The Archive in the Early American Literature Classroom: Techniques, Exercises, and Assignments
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Abstract: This essay explores a number of strategies for using the archive in the American literature classroom. It begins by detailing an opening day use of archival materials that sets the tone for all of the following classes. Then, it explains the idea behind “the paratext”—anything not included in the text proper—and shows how instructors can provide students with important insight into the material functions of literary work by paying close attention to paratextual elements. In particular, it focuses on the title pages of Mary Rowlandson’s 1682 captivity narrative, showing how the printers and publishers of her work conditioned their readers before Rowlandson’s own voice even appears. The essay moves on to describe how the archive can best be utilized in small group formats, specifically during discussions of abolition and antislavery. Finally, the essay concludes by revealing the logic and structure of an archive-based essay assignment. Throughout, it offers detailed information regarding various archives that may be of use to other instructors of early American literature and culture.

As a print culture historian of early America, it is my contention that the archive is an indispensable tool in the teaching of any pre-1865 American Literature class. With the advent of digitized databases like the Archive of Americana’s Historical Imprints Series, America’s Historical Newspapers, and a multitude of others, archival materials from the Puritan era to the commencement of the Civil War are now more accessible than ever—a development that demands the attention of every teacher of early American literature and culture. But how do we integrate the archive into our classrooms, where pedagogical focus has long been placed on the close reading of important textual passages? How do we bolster our lectures with archival evidences? How do we design small group activities that are both useful and efficient for an exploration of the archive? How do we author effective archive-based writing assignments? How do we teach students to build analytical bridges between a work’s content and its materiality? How do we even begin to describe to our students that texts have an aesthetic when they are asked to read out of enormous anthological tomes? In this essay, I offer answers to these questions and many others, all of which are steeped in my teaching experiences at both large research universities and small liberal arts colleges.
No matter what form an American literature class might take—survey, seminar, lecture, century-specific, theme-dominant, or otherwise—the archive electrifies the classroom. As such, opening day exercises that foreground the relevance of archival artifacts to the subject matter at hand are of paramount importance: when done properly, they set the tone for every subsequent class. Often, professors treat Day One as a "getting to know you" time and space, encouraging students to share their personal stories and backgrounds with one another. These activities are usually followed up by a review of the syllabus and a discussion relating to the overarching goals and theses of the class. I do not mean to downplay the efficacy or meaningfulness of this approach; I have seen it work quite well, in fact. But I always begin my American literature classes with archival exercises—ones that are meant to lay the foundation for my courses and send a direct message to my students: texts are objects, artifacts, and real things, too.

When I teach the classic early American literature survey, I arrive in the classroom twenty to thirty minutes before the commencement of class, load up a PowerPoint presentation, and place a slide on the screen with side-by-side images of John White's *An Indian Werowance or Chief* (1585) (fig. 1) and the subsequent Theodor de Bry engraving of
White's 1590 painting (fig. 2). I then depart the classroom and return at the onset of class. The effect on students is often dramatic: when they arrive, they are immediately faced by these two similar, but ever-so different, representations of a native body. It is both a shocking experience and an uncanny one. As Sigmund Freud says, "We can only say that what is novel can easily become frightening but not by any means all. Something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny" (2). And that's exactly the kind of reaction that de Bry's slight variations produce. Consider the difference in the depiction of the bodies. De Bry adds a musculature to the chief that is reminiscent of classical sculpture and of that created during the Italian Renaissance—a strategy meant to Westernize the native North American body. It is a subtle change, rendering the engraving unfamiliar, uncanny, even uncomfortable. I then ask the class: "why does de Bry do this?"

After fielding answers from students, I begin to gesture toward my main point: the cheap reproducibility of engravings versus the outrageous expense of purchasing original watercolor paintings allowed de Bry to bring images of the people and places of North America to many Old World audiences for the first time. Published and sold by de Bry in an illustrated edition of Thomas Harriot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, the engraving versions of White's original artwork reached the eyes of many Europeans, who had heard much talk of this new land and all that it had to offer, but had yet to see any visual representations of it. As a savvy businessman who sought to increase his sales, and as a well-traveled man who maintained a fascination with strange and exotic locales, de Bry actually used the circulation of this archival artifact to increase interest in the New World. Accordingly, de Bry altered White's originals in order to make the native peoples more recognizable, even more "noble," to his European audience, going so far as to transform native bodies into idealized Greek heroes. I go on to argue that de Bry's attempts were quite successful, that thousands of people were inspired by his work and set sail for a new land, one that they believed was teeming with fish, wild game, and a

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1 By evacuating myself from the arena during these crucial minutes I am able to direct attention to where it belongs: on the historical subjects that our class will investigate together, not on myself.
2 Ideally, I shape my responses to student questions in such a way as to suggest that they were the ones who came to the so-called "correct answer." This strategy helps increase their feeling of ownership and investment in the class.
fascinating new food called maize. Often, I will pause and let this fact sink in, only to pivot toward this important and indispensable point: "It was an archival object, a simple book with engravings, that helped spur European colonization of the New World, an historical phenomenon that led to the establishment of a nation we now call the United States of America." Or, as I more cheekily claim, "It was the archive that started it all, people!"

