects the past to the present in non-linear ways to foreground the fact that colonialism exists in the here and now as well as in the “then and there” of the past (Alexander 2005, 246). Alexander’s point is about temporality but her invocation of palimpsests as material objects also helped us to define why our location in special collections was an important part of our pedagogy. Palimpsests are pieces of writing that have been repurposed by later readers; in some instances, the original meaning is effaced and replaced with new text. Palimpsests superimpose the present on the past “without insisting on any linear relationship between them” (Harris 2009, 16), and in doing so they function as a visible reminder that books—even rare books—can be remade to meet the demands of new readers. In this way they help to “make visible the ways that ideologies and practices traffic within multiple spheres” (Alexander 2005, 246).

In our experience, special collections functions as a particularly powerful site for learning and activism. Special collections, importantly, is one of the only parts of our library that is open to the public; meeting in this space shifts the terrain in symbolic ways. It also provides a direct link between rare books as objects and as symbolic palimpsests that map institutional investments. Access to special collections materials, without prescriptive guidelines, helps to foster spatial and tangible understandings of power in precisely the ways in which Alexander argues. And, if students choose to do so, it provides an opportunity to practice its tenets in their own research, learning not just basic skills of bibliography but also, potentially, tenets of critical bibliography. Critical bibliography, as Lisa Maruca and Kate Ozment argue, “takes its force and purpose from the possibility of liberation as the outcome of bibliographic work” (Maruca and Ozment 2022, 232). When aligned with student choice and enacted in solidarity with critical librarianship, critical bibliography offers an inspiring and useful set of tools to reframe research. Because students choose which aspect of a book’s history interests them the most, they define which skills are needed to enable them to better understand its history on their own terms.

Some students chose to focus on traditional book history (printing, provenance); some on the social confluences of power written and rewritten on their pages. Others focused on our institution's history, querying how and why these books are part of our library. The palimpsest—as an object, a research provocation, and as a critical method—enabled us to move beyond the transactional skills-based models available to us offering students the option instead to pursue shared, loftier goals, including what Barbara Fister has termed “liberation bibliography” (Fister 2010).

Each student defined for themselves their area of focus. Their choices expanded the boundaries of the course in surprising ways. In their final projects, students explored misogyny and medical history sparked by a sixteenth-century obstetrics manual (Raynalde 1604); animals and environmental history using a seventeenth-century bestiary (Topsell 1664); anti-Jewish history and print culture found in a highly-offensive fragment of a sixteenth-century polemic (Luther 1543); the occluded history of women printers (Topsell 1664; Prynne 1629) and radicalism during the English civil war using a seventeenth-century pamphlet (Prynne 1629); histories of conquest from Renaissance travel narratives (Smith 1629); and the carceral politics of policing in American libraries (Bible 1566). Student research uncovered these facets of the collection and helped to transform its content in ways we could not have anticipated when we began our partnership. Each affirmed our hunch that this approach was worth the effort. The last example, for instance, demonstrates the tremendous potential of the course because we realigned objectives to focus on expanding Black feminist pedagogical possibilities of developing student opportunities for research as resistance.

Black feminist pedagogies emphasize agency and choice as a foundational component of resisting not only the corporate campus but also campus policies that police access to campus as well as student attention. M. Jacqui Alexander advises that “teaching for justice means that we examine the academy as a place of work with its own regimes of labour, its own internal economies” (Alexander 2005, 113). And, as Pauline Gumbs argues, the “public space of the classroom” connects to other public spheres, making clear how its possibilities connect to wider spheres of power: “What can be spoken? What can be heard? What can remain visible?” (Gumbs 2014, 254). Inspired by their arguments, we sought to offer students the opportunity to explore how “big ideas” of power connect to the “small spaces” of the classroom (239) and, in our example, to the library.

The Bible that sparked research on the carceral politics of libraries was first published in the mid-sixteenth century. It is one of the last authorized translations into English before the King James Bible. It's a large folio and it has been taken apart and reassembled. Over the years, many readers have left their marks in it. Most

notable, however, is Greta Gordon's reader's marks: in a bold scrawl, she used the fly leaf and reassembled title page to inscribe her coarse manifesto against the US government and the CIA in ink (see Images 7, 8 and 9).

