Literary Recovery

Teaching Materials Developed by: Jean Lee Cole, Loyola University Maryland

Peer Reviewed by: Julia Flanders, Northeastern University

Formatted by: Alice Martin, Rutgers University

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Introduction:

This assignment was used for an upper-division undergraduate English seminar focusing on a women's literary club in Baltimore, Maryland in the spring of 2018. It was used as part of a class project where each student researched a subset of club members, documenting their biographical information and publication output, in service of publishing a print anthology and populating an online archive focused on the club. Despite the focused intention of the original assignment, the skills developed are relevant for courses in literature, cultural history, library science, women's/gender studies, and ethnic studies.

This assignment showed the value of working as a group: in a period of three weeks, 14 students located over 500 texts by a group of approximately 40 women published over a period of about 50

years (1870-1920). Students were amazed at the different kinds of results obtained from different online repositories and databases, and they also learned a lot about keyword search strategies. They also observed how women's names and identities have been effaced from the archival and historical record. One of the most surprising revelations for the students was seeing how frequently by the women authors rendered themselves invisible, by choice, in response to a patriarchal culture.

At the beginning of the course, the club we were studying, the Woman's Literary Club of Baltimore, was virtually unknown; the club's name did not appear in either histories of Baltimore or in the history of women's clubs that was assigned as part of the course reading, and none of the club members were authors who would be recognizable to twenty-first century college students. Initial searches in the library catalog or in literature-related databases such as the Modern Language Association Bibliography frequently came up empty. However, students were exhilarated to discover that once they discovered a text—by using name variants, refining search fields, and combining search terms—they could use those discoveries to find additional texts. The Literary Recovery assignment was initially planned for a single week of the course, but students found so many texts in their first round of searching that I expanded the search options, and some students continued searching through the end of the semester and beyond. The students' discoveries became a daily subject of discussion during class sessions and eventually became the basis for a print edition of over 100 works written by club members, which were selected by the students based on criteria they developed by reading hundreds of publications and discussing their literary and historical merits (*Parole Femine: The Words and Lives of the Woman's Literary Club of Baltimore*, Apprentice House, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/Parole-Femine-Womans-Literary-Baltimore/dp/1627202528). All of the discovered texts, linked to full-text page images when possible, are included in the Virtual Library section of the Woman's Literary Club of Baltimore Archive (https://wlcb.github.io/archive/).

Although the assignment was a success, we did experience some challenges. Some students found searching in multiple databases tedious; others were unexpectedly overwhelmed with hits, so the amount of "work" done by each student was unequal, especially because each "hit" had to be entered into the Google Form separately. The submitted assignment reflects a series of revisions that combine the three assignments into one, and it also provides more scaffolding to show why the databases and repositories are grouped in the ways that they are and to prompt students to think about why the results that are returned may differ. These revisions improve the assignment's cultivation of digital literacy and also make it more accessible beyond evaluating the number of hits and correctness of information entered into the form.

If I used this assignment again, I would definitely use a template spreadsheet rather than a Google Form to collect the information. I also would introduce the concept of metadata more formally, now

that I understand what it is! With a more intentional focus on metadata, it would be possible, for example, to incorporate the addition of drop-down metadata fields on the spreadsheet—for example, to indicate literary genre or publication type—and have students work together on defining what metadata would be used. To focus on one example, students were both intrigued and bewildered by the wide range of literary genres in which the women wrote, including narrative poetry, humor, dramatic pageants, history, translation, and investigative journalism, many of which were not genres students studied in their coursework as English majors. Thinking of genre in terms of metadata would help students understand how categorization works, and especially, how it has been used to make certain kinds of literature more visible than others. The concept of metadata is both powerful and increasingly important and would receive much greater emphasis if I used this assignment again. (The final metadata categories used to generate the Virtual Library section of the WLCB archive is available under the Explore/Data tab: https://wlcb.github.io/archive/data.html.)

This assignment is easily applicable to a variety of courses. Focusing search on a single author could provide a focused activity for community groups and high school classes as well as undergraduates. In library science courses and upper-division or graduate courses in literature, meanwhile, focusing the assignment on a single author would provide the opportunity to more closely examine the different results produced by different search strategies.

Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:

- **Learning Outcomes:**
    - Gain experience keyword searching
    - Develop familiarity with literature-related text repositories and databases
    - Build an understanding of publication history, publication formats (especially non-book formats), literary genres, and questions of authorship.
    - Understand how gender is categorized, highlighted, and effaced in search engines, databases, and cataloging practices.
- **Task:** Students are asked to undertake a series of iterative searches in online databases and repositories to locate published works by an individual writer. In performing the searches, they track the keywords used and results obtained, entering the pertinent information and metadata into a Google Form.
- **Purpose:** Locating the actual works written by forgotten authors is the first step toward literary recovery--the process by which contributions of marginalized writers can be restored to

literary history. This is a step-by-step guide to finding works of literature written by forgotten women.