When I cover Puritan literature, whether in the survey or as a separate seminar, I incorporate archive-based exercises into almost all of my classes. Many of these classroom practices focus on the paratext—those enigmatic images, titles, names, etc. that surround a text proper. Typically, I will assign Gérard Genette's seminal article "Introduction to the Paratext" early in the seminar or during the Puritan Unit (if the class is a survey) to help students better grasp the meaning of this key concept. For the sake of my readership, I will excerpt a brief passage from Genette here, as well. As he writes,

The literary work consists, exhaustively or essentially, of a text, that is to say (a very minimal definition) in a more or less lengthy sequence of verbal utterances more or less containing meaning. But this text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions, themselves verbal or not, like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. One does not always know if one should consider that they belong to the text or not, but in any case they surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its "reception" and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book. This accompaniment, of varying size and style, constitutes what I once christened elsewhere, in conformity with the frequently ambiguous meaning of this prefix in French—consider, I said, adjectives like parafiscal or paramilitary—the paratext of the work. (261)

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3 Without doubt, de Bry exploited the anger many had toward the restrictive hunting and fishing laws of Europe.
Paratexts are therefore the domain of the printer and publisher, those individuals who seek to "present" the work to audiences. Often, authors themselves were removed from the process of the paratextual presentation of their works. Paratextual elements thus reveal how the producers of print, often acting as gatekeepers and upholders of a given culture, self-consciously framed and mediated literary work. It is therefore my contention that detailed analysis of paratexts fosters insight into the biases, judgments, feelings, beliefs, and moral codes of past peoples and societies.

Within the Puritan context and period, Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative provides perhaps the best terrain for paratextual analysis. In my classes, we focus primarily on the many different title pages of Rowlandson's narrative, with each one revealing the different concerns, anxieties, and motivations that printers of the text brought to their readers. When lecturing on this topic, I develop a presentation that shows contrasting images of the American and British title pages of her original 1682 work (figs. 3-5). I then walk away from the podium, and solicit student analyses and questions relating to the
documents, all while moving around the room. Normally, students will notice the different titles first. On the British title page, Rowlandson's narrative is titled *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, A Minister's Wife in New-England*; meanwhile, the American version presents the work as *The Soveraignty and Goodness of God, Together with The Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. I ask students to contemplate this dramatic difference in the titles.

What is soon revealed are the specific concerns of the two different places and cultures. For the reading audience in England, Rowlandson's text becomes an exotic tale of a white woman held captive amongst savage natives. It is exciting, titillating even. English readers hungry for news from the New World find in Rowlandson's story adventure; for them, it is entertainment. However, students often note the privileging of God in the title from the American version. For Puritan readers, Rowlandson's ordeal was a perfect example of God's goodness and awful power (his sovereignty). I then encourage students to see how the same exact story was thought of and received differently by these two disparate audiences. Texts are like magnets, I tell them. They attract meaning.

I further this important lesson by next showing students the title page of a reprinted edition of Rowlandson's captivity narrative from the American Revolution era. Usually, the first thing students notice is the image of Rowlandson pointing a rifle at a group of tomahawk-wielding Indians who are approaching her home. Of course, Rowlandson never fired a gun at any of King Philip's men (quite the opposite, actually: she was shot). I ask students why the printer of this later version of Rowlandson's story would have included such a picture. Often, students intuit the answer: in the midst of a budding revolution, Americans shaped Rowlandson into an image of themselves—a fighter against tyranny and invasion. Some students even note the very British-like appearance of the depicted Indians.