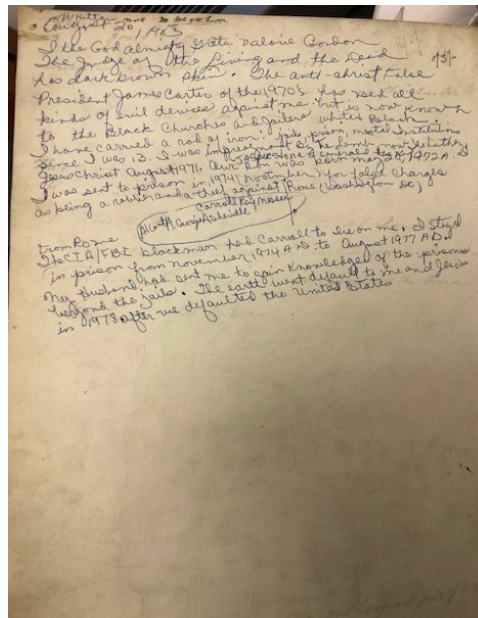


IMAGE 7 Front flyleaf in the Bible with two paragraphs of hand-written words written in ballpoint ink.

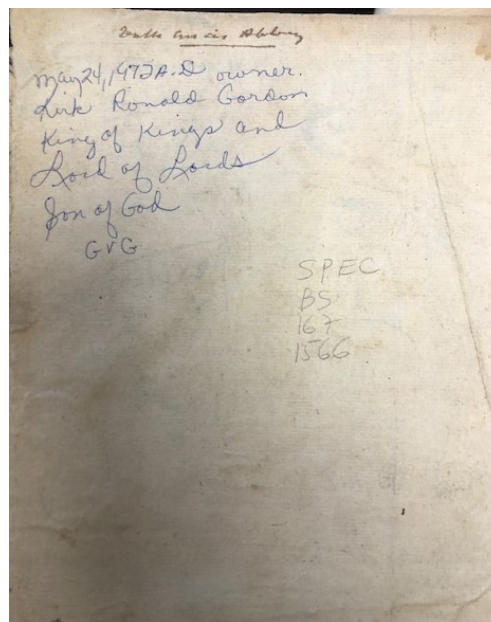


IMAGE 8 Paste down paper on the front cover of the Bible that contains three sets of readers' marks from various moments in its four-hundred year history.

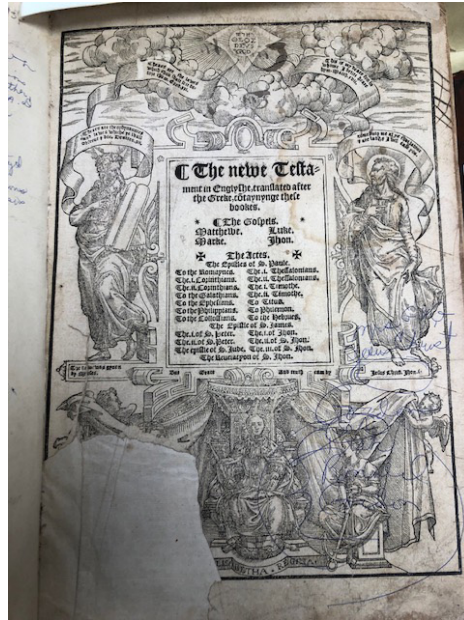


IMAGE 9 Torn and repaired page with readers' marks made with ballpoint and iron ink found on the title page of the 1566 Great Bible.

It's hard to ignore Gordon's writing, but it challenges traditional approaches to teaching book history, especially the idea that one must only ever approach rare books with the goal of leaving no trace upon them. For example, when we showed the Great Bible to other faculty, most were aghast, noting that the ink scrawled over the title page (shown above) seemed to "ruin" the book, even though the copy had already been taken apart and reassembled by a previous owner. At first, we made nervous jokes to one another that at least this didn't happen on our watch. However, emboldened by our partnership and our feminist ethos, we admitted that we, in fact, did not agree with our colleagues' point; this aspect of the book's history was important, and we wanted to know more about it.

Our students were fascinated by it as well, and one used the provenance assignment to explore it further. With Leah's help, the student learned that the Bible was previously part of the Sondley Reference library's collection, a collection of over 40,000 amassed by Foster Alexander Sondley, a scholar and lawyer. Sondley bequeathed the collection to the city of Asheville, North Carolina, provided that it was "to be used only at that place by well conducted white people in proper condition for such use all to be under such reasonable rules and regulations as will best promote the purpose of said Sondley Reference Library" (Sheary 2015).⁹ The Sondley Collection was not displayed to the public until the 1980s. It was then that Gordon,

9. This research was possible because librarians at Buncombe County Special Collections shared this material online and in accessible ways.

an African-American woman, penned her manifesto. The student connected the Bible to radical histories in the Renaissance but also racist histories in the twentieth century, linking it to broader histories of libraries and questions of access (Caputo 2018). He also hypothesized that Gordon was perhaps drawn to the Bible for many of the same reasons other readers in the past were as well: the Great Bible was a symbol of authority and Gordon's writings enacted power, even if most readers dismiss it as delusional (Caputo 2018).