- **Criteria:** Students are assigned the name of a woman writer to focus on. Students then use the provided handout (see Appendix A) to complete the following steps:
  - Search for texts by the assigned author in academic and literature-specific bibliographies.
  - Search for texts in online text repositories
  - Search for texts in archives of digitized newspapers and Google or other general search engines
  - Log important locating and contextual information about each of the located texts in a Google Doc (or other submission platform; see Appendix B)
- **Grading:** This was a very low-stakes assignment, basically graded on completion. It would be easy to make the assignment higher stakes by incorporating a metacognitive reflection on what students learned in the process of doing the assignment or by using the activity to apply concepts from a reading assignment about cataloging practices or search strategies.

See Appendix A for a detailed handout for this activity and Appendix B for sample categories on a submission questionnaire.

Contextual Materials/Resources/Further Reading:

- Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997)
- Anne E. Boyd Rioux, ed. *Wielding the Pen: Writings on Authorship by American Women of the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009)
- Michael E. Stevens and Steven B. Burg, *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997)
- Readings & documents online and on the <u>Woman's Literary Club</u> of Baltimore website

Appendix A: Activity Handout

Literary Recovery Assignment

What a culture or community considers "literary" or "literature" is not solely dependent on artistic merit or aesthetic quality. The very idea of an aesthetic standard depends on cultural authority and control, thus involving literature in relations of power, politics, and economics. In the United States, that has resulted in the devaluation of literary works written by women within patriarchal institutions including book and magazine publishing, as well as K-12 and university education.

Literary recovery is a process by which the actual contributions of marginalized writers can be restored to and thus enrich literary history. Recovery is especially important as the priorities and interests of readers, educators, and thinkers evolve over time.

Locating the actual works written by forgotten authors is the first step toward literary recovery. This is a step-by-step guide to finding works of literature written by women.

Within each round, search for both names and titles. As you search, make note of the following:
- What forms of names/titles are effective, and which are not? (E.g., full first and last name, initials, last name only)
- Is the author's gender implied by the way she appears in databases or repositories?
- Do these authors' works show up differently than well-known authors you have studied in other literature courses? How would you describe these differences?
- Literature courses tend to focus on three genres of literary writing: fiction, poetry, and drama. To what extent do the works you locate fall within these categories?

Tips on names:
- Try different forms of names: maiden name; married name with given first name; married name with husband's name (e.g., Mrs. John Doe); last names (maiden and married) with first initial (many women published using a first initial to disguise their identity as women).
- Make note of how authors are cataloged in Library of Congress/OCLC listings; this is the author's "known" identity as an author.

- Make note of name variants and pseudonyms as you go along. For example, Katharine is often also spelled Katherine; Jensen as Jenson, Kelly as Kelley, etc. All variants should be searched in *each* database.

Tips on finding texts:

- Refer to biographies, news articles, and reviews for additional publication titles, dates, and co-authors.
- Use advanced search to combine author, title, and keyword searches.
- Use quotations around phrases to search for a string of text rather than individual keywords.
- Search for text strings if you have them.
- Be creative!

I found one! What to do when you've located a text:[1]

- Be sure to completely document the database, reference or publication where you have located it. They can be surprisingly—and frustratingly— difficult to re-locate! To help you organize the information, submit each entry through this Google Form.
- If possible, save the link [or permalink] to the text, or better yet, download a copy. You may want to develop a consistent file-naming convention so that you can easily locate what you've downloaded. For example: Authorname_Firstwordoftitle.pdf.

Round 1: Academic and literature-specific bibliographies[2]

Bibliographies, as the word implies, are lists of books and other publications—which is to say, their purpose is to document what has been published and where books and other texts can be located. As a result, they are specifically tailored to finding texts by literary authors and should be the first places to turn; much of the work of literary recovery is simply to locate authors and titles that have simply been forgotten over time.

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[1] Rather than asking students to submit bibliographies of works they have located (a traditional approach), instructors may wish to create a spreadsheet template or a Google Form that can be filled out by students that will prompt them to fill in metadata categories (name, title, publication, etc.). Doing so will help students focus on collecting correct and complete information rather than getting hung up on bibliographical style.

[2] This list of databases may vary depending on what is available at different educational institutions.

You will need to access some of these resources through your university or local public library. As bibliographies, they are searchable lists, not repositories of texts, so you may also need to do additional searching (online or in person) to find the book, poem, or text itself.