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4 Such techniques demonstrate to students, either consciously or subconsciously, that I am in control of the material, that I do not need a script, and that I am intellectually flexible enough to respond to anything they might throw at me.
Beyond its efficacy as a driver of lecture and discussion, the archive in the American literature classroom is ideally suited for group work. One of my most successful group activities is structured around Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* and his Philadelphia-based newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. But before diving into an exploration of these texts, I present the class with the following excerpt from Franklin's *Autobiography*:

Our first papers made a quite different appearance from any before in the province; a better type, and better printed; but some spirited remarks of my writing, on the dispute then going on between Governor Burnet and the Massachusetts Assembly, struck the principal people, occasioned the paper and the manager of it to be much talk'd of, and in a few weeks brought them all to be our subscribers. Their example was follow'd by many, and our number went on growing continually. This was one of the first good effects of my having learnt a little to scribble; another was, that the leading men, seeing a newspaper now in the hands of one who could also handle a pen, thought it convenient to oblige and encourage me. Bradford still printed the votes, and laws, and other publick business. He had printed an address of the House to the governor, in a coarse, blundering manner, we reprinted it elegantly and correctly, and sent one to every member. They were sensible of the difference: it strengthened the hands of our friends in the House, and they voted us their printers for the year ensuing. (521)

Here students see Franklin revealing his shrewd business acumen. In order to bolster sales for his fledgling printing business, he reprinted a governmental document in a far more orderly and beautiful manner than his competitor and then sent his superior copy to all members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, for free. After making this point, I next encourage students to recognize Franklin's actual printing skills. For example, we explore

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5 Group activities work best in smaller classroom environments. At liberal arts institutions, class size is usually conducive to these types of learning exercises. At larger institutions that feature large lecture classes, group work can be subordinated to recitations and be overseen by teaching assistants.
how he was a master arranger of font and text, one who paid careful attention to aesthetic
details that he knew made his printed materials far more pleasing to the eye of potential
readers (and purchasers). We also note that he was fanatical about eliminating errors. And
finally, we talk through the advantages that his writing abilities lent his printing business—
even if a pamphlet was elegantly printed, no one would want to read it if it was not
entertaining. Franklin excelled at all of the above.

Once students internalize this information, I break the class into several groups of
four or five and assign each one a different digitized edition of Poor Richard's or the
Gazette. I ask each group to spend about twenty minutes paging through their designated
material, looking for examples of Franklin's editorial, written, and aesthetic abilities. While
they are engaged in this process of exploration, I spend time with all of the groups, listening
to their observations and pointing out things they might have missed. As the end of our
session draws close, I require the groups to deliver brief presentations on their discoveries
to the rest of the class. This hands-on engagement with Franklin's archival materials
provides students with a window into what it was like to be a reader, writer, or printer in the
American eighteenth century, it furthers my overarching approach to Franklin himself, and it
once again reiterates the message that texts are living, breathing entities, not just stale
reprintings in anthological collections.

I also utilize these two strategies—class-based exploration of paratexts and archive-
based group work—when I cover abolition and other reform groups. It perhaps goes
without saying that these were exceptionally literary movements; indeed, the effort to end
slavery and promote equality amongst the nation's disparate races, genders, and classes
was fought out in print. It is thus vitally important to instruct this arena of American literature
with the archive close at hand. A student simply cannot appreciate or understand the effect
of an abolitionist broadside, for instance, without seeing how it was actually arranged on the

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6 I have found that any of edition of Poor Richard's works well for this activity. However, I tend to choose
specific Gazette editions that feature something unique in the history of the Pennsylvania colony. One
such example is the May 9th, 1754 edition, in which Franklin includes his famous "Join or Die" snake image.

7 This is also an effective strategy for drawing out shier students who perhaps find class discussion too
intimidating.

8 I do this regardless of whether I am teaching an early American survey course or a seminar on African-
American literature and culture.
page. As such, I expose students to as many archival materials from this period as time allows.

I often begin by creating a PowerPoint slide with side-by-side images of Olaudah Equiano's frontispiece to his *Interesting Narrative* and a painting of himself he commissioned later in his life. We usually start with the frontispiece, which portrays Equiano dressed in upper-class finery holding a Bible that is open to the book of Acts. I ask students why he looks this way and who might be responsible for the representation. Students tend to guess correctly that the image was created by the publisher, printer, or disseminator of the *Narrative*. I then steer the class conversation toward the clothes and the book, encouraging students to discover that these elements make Equiano look less exotic—and less black—than he otherwise would have appeared. He has been molded to look more acceptable to the predominantly white reading audience that will purchase his book. The Bible demonstrates both his religiosity and his literacy; in an era when most people with black skin could not read, the image of Equiano shows us that he, in fact, is literate. That the book is the Bible further disarms any potential distrust or skepticism about his character. I then strongly emphasize that all of this happens before readers even see the first word of his text. They have been conditioned—much like Equiano himself—by a white editor.
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After establishing the power and control of those outside forces, we compare the frontispiece to the portrait of Equiano. Students often immediately note the difference in the noses. In the portrait, Equiano's nose is wider and larger; in the frontispiece, it is made more aquiline, straight. I explain to the class that what we are witnessing is the further de-Africanization or de-blacking of Equiano. The portrait, controlled by Equiano, is the more realistic representation of the man and thus includes all of his facial features. The frontispiece, however, edits his body in order to further the goal of acclimating Equiano's white readership to the fact they are consuming a book written by a former slave. I argue that this is a sneaky and nefarious tactic, one that we should be critical of, even today.