We were greatly inspired by this student's findings, and we became determined to encourage these kinds of projects in future iterations of the class. We built in more time for active research during class in order to ensure that all students felt welcome in the space and had access to the materials. This also gave us more time to work together, which continued to change the dynamic of our librarian-faculty partnership. Since we wanted students to have access to a large range of materials (rather than just the ones we chose to focus on), we worked jointly to set up the book cradles, book weights or snakes, and other supports before class. Shared labour allowed us to chat and bond as well as to tweak our lesson plans in real time. The same was true of the time spent putting the materials away; we could process the class together, share our thoughts about what went well, and course correct for the next session. We could also share the challenges we were facing in other aspects of our jobs, things most faculty members actively ignore when partnering with librarians. Our hope is that our camaraderie and the vulnerability we displayed also provided a different and useful model to students of what a scholarly collaboration and equitable exchange might look like.

We also decided that the students' findings deserved a bigger platform. We held a pop-up book exhibit, offering them a chance to share their findings in an informal Q-and-A format. We did not require students to present their findings but we encouraged them to consider doing so, emphasizing (again) student choice. It was fine to be an audience member for the exhibit and to ask questions for their peers. But we also sought to embrace the spirit of community, inviting others to join us, including our colleagues, friends, and families. Some faculty brought their children, and library workers took breaks to attend and learn from the students. Students invited their friends and roommates. We invited the President, Provost, Dean, and department chairs in order to spotlight the important role of librarians in shaping student research, and to provide our students with an opportunity to speak directly to those in power on campus. The result was a capstone experience that allowed students to present their research—research on the Renaissance but also on transformative social justice goals—to a much wider audience than just us.

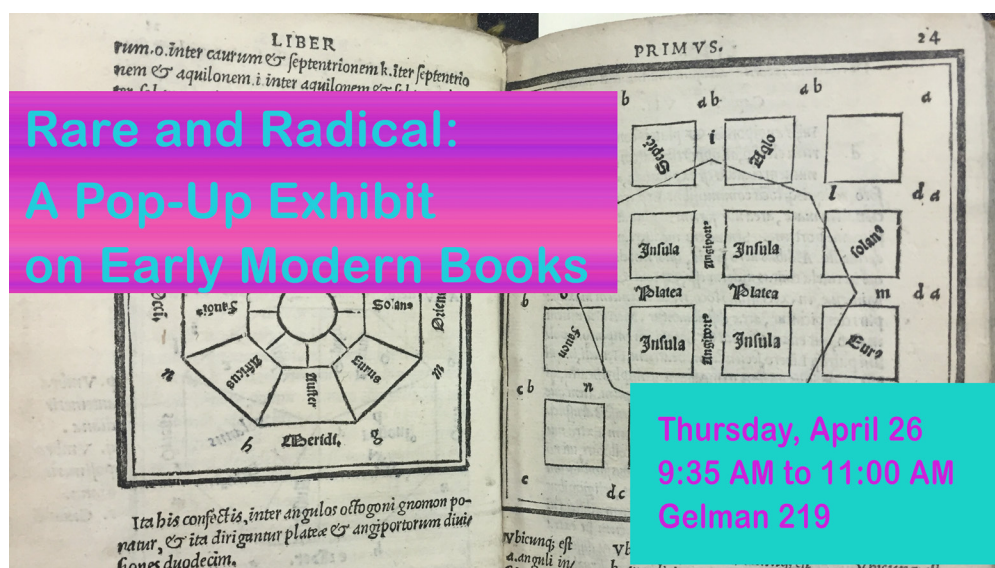


IMAGE 10 Promotional image for the end of semester student-led pop-up event held in the first iteration of the course.

The course ended with an event that celebrates the democratization of authority and a celebration of curiosity, engagement, and critique as an important research outcome in and of itself. While the academic classroom and the library are both defined and shaped by the larger context of the corporate, neoliberal academy, our experience suggests that the library classroom can more readily become a space for “teaching for justice” (Alexander 2005) through a feminist praxis because of its dialectical tension as a site of both struggle and liberation.

