

LITR 455/ CPLT 567/ SPAN 361/ SPAN 753/ HUMS 161

Columbus to Google:
A Critical History of the Archive

Spring 2025

M/W

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Course Description

Modern libraries and archives cannot be understood without steady reference to the history of European conquest and colonial expansion. In the 21st century, we are as likely to mourn its evident gaps and silences as to rejoice in its feats of accumulation. Scholars today train to read between the lines, against the grain, to mind the gaps, even to critically fabulate in order to be able to reconstruct the lived world and knowledges lost in the wake of European genocide and erasure. Not far from his father's desire to see and own all, Ferdinand Columbus imagined and went out of his way to build a universal library of all that was known and could be known. We begin our course here, at the encounter, when cosmography and bibliography seem to collapse into each other, driven by the Euro-Christian will to conquer. We end in the present, when companies like Google, Microsoft, OpenAI, Clarivate and other specific actors have gained enormous power through their ability to aggregate, index and manipulate massive corpora; now, when the cultural and historical record of humanity has become a hybrid construct, part analog, part digital; but also when so-called generative AI begins to make its hallucinatory contributions to that very record.

Instead of tracing a prefabricated history of libraries and archives, we will revisit key episodes, tropes, ideas and practices from the past 500 years in order to investigate how the de-facto archive of humanity came to be the way it is today. We

will also encourage and hopefully inspire each other to imagine new ways of understanding how the human record is not only a simple byproduct of human activity, but often produces and frames that very activity, helping us connect our historical and theoretical sketches to contemporary concerns: the Anthropocene, the corporate threat to research and education, persistent inequalities, neo-colonialism and more.

Learning Goals

In this course, we hope you will:

- (a) understand and be able to deploy several critical and technical methodologies across disciplines to help you approach archival sources and the archives that hold them as fundamentally constructed structures, shaped by political, social, economic forces throughout history.
- (b) get a broad sense of the history of the institutional cultural and historical record from the Early Modern period until the present.
- (c) imagine ways to improve the structure and extent of today's cultural and historical record, and their relationship to it as burgeoning scholars.

For Graduate Students: Graduate students will have additional readings and a more substantial final assignment in consultation with their particular research interests.

***Important*:** In this course we aspire to be a diverse and inclusive learning community. By sharing our thoughts and questions, by listening with care and with open minds, we will work collaboratively to move past the paralysis that often occurs in well-meaning conversations on politics and controversial social issues. We welcome students of all backgrounds, majors and non-majors, those who have studied subjects in the humanities before and those come to these new subjects with fresh eyes and curious minds.

Texts

Edward Wilson-Lee, *The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books*

Optional for purchase:

Pettegree & Weduwen, *The Library: A Fragile History*

Natalie Zemon-Davis, *Trickster Travels*

All other readings will be made available on Canvas.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Introductions

Mon 13 Jan: Introductions

Readings:

Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my library"

Amitav Ghosh, "My Grandfather's library"

Wed 15 Jan: Tools & Vocabulary

Readings:

Dorothy Berry, [Finding Your Way Through Finding Aids](#)

Michelle Caswell, "[The Archive' is not An Archives](#)"

Selected keywords from the [Dictionary of Archives](#)

Set up Class GoogleDoc of terminology & vocabulary

PART 1: Early Modernity & Global Expansion, 1400-1800

Week 2: Dreams of A Universal Library

no class on Monday (MLK Day) – class meets on FRIDAY

Wed 22 Jan: Collections & Libraries before 1492

Readings:

Andrew Petegree, *The Library: A Fragile History* (selections)

Edward Wilson-Lee, *The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books*

Fri 24 Jan: Readings:

Edward Wilson-Lee, *The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books*

Piazzoni, "The Vatican Library and its Manuscripts"

To Look at:

Parmenio, [Inventory of the Vatican Library] (1518)

Inventory of the Vatican Library under Pope Paul III

Index of Forbidden Books

Week 3: Collecting & The New World

Mon 27 Jan: Indigenous Materials in the Vatican Library
Students will research these materials

Readings:

Díaz & Rodgers, *The Codex Borgia* (selections)

[Getty Digital Florentine Codex](#)

Kimmel, from *The Librarian's Atlas*

Wed 29 Jan: Readings:

Russo, from *The Untranslatable Image*

Russo, from *A New Antiquity*

Bleichmar & Mancall, from *Collecting Across Cultures*

Week 4: Collecting the East

Mon 3 Feb: Near Eastern Manuscripts in the Vatican Library
Students will research these materials

Readings:

Jones, from *Learning Arabic in Renaissance Europe*

Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels* (selections)

Wed 5 Feb: Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels* (selections)

