

Critical Librarianship for Special Collections

An Open Educational Resource (OER) for Special Collections Instructional Librarians

Target audience: This discussion can be adapted to any audience, but its target audience is higher education undergraduate and graduate students. This exercise targets students who are interested in pursuing archival research for their own work or who are studying Library and Information Studies.

Classroom topics: Special Collections Libraries, Provenance, Ownership, Collecting, Capitalism and Value, Power Structures, Institutions, Memory and History, Hidden Collections, Critical Librarianship

Learning Outcomes: Students will engage in a thought-provoking discussion about the nature of Special Collections including how they came about and what values they represent. Students will be asked to think critically about the role of libraries and cultural heritage collections, and how they might operate within these collections are researchers.

Optional Readings to Assign in Advance:

- Jonathan Cope. "Four Theses for Critical Library and Information Studies: A Manifesto." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(1), 2017. <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.30>
- Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, T-Kay Sangwand. "Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(2), 2017. <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.50>
- Eamon C. Tewell. "The practice and promise of critical information literacy: Academic librarians' involvement in critical library instruction." *College & Research Libraries*, 79(1), 2018. <https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/16616/18453>
- Kimberly Anne Coles, Kim F. Hall, and Ayanna Thompson. "[BlacKKKShakespearean: A Call to Action for Medieval and Early Modern Studies.](https://profession.mla.org/blackkkshakespearean-a-call-to-action-for-medieval-and-early-modern-studies/)" *MLA Profession*. <https://profession.mla.org/blackkkshakespearean-a-call-to-action-for-medieval-and-early-modern-studies/>

- M. Rambaran-Olm. "[Anglo-Saxon Studies \[Early English Studies\], Academia and White Supremacy.](https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3)" Medium.com, June 27, 2018.
<https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3>

Part I. Introduction “Special Collections” to either Brand New or Experienced Users

Learning Goals: The purpose of this discussion is to get students to think about and to articulate what they think a Special Collections Library is and what values we assign to it. Get students thinking through discussion prompts, and as they come up with observations, write key words on the board.

What is a Special Collections library and how does it differ from other library holdings?

What items belong in a Special Collections Library and what items do not belong there?

Who is a Special Collections Library for? Who is it not for?

How did these items arrive in this collection? Who first collected them, and how were they transferred here? Does this history of the item’s ownership (known as provenance) matter to the study of the item itself? Why or why not?

How do you think issues of Social Justice, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion play out in Special Collections Librarianship? Do you think these topics are relevant to Special Collections research, or not?

What is the role of Special Collections Librarians? What is the Special Collections Librarian’s responsibilities for the materials themselves? What is the Special Collections Librarian’s responsibilities for the users of those materials?

Advanced Discussion Topic: Discuss the Special Collections Reading Room. What is the typical process for a researcher to view an item in a Special Collections library? Let’s think about access and control. How does the reading room

communicate power structures? How does the reading room enact power and control? Who has the authority in the Special Collections Reading Room?

Part II. Interpret/Discuss Quotations for Advanced Seminar

Discussion

This exercise works well in small groups following a larger introductory discussion. If students were assigned these readings as homework, then they will be better prepared to discuss these quotations. However, the quotations should function fine on their own to elicit discussion, even if the student hasn't read the full article.

“The future of special collections is disintermediation. Committing to openness necessarily entails what may instinctually feel like a loss of control. As our collections become increasingly shareable, they become increasingly unmoored from the organizational and interpretive contexts we have carefully constructed for them. These contexts have great value, constituting one of the most important parts of our work as special collections librarians. It would be more productive, however, not to mourn our loss of control, but to celebrate the empowerment of users.” John Overholt, “Five Theses on the Future of Special Collections,” 2013.

“Historically, Early English studies was perceived, taught and studied within an Empirical framework which most often created an implicit bias surrounding ‘British’ origins. The perpetuated false narrative continues to prevent students of color from connecting with the texts, and in short, drives away both students and scholars of color — people who, like me, grow tired of constantly being asked to justify their existence in a field assumed to belong to white people. ...Early English Studies is a beautiful field, with both linguistic and contemporary relevance. It furthers our understanding of human history, allows us to draw parallels and highlight differences between areas around the globe, and helps explain today's world. And yet it finds itself in a diminished position, applauded increasingly by white nationalists. The field need not reinvent the material, but we need to change. What can we do as scholars to reinvigorate the field?” -M. Rambaran-Olm, “Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia and White Supremacy,” 2018.