1. Library catalog
2. WorldCat/OCLC
3. American Periodical Series
4. Making of America
5. Reader's Guide
6. Online Books Page at University of Pennsylvania (search authors by last name first)
7. FictionMags Index (search by author)

Round 2: Online text repositories

These publicly available online repositories have amassed huge numbers of texts owned and subsequently digitized by libraries, research universities, and individuals and may contain all kinds of texts and documents (including multimedia and non-text materials). Because their contents are dependent on what texts are actually held in a repository and also what an institution has decided to digitize, they may not provide a complete list of any one author's publications. At the same time, they can include texts and documents that a bibliography in Round 1 might not include (a particular publisher or magazine, for example, might not have been indexed because it was too small or too new).

Searching in these databases will be much easier if you have publication names nailed down, as well as some titles. Because they are repositories of digitized texts, you can also search for strings of text within quotation marks. This can be especially helpful when searching for poetry or a text that may have been quoted in a speech or a book review.

1. Google Books
2. Hathitrust.com
3. Archive.org
4. Gutenberg.org (usually just text, no page images)

Round 3: Newspapers

You may be surprised to learn that newspapers used to publish literature of all kinds, including poetry, short stories, and even long novels (which were generally published in *serialization*, a chapter or two at a time). Until the turn of the twentieth century, far more people read literature

in the pages of newspapers rather than in books. Searching in newspapers can be tedious and messy, however, so it's best not to begin here. But because they covered daily or weekly events, sometimes at a very local level, you may find information in newspapers that are not included in monthly magazines or books, which tend to cover larger geographical areas and are published on a longer timeframe.

It's best to have some information about a particular author before you embark on a newspaper search. For example, it's important to know when the author was publishing (you'll want to restrict your searches for when they were actively publishing, and certainly there's little point in searching the period prior to that), and it's also helpful to know where they were living or working, so that you can narrow your search to newspapers in that town, city, state, or region.

Because women in particular frequently were not referred to by their first names, you'll need to be careful to sort through the false positives that are likely to come up in a search (to make sure the "Miss Smith" you've found, for example, is the Eugenia Smith you're looking for, not Anastasia or Lucy or Christina Smith). Note: you're apt to find biographical information in newspapers as well.

1. Chronicling America newspaper database at the Library of Congress
2. ProQuest Historical Newspapers (or other newspapers to which your institution's library subscribes).
3. Newspapers.com, using 7-day trial or paid subscription. NB: only pull the trigger on your trial if you're ready to start reception + biographical research as well and can devote some time to collecting clippings.
● Note: some individual newspapers have their own archival systems; be on the lookout for ones that may be pertinent to the authors for which you're searching. (For example, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, which covered African American news and culture across the nation, has its own archive which can be browsed by date.)

Round 4: Google

What have you missed? Sometimes a random Google search on names and titles will turn up information on Wikipedia, personal websites, and the like. Note, however: this should be your last resort, not your first. Now that you have searched in the other databases and repositories, can you explain why?

Returning to the start:

Your searching at any level may result in mentions of publications and new forms of authors' names that can be searched for in databases you've already tried. Look for obscure periodicals in WorldCat, HathiTrust, and Archive.org, or consult your institution's interlibrary loan office.

Remember always: recovery is an iterative process.

Appendix B: Sample Submission Form Categories

Submit an item

Submit publications located in the Literary Recovery assignment.[3]

Email:

Brief description of the item (e.g.: "TITLE OF WORK" or "Cover of [BOOK TITLE] by [AUTHOR]" or "Photograph of [MEMBER NAME]"):

Creator of the item (For texts, include the author's name ([FIRST NAME] [LAST NAME]). For photographs, include the photographer's name if possible. If unsure, leave blank.):

Source (Where you found the item. Use the name of the archive/website, not a URL.):

URL where item can be located (Only fill in if the item is stored online. Note: URLs of images should be for the actual image, not the webpage that includes the image. To find the image URL, control-click (Mac) or right-click (PC) on the image and select "Copy Image URL."):

Publisher (Only fill in for published texts. For books, use [PUBLISHER PLACE]: [PUBLISHER]. For journals, include the journal title only.):

Date (Include year of publication only for book publications; month and year for journal publications. For websites, include date accessed.):

Type of resource:

- Photo
- Title page or cover

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[3] This submission form was originally made using Google Forms. The metadata that was derived from the assignment is available on the Woman's Literary Club of Baltimore website under the Explore/Data tab (https://wlcb.github.io/archive/data.html).

- Fiction
- Poetry
- Drama
- Essay or newspaper journalism
- Other: _____

Contributor (Type your name here!):

Files (Upload files here: images, transcribed documents, PDFs.):