Conclusion: Libraries as Critical and Transformational Spaces

These outcomes were possible because our partnership began by examining and rejecting the hierarchies and conditions of isolation common in the neoliberal academy and because our feminist praxis includes principles defined by critical pedagogies and critical librarianship. The Library, as an educational institution, has its roots in the Enlightenment and arises from a desire to create “better citizens” (Bivens-Tatum 2012, 133) better equipped to participate in a liberal democracy. This was and is, however, as nina de jesus argues, a political project that relies on “ideologies and ways of knowing that perpetuate settler colonialism and white supremacy” (de jesus 2014). Libraries are cherished institutions for nurturing a love of books, reading, and knowledge. Libraries are often viewed as sites of freedom of thought and expression, and of personal privacy in those acts, as well as safe spaces that operate outside of a capitalist logic. Libraries are all these things—and they are sites in service to the acquisition and preservation of cultural hegemony in those moments too. Further, de jesus argues, somewhat hopefully, that “libraries,

unlike other institutions of settler states (like the judicial system), have at least some emancipatory potential” (de Jesus 2014). Accessing this hopeful emancipatory potential for de Jesus requires “disrupting the empire’s mechanisms for creating ‘knowledge’ by being more than a repository for imperial knowledge products” (de Jesus 2014).

The emancipatory potential of the library is critical to our pedagogy and praxis. Special collections within a private university may seem an unlikely space to develop a feminist and antiracist praxis. However, in placing institutional archives in conversation with rare books our hope was for students to access a more critical and immediate understanding of their place in history. More importantly, we hoped they would interrogate the structures of power they find themselves in that are dependent upon their enrollment.

When linked to feminist praxis and Black feminist pedagogies of possibility, special collections can challenge the positioning of student research within the 21st-century corporate university. Practiced in this way, the librarian-faculty partnership can become not only a transformative but necessary relationship as we strive to achieve the educational goals that define critical pedagogy and librarianship, especially disrupting racism and white supremacy in institutions of power (including higher education) and encouraging student affinities for transformative social justice. Such work requires continual labour and analysis in order to ensure that these paradigms do not reemerge. Each iteration of the class will present a new set of challenges and we’ll need to continue to adapt in order to navigate them. Moreover, faculty and librarians are but two categories amid a vast landscape of workers in the academy. Liberatory worksites will require solidarity among a broader and more diverse coalition of actors.

Even with this grim analysis foregrounded in much of the scholarship on this topic, we set forth and remain unapologetically hopeful. This radical hope has not changed since we began working together over five years ago and we have found inspiration in one another’s ability to maneuver the tensions that claw at it. To do this requires recognizing different and multiple points of engagement for transformative learning. Our collaboration revealed new ways to work within our institutionally-defined roles and to challenge the hierarchies that frame them; this alone greatly enhanced the course and is the key factor that we encourage other librarians and faculty to seek in their own institutions. Our trust in one another also helped us to embrace a shared feminist ethos to radically expand the horizons of possibility. One that activated the trust and solidarity built through our shared analysis of institutional power and structural isolation. And one that centered student learning in a way that allowed for students to engage in their own analyses of structures of

power. We aspire to bring that same collective energy to the larger, oblique, and overwhelming challenges that define the academic working environment in the twenty-first century.

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Appendix A – Sample Course Schedule with Special Collections Activities

ENGL3430: Radical Books in the Age of Print (English Renaissance)

Class Schedule

Special Collections Materials List: <https://go.gwu.edu/engl3430books>

- T 1/16 Course Introduction: Rare Books & the history of printing
Meet in Special Collections
Session 1: Introduction to Special Collections and Print History
- Folding exercise – folding a boardside into a gathering
 - Blindfold Book Test
 - Examples of materials from major points in Western print history

- Th 1/18 Case Study: John Milton's *Areopagitica* & freedom of the “press”

Beginnings

- T 1/23 Tyndale, Erasmus & Henry VIII

- Th 1/25 *Meet in Special Collections*
Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*
Session 2: Early printers and humanist scholarship
- Practice approaching books as objects of study
 - Working with Rare Books Exercise; identifying parts of a book