Week 5: The First "Universal Library"

Mon 10 Feb: Conrad Gessner, *Biblioteca Universalis* (Beinecke)

Readings:

Blair, *Too Much to Know* (selections)

Wed 12 Feb: Leibniz on encyclopedias, computation, and libraries

Readings:

Palumbo, "Leibniz as Librarian"

Jones, from *Reckoning with Matter*

PART 2: Nation & Empire, 1800-1945

Week 6: Collecting an Empire

Mon 17 Feb: The British Museum & Library

Readings:

Harris, from *The History of the British Museum Library*
Price, *How to do Things with Books in Victorian England*

Wed 19 Feb: Exploring the Collections

Students will explore objects/catalogues of the BL

Readings:

Rooney, "British Museum, Imperialism & Empire"
McAleer & Mackenzie eds, from *Exhibiting the Empire*

Week 7: The American Dream: Beyond Empire?

Mon 24 Feb: The Library of Congress

Readings:

[History of the LoC](#)

Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson's Library*

Hayes, "The Libraries of Thomas Jefferson"

Wed 26 Feb: Readings:

Cole, "The Library of Congress Becomes a World Library, 1815-2005"

Lee, "The Library of Congress of the United States: An Institutional Trajectory in the Geopolitics of Culture"

Week 8:

Mon 3 Mar: *On Dewey vs LoC Classification systems – what counts and for whom?*

Readings:

Richards, from *The Imperial Archive*

Takehome Mid-term EXAM DUE

Wed 5 Mar: What is bibliography and why does it matter?

Readings:

A Recent History from the [Bibliographical Society of America](#)
Spires, "On Liberation Bibliography"

SPRING RECESS

Week 9:

Mon 24 Mar: Feminist Bibliography

Readings:

Ozment, "Rationale for a Feminist Bibliography"

Eichhorn, from *The Archival Turn in Feminism*

Wed 26 Mar: Black Bibliography

Readings:

Explore the [Black Bibliography Project](#)

Goldsby & McGill, "What is "Black" about Black Bibliography?"

PART 3:

Computation, Neocolonialism, & Digital Futures, 1945-2025

Week 10:

Mon 31 Mar: Origins of Computation and Digital Libraries:

The Legacy of World War II

Readings:

Bush, Vannevar. "[As We May Think](#)." *The Atlantic*, 1 July 1945.

Tenen, Dennis. "[Reading Platforms](#): A Concise History of the Electronic Book."

Sato, Shohei. "'[Operation Legacy](#)': Britain's Destruction and Concealment of Colonial Records Worldwide."

Wed 2 Apr: The Return of the Library of All Things

Readings:

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Congress of the World," "The Aleph"

Marcum, Deanna B., and Roger C. Schonfeld. *Along Came Google: A History of Library Digitization*. (Selections)

Alissa Centivany. "[The Dark History of HathiTrust](#)," in proceedings of the 50th Annual Hawaii International Conference on Systems Science (HICSS '17)

Week 11:

Mon 7 Apr: The Rise of the Knowledge Cartels

Readings:

Larivière, Vincent, et al. "[The Oligopoly of Academic Publishers in the Digital Era](#)." *PLOS ONE*, vol. 10, no. 6, June 2015, p. e0127502. *PLoS Journals*.

Fisher, William. "[A Brief History of Library-Vendor Relations since 1950](#)." *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory*, vol. 17, no. 1, Mar. 1993, pp. 61–69. *ScienceDirect*.

Wed 9 Apr: Documents as Data, Data from Documents

Readings:

Padilla, Thomas, et al. "Always Already Computational: Collections as Data: Final Report." *Copyright, Fair Use, Scholarly Communication, Etc.*, May 2019.

Explore: [\(Un\)Silencing-slavery: Remembering the Enslaved at Rose Hall Plantation, Jamaica](#).

Week 12:

Mon 14 Apr: Decolonization and the archive

Readings:

Risam, Roopika. *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*. (Selections)

Bastian, Jeannette A., et al., editors. *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record: An Archives Reader*. (Selections)

Hicks, Dan. *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. (Selections)

Wed 16 Apr: Community Archives, Pirate Libraries, Alternative Futures

Readings:

Caswell, Michelle, et al. "'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': Community Archives and the Importance of Representation." [Keynote Conversation and Closing Event for Who Owns Black Data? \(March 29, 2024\)](#). www.youtube.com.

Custodians.online, 2015. ['In Solidarity with Library Genesis and Sci-hub'](#).

