

# The Social Life of Paper

## ENG G41.2944 & MCC E58.2344

[Lisa Gitelman](#) (she/her)

Mondays 11:000-1:45

244 Greene St. 306

Office hours: After class and always by appointment (239 Greene St. #720). Feel free.

Those who are careful (as they call it) to principle children well, instill into the unwary and as yet unprejudiced, understanding (for white paper receives any characters) those doctrines they would have them retain and profess.

—John Locke (1690)

It is unfortunately the prerogative of this papering age of the world that, since the universe has fallen into the hands of the merchants of book and images, thousands of authors and artists, now blinded by the direct light of nature, see however quite well, as soon as this light is reflected from a piece of paper.

—Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1795)

The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the telltale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.

— Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1803)

Susie, what shall I do—there isn't room enough; not half enough, to hold what I was going to say. Won't you tell the man who makes sheets of paper, that I haven't the slightest respect for him!

— Emily Dickinson MS letter to Susan Gilbert (1853)

Common Sense on a Roll™

—Kimberly-Clark Worldwide (2008)

“Off and on,” [Claude] Shannon wrote to Vannevar Bush in 1939, “I have been working on an analysis of some of the fundamental properties of general systems for the transmission of intelligence.”

--James Gleick, *The Information* (2011)

After [Kim Il-sung's] death, and as his son Kim Jong-il's rule became established in the Institutions of state, the status of novelists changed. Poetry became the literary vogue. This was not due solely to Kim Jong-il's preference for the form. The phenomenon was reinforced, if not triggered, by a shortage of paper when the North Korean economy collapsed.

—Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee* (2014)

The history of paper only turns into a media history as it serves as a reference system for the analysis of bureaucratic or scientific data processing.

--Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques* (2015)

Where you stand on the question of who wants eBooks really does heavily depend upon where you sit.

--Naomi S. Baron, *Words Onscreen* (2015)

**Course Description.** What is the cultural work performed by or with the technology of paper, that most excellent of all Chinese inventions? How might a history and theory of paper supplement recent accounts of media, formats, and genres? What does a focus on paper stand to tell us about artifacts like “the book” or constructs like “the literary,” for instance? What is the work of paper in the production of knowledge, the shared imagination of value, and the persistence of inequalities? What does it mean to imagine a paperless future? Organized around discussions of readings in common, this course offers students an opportunity to think creatively about their own methods and objects of study.

**Course Requirements.** Written work will consist of one short essay (10%) due by February 12th and a final project due in at the end of the semester (70%). Final projects may take one of two forms depending upon your personal goals. Either you may propose and write a conference paper for an actual scholarly conference (hand in the CFP, your 500-word proposal, and the 10-page paper), or you can write an original research paper (hand in approx. 20-25 pp.). In either case, let’s confer one-on-one about where you are headed. We can also discuss these options and your ideas as a group. Needless to say, all work must be your own, and any plagiarism—no matter how accidental—will result in failure for the course. Late papers will be penalized and may not receive written comments.

Informed participation in class discussion is an additional requirement (worth 20% of the final grade) and will include at least one brief in-class presentation in which you will be asked to (a) introduce an author, (b) the larger work and/or oeuvre from which this reading comes, and (c) locate any intertext(s) relevant to the assigned reading that you find interesting (and why). Attendance is expected in this course. If you need to miss more than one session for any reason (NB, I have to miss one in early April), we’ll figure out a makeup tutorial on Zoom.

All of the course readings will be available electronically, either in a “Resources” area of the course Brightspace site or via persistent links in this syllabus. (Make sure you are logged into the NYU Libraries when clicking on links in the syllabus.) If you notice any dead links on the syllabus or in Brightspace, please email me a.s.a.p., and I will try to troubleshoot. In some cases, you may want to scrounge up your own hard copies (e.g., Week 2? Week 5?) to better understand Brightspace excerpts in context. Later in the semester I will be asking for your help in assigning a few readings for the group, once you know what you’ll be working on as a final project, and I’d like to use the last class session as a works-in-progress forum, which we’ll organize as a group.

