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# Treasure Hunt Without a Map: Archival Research at the University of Pennsylvania

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## Treasure Hunt Without a Map: Archival Exercises

Meghan Strong

### Exercise #1: Getting to Know Whitman

**Background:** Walt Whitman was the “Good Gray Poet,” great writer and author of *Leaves of Grass*, but Whitman has not always been viewed in a positive light by everyone. Perceptions of Whitman have been shaped by a number of influences and societal issues that have changed throughout time. The archives at the University of Pennsylvania have various works concerning Whitman and the way he was viewed in specific time periods. Our own library databases also contain critical articles on Whitman and his works. In this series of exercises, you will explore how criticism of Whitman has evolved in the decades since his death by utilizing the various research materials available to you. The goal of this assignment is to practice annotation and critical research skills, as well as enhance your knowledge of Whitman’s works, critics, and his life.

This first exercise will take you to the archives for the first time. Before first, start by getting to know Whitman through some of his published poems:

“For You O Democracy”

“Going Somewhere”

“O Captain, My Captain!”

“The Wound Dresser”

Then read the poems and materials at the archives. It’s a good idea to bring copies of the published poems with you to the archives.

What differences do you see between manuscript fragments and Whitman’s published poems? Are there any? Try transcribing the written manuscript fragment and looking at it side by side with the published poem. Then, highlight the differences you see. (This will work best with “Going Somewhere.”)

What do the changes say about Whitman’s writing process? What do they say about the poem’s message or theme?

What materials are in the collection besides poems?

What do these tell you about Whitman?

Is your perspective or interpretation of the poem changed by seeing these manuscript fragments and other materials?

Write a brief analysis of the materials you examined and how they influenced both your perception of Whitman and your understanding of the poems you have read.

## Exercise #2: *Calamus*

Whitman was known for his great talent and appreciation for writing letters. After his death in 1892, Whitman's friend Richard Bucke published *Calamus*, a series of letters Whitman wrote to Peter Doyle. You can do some research to find out who Doyle was to Whitman, but do this after you have already worked with the book. See if you can figure it out for yourself just from Whitman's letters.

Begin this exercise by reading some of the poems in the *Calamus* section of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. At a minimum, you should read and annotate five. Then, visit the archives to read the letters. This will be your second visit to the archives. Request *Calamus* from the Rare Book Room. Alternatively, view it online at:

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t8jd4q897;view=1up;seq=5>

What type of relationship do you think is represented in these letters?

How do these letters shape one perspective of Whitman? What might have been readers' reactions when it was published?

What may have been the dangers of publishing these letters?

Do you think it would have been a problem if this book was published while Whitman was still alive?

What might have been Bucke's motivation for publishing these letters?

How does this book relate to Whitman's *Calamus* poems? Do the letters change or enhance your understanding of the poems?

Over the course of these exercises, you will develop an annotated bibliography. This book will be your first entry. Make sure to follow the standards of MLA as you develop the bibliography and annotations.

### **Exercise 3: Whitman through the Decades**

Now that you have gotten to know Whitman through his poetry and letters, you will begin to read criticisms of his work using the library databases. Focus on MLA Bibliography and Academic OneFile; those will give you the best results. Your task is to find examples of criticisms and perceptions of Whitman – both his writing and his life – during other time periods. Find critical articles from the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, a minimum of one from each decade, and create an annotated bibliography of the articles and perceptions of Whitman, adding to the one you started in Exercise 2 with *Calamus*. As you are looking, keep in mind: criticisms are not always negative; a critical paper may praise Whitman’s work, and this is still a relevant and valuable critical perspective.

#### **Exercise 4: The Walt Whitman Bridge**

When the Delaware River Port Authority announced in 1955 that it would be naming the new bridge between Philadelphia and New Jersey after Walt Whitman, there was widespread opposition to the name. The Delaware River Port Authority records on the naming of the Walt Whitman Bridge are housed at the University of Pennsylvania archives, and they create a detailed picture of how Whitman was viewed by a specific group at a specific time.

This will be your final visit to the archives in this series. After developing an annotated bibliography of perceptions of Whitman in previous decades, you will examine the focused perception demonstrated by this collection. Before reading anything else in the collection, read the report released by the Delaware River Port Authority in Folder 22 to gain the necessary background.

What does the collection contain?

What were some of the reactions to the name?

Who were some of the groups and people at the head of the opposition?

What does the resistance to the name of the bridge tell us about how Whitman was viewed in the 50s?

Why was there so much coverage of the naming of the Whitman bridge when there was another bridge name in the same report?

Do you think this collection represents the majority view of Whitman at this time? Or did the naming of the bridge simply highlight a specific minority view?

Your response to some of these questions may be more of a hypothesis on your part, but what can you use to answer these questions? How has your research in this series of exercises contributed to how you interpret and understand this collection?

This will be your final entry in your bibliography. Be sure to find out how to properly cite this collection (hint: finding aids are very helpful!). Once your bibliography is complete, write a 2 to 3 page paper to introduce the bibliography, and synthesizing what you have found. You may want to discuss how perceptions of Whitman have evolved over time, what social issues may have contributed to these perceptions, and/or how studying archival collections and primary sources can add to our interpretations of Whitman's works.

### **Exercise 5: Marian Anderson Collection Exercise**

Marian Anderson was born in 1897 in South Philadelphia. She was an African-American singer who gained fame in Europe in the late 20s and early 30s before returning to America and pursuing her career there. She faced prejudice because of her race, but overcame it and achieved great fame before her death in 1993. During her career, she received thousands of letters from fans across the country, and these have been collected by the archives. Housed in the collection are more than a hundred boxes of letters, sorted by name but otherwise uncategorized.