Hall, G., 2016. *Pirate philosophy: for a digital posthumanities*

Week 13:

Mon 21 Apr: Final Project Workshop #1

Wed 23 Apr: Final Project Workshop #2

Mon 5 May: FINAL ESSAY DUE

Course Policies and Requirements

I. ASSIGNMENTS

A. Three Short Exercises: You will have three short library exercises to complete. These will involve exploring objects in repositories that we will discuss and doing some basic research on their provenance. See schedule for due dates.

B. Shared Lexicon & Vocabulary: We will build a shared lexicon with glosses for important vocabulary and terminology over the course of the semester. You will contribute one entry to it every week: instructions forthcoming!

C. Midterm Exam: There will be a short take home midterm exam that will focus on the concepts, vocabulary, and terminology we learn in this course.

C. Final Project: You may choose to build a sample collections with a robust critical framework (digitally or put together in essay-form): this project will engage with the key themes of the course as you think about what constitutes an archive/collection, how you might reimagine metadata and description, and how you might build an argument for why your collection should be organized in a particular way. A second possibility for your final project is to undertake an analytical project based on the holdings of a large library (either one we have discussed in class or of your choice). Graduate students may choose to do a regular seminar paper of 20-25 pages and must discuss their choice with the instructors.

Requirements for written assignments: All written assignments should be typed in a regular 12-point font, with 1-inch margins, proofread and carefully revised. Sloppy work is a mark of disrespect to all of us and we urge you to avoid it. You will be penalized for persistent technical errors (spelling mistakes, large font, short length etc.) up to a third of a letter grade (i.e. if you would get a B+, you will get a B instead).

II. GRADES

The grading structure for the course is as follows:

Participation: 10%
Shared Lexicon: 10%
Short exercises: 20%
Midterm Exam: 20%
Final Paper/Project: 40%

For an explanation of grades, see “Grading Rubric” (handout and online)

III. CLASS RESOURCES

The Canvas site for this course will contain a number of supplementary materials to help you enrich your understanding of the topic, its key philosophic questions, and major literary responses. Please check the site regularly.

IV. YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

Attendance: This course will rely on lively interchange: therefore attendance and *active* participation are required. This means having read the texts and done the assignments carefully before you come to class, having some specific responses to them that you are willing to share, being sufficiently alert to join in a lively conversation. More than 4 unexcused absences will result in a lower grade for the course. **After 6 absences, you will receive an F.** If you have to miss a class, please email us beforehand to let us know.

Lateness is disruptive and disrespectful to all of us, so please make sure you get to class on time.

Communication: You are required to check your school email. From time to time, we will send out emails to you and the class: you are responsible to ensure that we have the correct email for you!

Meeting with us: We have office hours so that we can talk to you outside of class: come and see us!

V. MISCELLANEOUS POLICIES

Extensions and Late Work: We’d like to get comments back to you as soon as possible, but can only do this if we receive your work promptly. We are not unreasonable, so please email us if circumstances hinder you from finishing an

assignment on time. Do not email us for an extension the night before, unless you have an officially sanctioned excuse or a very creative explanation. Extenuating circumstances we understand and tolerate; procrastination we understand but do not tolerate or encourage. Late assignments will be penalized by a third of a letter grade per day (one day late=highest possible grade of A-; two days late=B+, etc.).

Accessibility Statement:

Your success in this class is important to us. We will all need accommodations because we all learn differently. If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or that form barriers to your inclusion, please let us know as soon as possible. Together we'll develop strategies that can enable you to succeed in the course. We encourage you to visit [Student Accessibility Services](#) to determine how you could improve your learning as well. If you need official accommodations, you have a right to have these met. There is also a range of resources on campus, including the [Writing Center](#), [Residential College Tutors](#), and [Academic Strategies](#).

Plagiarism: Yale considers plagiarism, or academic dishonesty of any kind, a serious offense. To us, it is the worst offense you can commit in an academic context: it is disrespectful not only to your source, but to your own intellectual integrity. Forms of plagiarism include submitting papers, or portions of papers, written by other people as your own, as well as presenting someone else's ideas as your own without acknowledging the source. You are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty and avoiding it. We encourage you to review the following resources so that you understand what exactly constitutes plagiarism – when in doubt, or if you have questions, don't hesitate to talk to us or your TA: <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism>
<http://hnn.us/articles/514.html>

Always acknowledge the work of others — doing so does not diminish your work, it enhances it.

University Policies: We respect and uphold University policies and regulations pertaining to the observance of religious holidays; assistance available to the physically challenged, visually and/or hearing impaired student; plagiarism; and harassment or discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, national or ethnic origin, gender, sexual or affectional orientation, age or handicap, or any other basis for prejudicial treatment. We urge you to become familiar with the respective University regulations and to bring any questions or concerns to our attention.