## **Calendar of Class Meetings and Assignments**

(Any changes will be announced via Brightspace)

### Fourteen Mondays

1.

January 22 Introductions

Readings: “Adventures of a Quire of Paper” (1779) with [Robbins, “Commodity Histories”](#) (2005). See also (recommended) [Adam Smith on the woolen coat](#) (1776) and Jennifer L. Roberts, “[Things: Material Turn, Transnational Turn](#)” (2017)

2.

January 29 Paper Theory

Readings: Latour, "[Visualization and Cognition](#)" and "[A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans](#)"; see also Derrida, "Paper or Me" from *Paper Machine*.

3.

February 5 Paper Theory (misc.) and "Poor Images"

Jose Muñoz, "[Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts](#)" (1996); Michael Warner, "[Publics and Counterpublics](#)" (2002); Plus Paul Frosh, "Prologue" and "Introduction" (recommended) and definitely "[Screenshot: The 'Photographic' Witnessing of Digital Worlds](#)" (2019); also Hito Steyerl, "[In Defense of the Poor Image](#)" (2009)

**Writing Assignment:** Sometime between February 5 and February 12 please hand in (via email) a short essay (~750-1000 words). Your essay can (a) offer a response to one of the course readings we've discussed so far; (b) offer a "biography" or analysis of a piece of paper ephemera of your choosing; or (c) make a proposal for an end-of-semester research paper. You decide.

4.

February 12 Paper Art

Readings: Craig Dworkin, "[No Medium](#)" (at least pp. 5-33); Rippon, "['lighght' and 'covfefe'](#)" (2020). Your suggestions?

Winter Break (Presidents' Day)

5.

February 26 Paper Histories (antebellum USA)

David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (selections); Jennifer L. Roberts, "Audubon's Burden"

6.

March 4 Digitization and Research

Abbott, "[Digital Paper](#)" (2014) selections; also Ryan Cordell, "[Speculative Bibliography](#)" (2020)

7.

March 11 Semiosis + Substrate

Mullaney, Thomas, "[Semiotic Sovereignty](#)" also Gabreile de Seta [QR code: The global making of an infrastructural gateway](#) (2023)

Spring Break

8.

March 25 Preprints and reprints with visiting scholar Phillip Roth (Aachen, Germany)

Alex Csiszar, "[How Lives Became Lists and Scientific Papers Became Data](#)" (2017).

Meredith McGill, "[Introduction: The Matter of the Text](#)" (pp. 1-19) in *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (2007).

9.

April 1 Object and Medium (two first books made out of MCC dissertations!)

Jacob Gaboury, at least Ch. 4, "[Object Paradigms: On the Origins of Object Orientation](#)" (2021); also Kate Brideau, *The Typographic Medium* at least pp. 25-48.

10.

April 8 No class

In lieu of class this week please read ahead.

Also, in the interests of taking paper literally, please watch [this webinar on Japanese papermaking](#). Think about the dynamics of regionalism, eco-history, mechanization, and tradition. (This is one of a series of videos made by [Dieu Donne](#) in Brooklyn.)

Also, to make up for this missed session I'd like to schedule one-on-one meetings with each of you sometime before May 12<sup>th</sup>.

11.

April 15 Literary eco-histories

Joshua Calhoun, [The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts](#) (2020) Introduction and chapters TBD

12.

April 22 Mapping "Book History"

Since at least 1982 when Robert Darnton published his classic essay "[What Is the History of Books?](#)" ([revisited in 2007](#)), scholars have sought to define (and disrupt?) book history as a field. For this class session let's read some recent definitions, but let's also work inductively from examples published in the journal [Book History](#) (1998-2024). Readings TBA.

13.

April 29 Formalisms and related questions

Whitney Trettien, "[Substrate, Platform, Interface, Format](#)" (2023); Alison Wiggins, "The Materiality of Written Textual Forms" (2023) **AND** another article of your choosing TBA.

14.

May 6 Last Day

Your works in progress and final thoughts

May 14 Papers due via email. Please, no stragglers.

## Highly Selective (to the point of almost random) Bibliography of Relevant Works

Agar, