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WHAT IS CRITICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY?

Lisa Maruca and Kate Ozment

Despite the suggestive resonance of critical bibliography in recent scholarship, there is not a settled definition of what the term is or does. W. W. Greg uses critical bibliography to distinguish the work of description and that of use, the latter being the “critical” aspect of bibliographic scholarship.¹ More recently, Michael F. Suarez addressed the annual meeting of the Bibliographical Society of America and reclaimed critical bibliography as a practice that puts “bibliography in productive conversation with the rest of the humanities” by asking “How can we understand the textual artifact in history? How did this book come to be the way it is?”² In 2022, Elizaveta Strakhov expanded on this to include “How do we know the answers to the questions we are asking?”³ Strakhov understands critical bibliography to mean “the analysis of bibliographical features for the purpose of disrupting the methodological categories by which our scholarship operates.” She invites us to “critique the existing questions we have automatically asked” and to “problematize the dominant categories, informational silos, patterns of thought, and existing habits of the wider scholarly field to which the material text belongs.”⁴ Each scholar uses the term *critical* for different purposes—Greg and Suarez in evolving disciplinary terms and Strakhov in a deliberate un-disciplining of bibliography.

While a lack of fixity makes critical bibliography an exciting place to work, the boundarylessness of this phrase makes it difficult to know what it means to “do” critical bibliography or to create a discourse between scholarly work with shared values. To clarify the interests of this special issue, we offer our working (though specifically not delimited) definition of critical bibliography that we have deliberately allowed the pieces in this issue to shape.

We position critical bibliography as the intersection of critical theory and bibliographic study. We define “bibliography” in Greg’s terms as the study of the lives of material books, widely defined, including their production, circulation, and reception.⁵ Bibliography has also grown beyond the book, as this collection well illustrates. Many of our contributors may

feel more at home in related areas, such as communication, Indigenous textualities, material culture, archival theory, and media studies. We use “critical theory” to signify theories resonant with those that grew out of the Frankfurt School, which sought to liberate human beings from oppression and was extended by twentieth-century thinkers like bell hooks, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Edward Said, and Eve Sedgwick. Resulting discourses include feminist studies, critical race studies, postcolonialism, Marxism, queer theory, and disability studies, to name a few. Twisting the two threads together, critical bibliography explores how critical theories can (re)shape our histories of the book and bookish objects and in turn how bibliography can be used as a tool to resist oppression.

The critical bibliography that these pieces explore nods to but does not show fealty to the imperial, white, cis-male, heteronormative, neurotypical bibliographic tradition.⁶ Rather, it takes its force and purpose from the possibility of liberation as the outcome of bibliographic work. Barbara Fister first offered liberation bibliography as a “manifesto” to promote open access against the corporate control of knowledge as intellectual property.⁷ Fister was prescient in acknowledging that those who work to maintain and circulate knowledge “are implicated in systems that often benefit us, even if we think they are unjust.” Derrick R. Spires extends Fister’s original focus and defines liberation bibliography

as a conscious and intentional practice of identifying and repairing the harms of systemic racism, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and other oppressive structures in and through bibliography and bibliographical study. . . . [I]t requires an attention not only to identifying the unjust, inaccurate, and inaccessible, but also to creating new pathways to addressing these issues and dismantling the structures that perpetuate them.⁸

We see liberation bibliography as a necessary outcome of critical bibliography—the result that theories naming “settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and other oppressive structures” have sought to achieve.

This issue uses critical bibliography, then, as an umbrella term that hails all interested in the study of material texts *and* the ways we can undiscipline our engagement with them while using our work to forward efforts for liberation. We called not just for traditional case studies but also for provocations and interventions, crafting and conversations, pedagogy and praxis. The result is a heterogeneous set of works, representing a variety of regions and approaches, that unite in troubling traditional

bibliographical methods. They do not merely *add* representation but take on the very grounds, definitions, and boundaries of our field. These pieces ask epistemological and ontological questions that interrogate the material and conceptual construction of bibliographic knowledge itself: who and what are validated as part of this discourse, who has admission to it, how it is organized and deployed, how its institutions and infrastructures are built.

Many of our contributors problematize the object of bibliographic study, for example. They not only go beyond the codex and press but also demonstrate what's at stake when written records are prioritized at the expense of forms that are less fixed. Jesse R. Erickson situates tarot cards in practices of divination *and* humanism; Paul Benzon thinks about notions of duration and longevity with a weathered found-object installation; Travis Sharp shows how Inka khipus challenge definitions of writing and resistance; Daniel Radus explores the spiritual and cultural signification of a pipestone carved into a book; and Mark Alan Mattes reflects on the historicity and futurity of trees. Together, these essays and others ask: Is every text material? What does materiality mean? How does the material account for decay, nothingness, and invisibility? Where are the (porous) boundaries between book and body, text and substrate, object and emotion?

When scrutinized, even traditional books are more than they seem, and other contributors recover the labor that is often obscured there. John J. Garcia finds racialized laborers making white book culture possible at the edges of print production; Oishani Sengupta explains how local, Indigenous artists in India can be erased, even as their work is appropriated; Georgina Wilson surfaces early modern women's labor in paper making; and Helen Williams recuperates domestic craft as a key component of bookmaking. While all the essays on teaching here demonstrate the intense, often unacknowledged labor that goes into creating equitable and liberatory classrooms, Amanda Stuckey in particular lays bare the difficulties and successes in teaching descriptive bibliography with material books while following the tenets of disability pedagogy.