Your task will be to choose a folder from these boxes with at least five letters, become intimately familiar with the writer, and ultimately transcribe the folder's contents. You will learn about letter writing and reading to recognize important details. In addition, you will develop skills in transcription and handwriting analysis, which require time and practice to hone.

Background reading: “‘Is It Ridiculous for Me to Say I Want to Write?’ Domestic Humor and Redefining the 1950s Housewife Writer in Fan Mail to Shirley Jackson” by Jessamyn Neuhaus

**Part 1:** After choosing a folder and doing a close reading of all the letters, write a two to three page portrait of both the writer and what you learned from the letters. You may have to go through several folders before you find someone worth investigating. Five letters simply requesting songs won't provide enough material to work with. Questions to consider:

- Who is the writer?
- Why is he or she writing to Marian?
- What do the letters tell us about the writer?

- What more can they tell us about how Marian was viewed by her fans?
- What small details can help you in developing the writer's identity?

**Part 2:** Transcribe the letters in your folder, working carefully and paying attention to the handwriting. Once you are finished transcribing the contents of your folder, write a two page reflection discussing the challenges of this exercise and any new perspectives you may have gained on handwriting, letter writing, or anything else. Questions to consider:

- How has handwriting changed throughout the decades?
- What strategies can help you identify difficult parts?
- Are there words that can be discerned through context?
- Are there words that cannot be transcribed at all?
- What types of words pose the greatest challenge?

**Group element:**

Each individual should complete the above tasks on his or her own, choosing a folder that is different from the others' folders. Once the individual work is complete, the group should meet together and discuss, then prepare a brief presentation on their findings. Questions to consider:

- What trends did you see in the letters?
- Do the different folders represent different types of fan letters?
- What did you learn from this experience as a whole?

## Exercise 6: Montaigne's "Of Cannibals"

After reading Montaigne's "Of Cannibals," you will examine the roots of several key words from the text and read two early translations of the text. The goal of this exercise is to learn how to use the Oxford English Dictionary and to practice using primary sources to deepen understanding of a text. Come to class prepared to discuss the below questions, particularly the question on the title of the essay. Find below links to both required translations and the Oxford English Dictionary.

OED: <http://www.oed.com/>

Florio translation:

<http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/sceti/printedbooksNew/index.cfm?TextID=montaigne&PagePosition=120>

Cotton translation:

[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Essays\\_of\\_Montaigne/Book\\_I/Chapter\\_XXX](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Essays_of_Montaigne/Book_I/Chapter_XXX)

### Look up the words "cannibal," "savage," and "barbarian" in the OED online.

A brief guide to using the OED: Enter your word in the search bar on the home page. You will get a list of results. Your word will almost always be the first one. Let's start with "cannibal." Select the first entry in the search results. At the top of the entry, you will see "Etymology." Click on "Show More" if you can't see the whole thing. Read through the whole etymology. Notice that cannibal did not originally mean a person who eats other humans, but came from the name of a tribe. What was Columbus' connection to this word? After reading the etymology, read through some of the other definitions listed below it. Note that different dates are given beneath each definition to give context.

### Consider the following other questions as you work with the etymologies of the other words:

1. What are the roots and histories behind each of these words? How do their definitions differ?
2. Are these words used interchangeably within the text? If not, how are they used differently?
3. Did the definitions change between when Montaigne wrote the essay (~1580) and when the first translation (1603) and the second translation (1686) were created?
4. How might readers have understood this essay (and its translations) differently in the context of how these words are defined?
5. Why do you think Montaigne titled his essay "Of Cannibals" but never uses the word "cannibal" in the body of the essay?

### Read the two different translations online:

How does what you have just learned about the words cannibal, savage, and barbarian play a role in these translations? Notice that the Cotton translation was written only 83 years after the first, but the language is much closer to our language today. What might be the cause of



this? Do you find the Cotton more accessible? What is the significance of increased accessibility of this text?

Another important difference between your version of the text and the two translations is the last line of the essay. What is the last line of each version and how do they differ? Why might each of the translators have chosen to translate the last line in this way?

Make note of at least one other significant difference between the different versions of the text, and be prepared to bring it up in class.

**Other questions to consider as you read:**

1. Are there any words or ideas that have a greater weight in one translation?
2. How can translations affect the way texts are read and understood?
3. Can the way a text is translated change the audience of the text?
4. What does this exercise show you about the difficulties and significance of translation?

\*Note: Exercise inspiration taken from University of Pennsylvania syllabus created by Roger Chartier and Peter Stallybrass - Topics in the History of the Book: Word, Phrase, Sentence: Reading, Writing, and Printing in Early Modern Europe and America COML 411.401/ ENGL 234.401/ HIST 411.401

### **Exercise 7: “Of Cannibals” French translation exercise**

The goal of this exercise is to work on translation techniques and expand our interpretation of Montaigne’s essay by comparing his original essay to the translation. Start with the English version you already read. How would you translate it back into French? Translate the first 2 pages. Next, find the original French at <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.0:2:31.montaigne>

How does your translation compare to Montaigne’s original?

What might be the reason for any differences?

How does the evolution of language change our understanding of old texts in a modern world?

How does the English version to the original?

Do you think the way the original was translated into English changed the meaning of the essay in any way?

Write a 3 to 4 page reflection on the translation process and challenges it poses, as well as the specific ways in which translation changes (or does not change) your understanding of Montaigne..