Finally, I utilize group work near the end of any abolition/antislavery section of a course. In it, I separate the class into small units and assign each one either an edition of William Lloyd Garrison's The Liberator, Frederick Douglass's The North Star, or a compilation of textual imagery related to the abolition movement. Like with the above-mentioned group exercise, I require each unit to produce a short presentation on their artifact to deliver to the class near the end of the session. This strategy allows for the students to learn about the objects they did not directly analyze, thereby facilitating the acquisition of knowledge for the entire class.

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9 I also perform this exercise with the frontispiece to Phillis Wheatley's collection of poetry and a later portrait commissioned by her. In the frontispiece, we see Wheatley dressed in the clothing of a domestic maid. She is seated at a desk and she is in the act of writing, with one hand on a quill pen and the other on her chin (in the classic thinker's position). Around the outside of the oval image are the words "Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston." I first mention that she was a slave, not a servant. We then discuss why the white editor made the change (to ignore the harsh reality of her situation). After establishing that important piece of information, we examine Wheatley herself: she is chaste, she is literate, and she is capable of deep thought. Again, I argue that this construction was meant to ease questions of authenticity and to de-Africanize her for the white readers that happened to purchase her book (or were thinking of buying it). The class then compares the frontispiece to the painting of Wheatley, in which they quickly notice the prominent display of her upper torso. When given the chance, Wheatley emphasized her sexuality and her role as a black woman in American society. She also chose to wear pearls, a symbol of her financial stability in the aftermath of her manumission.

10 I find it useful to perform the Equiano and Wheatley exercises on the same day, back-to-back.

11 I use the May 30th, 1845 edition of The Liberator because it contains excerpts from the yet-unpublished autobiography of Frederick Douglass. This allows students to see how Douglass's Narrative was hyped and marketed in advance of its publication. Since this exercise usually follows students' reading of Douglass, it provides them with further understanding of his text's history and function in the real world.

12 Examples include but are not limited to posters advertising lectures by ex-slaves, the famous cross-cut depiction of a slave ship, the seal of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery in England, otherwise known as the "Am I Not A Man Or A Brother" image, the title page to Frederick Douglass's A Narrative of the Life, and many others.
By means of conclusion, I would like to describe an archive-based essay assignment that I require in my surveys of early American literature. In the past, I have downloaded digital copies of nearly twenty texts from the Evans Early American Imprint Collection. I chose a wide variety of materials, including early American erotica, a slave narrative, an obituary, a last will and testament, an antislavery poem, a book of military tactics, a cookbook, campaign literature, the New England Primer, miscellaneous children’s literature, and much more. Students are then charged with selecting a single archive and authoring a roughly 1,500 word essay about it.

Ideally, this assignment functions as an extension of the analytical archive exercises I have detailed in the above paragraphs. As such, I require students to explore not only what their chosen archive says (its content), but also what it looks like (its aesthetic). As they work to produce detailed descriptions of their objects, I encourage students to search for any contextual clues they may be able to find regarding the text’s printers, authors, places of publication, and their reception histories. This type of research helps introduce students to the strategies employed by print culture historians and other scholars interested in the history of the book more generally. It also provides them with an opportunity to produce heretofore new knowledge about esoteric American texts. Indeed, this particular essay assignment is likely to facilitate intellectual discovery precisely because the vast majority of the texts have not been given serious consideration by scholars of early American literature and culture. Although it is difficult to quantify—or even qualify—the effect that making a thrilling new discovery has on students, I believe firmly that it is a quite powerful and transformational accomplishment.

As I have endeavored to show in this article, the archive can be an indispensable tool in American literature classes. It fosters connections between the material world and the practices of reading and writing, it lays bare the social and cultural considerations that lurk behind the publication of literary texts, and it offers students a unique, hands-on experience whilst in the classroom. As instructors of American letters and the cultures they

13 This assignment is an adaptation of one given by Dr. Thomas Augst of New York University, who first exposed me to this strategy in 2009.
14 An alternative version of this assignment could allow students to choose a text from the Evans database themselves, should their given institution have access to it.
15 In selecting these materials, I tried to cover a wide range of topics so that all students can locate something in which they are interested.
have spawned, we owe it to our students to show them this side of the printed world. Their understanding of the nation and its literary history will not complete without it.
Works Cited

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