- T 1/30 *Meet in Special Collections*
Session 3: Library as Institution
- Building a collection, building a library
 - The physical arrangement of libraries
 - Provenance--using library archives for provenance research
 - Selections from specific named collections; donor agreements, bookseller catalogs

- Th 2/1 Thomas More, *Utopia*

- T 2/6 *Meet in Special Collections*
More, *Utopia*
Session 4: Information Architecture
- MARC data, cataloging standards and practices
 - Problematic subject-headings and reparative description
 - Comparing a book to its catalog record

- Th 2/8 More, *Utopia*

T 2/13	<p>Meet in Special Collections Aemilia Lanyer, <i>Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum</i></p> <p>Session 5: Rare Book Selection for Book Biography Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students select the rare book they will use for final research assignment
Th 2/15	Renaissance Lyric: Wyatt
<i>Order/ structure/ Sequence</i>	
T 2/20	<p>Class held in Special Collections Sonnets-- Philip Sidney, <i>Astrophil & Stella</i></p>
Th 2/22	Sidney, <i>The Defense of Poesy</i>
T 2/27	<p>Class held in Special Collections Edmund Spenser, <i>Faerie Queene</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students continue to work with the rare book they selected for the research assignment
Th 3/1	Spenser, <i>Faerie Queene</i>
<i>Illustrations</i>	
T 3/6	<p>Class held in Special Collections Harriot, <i>Brief and True Report of the Newfoundland of Virginia</i> and Smith, <i>The Generall History of Virginia</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students continue to work with the rare book they will use for final research assignment
Th 3/8	Harriot, <i>Brief and True Report of the Newfoundland of Virginia</i>
T 3/13	No class (spring break)
Th 3/15	No class (spring break)
T 3/20	George Herbert & 17th century lyrics
Th 3/22	Library: Bibliography workshop
<i>Genre</i>	
T 4/3	Francis Bacon, <i>New Atlantis</i>
Th 4/5	Bacon, <i>New Atlantis</i>
T 4/10	Margaret Cavendish, <i>Blazing World</i>
Th 4/12	Cavendish, <i>Blazing World</i>
T 4/17	John Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i>
Th 4/19	Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i>
T 4/24	Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i>
Th 4/26	Last day of class: Wrap Up/ Research Discussions

Appendix B: Course Assignments

Reading Portfolio/ “Renaissance” commonplace book

In this assignment, students keep a record of their reading across the semester. It is comprised of five parts: a short biography of who they are as a reader and writer, 10 short entries (each including a quote, a paragraph reflecting on what drew them to it, and relevant themes), an index of the themes, a self-reflection paragraph assessing the themes, and illustrations of a canto from the *Faerie Queene*.

Writing Portfolio

2 1000-word essays (close-reading analysis of the beginning of *Utopia*, *Book of the City of Ladies*, or *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and one on the ending of *New Atlantis*, *The Blazing World*, or *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*)

Research Portfolio: Four-part research project in which students select a book in GWU’s special collections and learn about its history:

Author: Who caused the book to be written? Do we know who the author is? What other texts did the author write or compile or translate?

Printer: Who caused the book to be first printed? Who provided money? From where did the manuscript come? Was there an ongoing relationship between author and publisher or between publisher and printer? How many copies were printed? What other sorts of books did the publisher publish or the printer print? Who sold the book? Where was the book sold? What other sorts of books were sold there? Was the book sold in the same general location as it was printed? If not, why not?

Readers: Who read or bought the book? How much did it cost? What information do you have about its readers? Were they the intended audience? How popular was the book? Are there signs of contemporaneous readers (i.e., readers who might have been the original owners of the book, or who had the book within the first decade or two of its printing)? How do you know that they’re early readers of the book?

Collectors: What happened to the text after the printing of your book? Were there editions printed after yours? Were they printed by the same stationer or different ones? Are there records of rights changing hands? Did your book have an afterlife either in the early modern period or in later centuries? Are there other works that respond to this book? Are there post Renaissance editions of it? Twentieth or twenty-first-century editions? Are those editions geared toward scholarly readers or to other sorts of audiences? Did the book spread beyond the geographical location of its printing? Are there translations of it?

Book Biography: put all of these pieces together in a way that is succinct, engaging, and accurate, revising with an eye towards highlighting what you think is the most important aspect of its history.

Extra Credit: Pop-Up Book Exhibit (Gelman Library)

We’ll stage and host a book exhibit for the wider GWU audience, showcasing the rare books in Gelman’s special collections. Students will orally present what they’ve learned about each chosen book to a diverse audience.