“The vision of the ideologically neutral library should be consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history. The argument that—particularly in 2015—a social subject can operate in the world—particularly in a professional/occupational setting—and not be

shaped ideologically by larger social forces is difficult to sustain. Every decision made by a librarian to include or exclude an item from a collection, every interaction with a patron, every managerial policy written, is shaped by innumerable social forces. The belief that a professional could operate in some kind of strictly value neutral way contradicts common sense and history. Library collections should strive to be ideologically diverse, but the ideal of strict value neutrality is difficult to justify because librarians should be aware of the values that underlie the profession.” -Jonathan Cope, “Four Theses for Critical Library and Information Studies: A Manifesto,” 2017

“At its core, critical theory gives us an analysis of power in all its forms that is crucial to understanding the context of record creation, of archival functions, of the formation of archival institutions, of archival outreach and use and advocacy, of who becomes archivists and how and why, and of how we define and teach and practice core concepts. We know that power permeates every aspect of the archival endeavor, that the archive “is the very possibility of politics” to quote Verne Harris, that there is no neutral in archives.⁶Critical theory is crucial for understanding this power --how it operates, through whom, and why --and for building new archival practices that liberate human potential rather than oppress it based on categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability.” -Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, Eds. “Critical Archive Studies,” 2017.

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Instructor: _____

Class & Date: _____

1. What is a Special Collections library and how does it differ from other library holdings?
2. What items belong in a Special Collections Library and what items do not belong there?
3. Who is a Special Collections Library for? Who is it not for?
4. How did these items arrive in this collection?
 - a) Who first collected them, and how were they transferred here?
 - b) Does this history of the item's ownership (known as provenance) matter to the study of the item itself? Why or why not?
5. How do you think issues of Social Justice, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion play out in Special Collections Librarianship?
 - a) Do you think these topics are relevant to Special Collections research, or not?
6. What is the role of Special Collections Librarians?
 - a) What is the Special Collections Librarian's responsibilities for the materials themselves?
 - b) What is the Special Collections Librarian's responsibilities for the users of those materials?

Advanced Discussion Topic: Discuss the Special Collections Reading Room. First, summarize the typical process for a researcher to view an item in a Special Collections library. Let's think about access and control.

- How does the reading room communicate power structures?
- How does the reading room enact power and control?
- Who has the authority in the Special Collections Reading Room?

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- II. “Historically, Early English studies was perceived, taught and studied within an Empirical framework which most often created an implicit bias surrounding ‘British’ origins. The perpetuated false narrative continues to prevent students of color from connecting with the texts, and in short, drives away both students and scholars of color — people who, like me, grow tired of constantly being asked to justify their existence in a field assumed to belong to white people. ...Early English Studies is a beautiful field, with both linguistic and contemporary relevance. It furthers our understanding of human history, allows us to draw parallels and highlight differences between areas around the globe, and helps explain today’s world. And yet it finds itself in a diminished position, applauded increasingly by white nationalists. The field need not reinvent the material, but we need to change. What can we do as scholars to reinvigorate the field?”

M. Rambaran-Olm, “Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia and White Supremacy,” 2018.

III. “The vision of the ideologically neutral library should be consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history. The argument that—particularly in 2015—a social subject can operate in the world—particularly in a professional/occupational setting—and not be shaped ideologically by larger social forces is difficult to sustain. Every decision made by a librarian to include or exclude an item from a collection, every interaction with a patron, every managerial policy written, is shaped by innumerable social forces. The belief that a professional could operate in some kind of strictly value neutral way contradicts common sense and history. Library collections should strive to be ideologically diverse, but the ideal of strict value neutrality is difficult to justify because librarians should be aware of the values that underlie the profession.”

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IV. “At its core, critical theory gives us an analysis of power in all its forms that is crucial to understanding the context of record creation, of archival functions, of the formation of archival institutions, of archival outreach and use and advocacy, of who becomes archivists and how and why, and of how we define and teach and practice core concepts. We know that power permeates every aspect of the archival endeavor, that the archive “is the very possibility of politics” to quote Verne Harris, that there is no neutral in archives.⁶Critical theory is crucial for understanding this power --how it operates, through whom, and why --and for building new archival practices that liberate human potential rather than oppress it based on categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability.”

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