Another theme focuses on the structures of knowledge, postulating that new forms of racial and sexual identity and more equitable power relations might be created through reforming bibliographic architecture. These processes can be seen in the cataloging, collecting, selling, and archiving of texts. For example, Julie R. Enszer argues that one woman's unabated enumeration of books in a magazine column across decades of the twentieth century constructed a specific form of lesbian identity and community. Rebecca Romney provides guidance on how to maintain

feminist principles while selling, and thus preserving, antiquarian books. Jacinta R. Saffold and Kinohi Nishikawa's conversation about the former's *Essence* Book Project highlights the importance of archiving data about the social, cultural, and entrepreneurial practices that shaped Black literary engagement. Joshua Ortiz Baco, Benjamin Charles Germain Lee, Jim Casey, and Sarah H. Salter discuss a digital archive of Spanish-language newspapers and the challenge of translating a visually dynamic and intertextual form into bibliographic conventions developed around the codex.

Two essays take on the pedagogical potential of bringing students into archive projects while simultaneously disrupting the norms usually governing such work. Kirstyn J. Leuner, Catherine Koehler, and Doran Larson discuss how to engage student editors as activist bibliographers with the American Prison Writing Archive. Danielle Spratt, Deena Al-halabieh, Stephen Martinez, Quill Sang, Joseph Sweetnam, Stephanie Guerrero, and Rachael Scarborough King reflect on their work transcribing documents for the Ballitore Project in a student-centered approach that is reflected in the construction of their article. As this list indicates, collaborative knowledge-making became a meta-issue as well, and the multiauthored pieces emphasize the power of pooling knowledge, perspectives, and resources in critical bibliographic scholarship and teaching.

Another thread of essays centers new ways of knowing and knowing *from*. For example, pieces by Megan Peiser, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and sarah madoka currie, who aligns with communities of critical disability studies, innovate forms of acknowledgment while resisting hegemonic structures. J. D. Sargan shows how bibliography's stance of "objectivity" risks shunting aside crucial affective, embodied responses. Others describe making as a form of knowing, such as Kadin Henningsen, who coins "critical fabrication" for his own creative and scholarly processes, and Jehan L. Roberson, who analyzes visual artist Kameelah Janan Rasheed's citationality and textual remixing. Citation similarly undergirds Shelby Johnson's analysis of the "more-than-human agents" acknowledged as teachers and cocreators by poet Bamewawagezhikaquay.

It is a testament to the complexity and sophistication of these pieces that our simple categorization hides the ways that multiple and intertwined themes resonate across all the works. Our contributors put into conversation existing critically informed but sometimes siloed fields like feminist bibliography, queer bibliography, Black bibliography, and Indigenous textualities, as well as underutilized approaches such as object-oriented ontology and affect theory. Their interplay makes visible how crucial

intersectional discussions will be to critical bibliography and its liberatory potential.

Finally, as a reflection of the values stated above, the editors would like to offer a note of transparency about the editorial guidelines that shaped this issue. Our call for papers was broadly written to encourage as many people as possible who *do* bibliography but may not identify *as* bibliographers to submit, and in whatever format best met their needs. The sheer number of abstracts we received in response to our call, including a significant number of early-career scholars, and the broad intellectual interests of these pieces speak to the success of that approach. But there are gaps, especially in Asian, African, and South American scholarship and work from the Global South, that indicate the limitations of our networks. We hope to see more work from these fields and recognize that it will continue to (re)shape critical bibliography.

The editors also chose to do a rigorous editorial review themselves, in an extended process that included developmental feedback and revision rather than traditional blind peer review. This was in part a practical choice: this issue was written, edited, and published during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the collapse of the traditionally employed academic job that supports uncompensated peer review. To put it bluntly: there are not enough external peer reviewers to be had, especially with the expertise and openness required to comment productively on this interdisciplinary work. Rather than generate additional uncompensated labor for others, we responded to these pieces using our experience as peer editors and bibliographers invested in feminism and liberatory theories. We also hope that this process, based on an ethos of trust, collaboration, and transparency, might be seen as an experiment, a prototype, for an alternative model of publication. For such experiments to be replicated, this form of intensive and time-consuming editorial work will need to be rewarded by the systems of hiring, tenure, and promotion that undergird our work. Moreover, we recognize the risk that such methods may be discounted by those who define rigor as the result of one specific process—ironically one of the themes of this collection. However, we feel that ultimately, these authors' profound contributions to the field of bibliographic scholarship speak for themselves.

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NOTES

1. W. W. Greg, "What Is Bibliography?," *The Library*, TBS-12, no. 1 (1913): 39–54.
2. Michael F. Suarez, SJ, "Hard Cases: Confronting Bibliographical Difficulty in Eighteenth-Century Texts." *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 111, no. 1 (2017): 1–30, quotation on 3.
3. Elizaveta Strakhov, "Opening Pandora's Box: Charles d'Orléans's Reception and the Work of Critical Bibliography." *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 116, no. 4 (2022). Our thanks to Strakhov for allowing us to see a preprint.
4. Strakhov, "Opening Pandora's Box."
5. W. W. Greg, "Bibliography—A Retrospect," in *The Bibliographical Society, 1892–1942: Studies in Retrospect* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1945), 23–31.
6. In this move, we take inspiration from scholarly editing, such as from D. C. Greetham, ed. *The Margins of the Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
7. Barbara Fister, "Trumping Ownership with Open Access: A Manifesto." *Library Journal*, April 1, 2010; available on <https://barbarafister.net/cv/liberation-bibliography/>.
8. Derrick R. Spires, "On Liberation Bibliography: The 2021 BSA Annual Meeting Keynote." *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 116, no. 1 (2022): 1–20, quotation on 5–6.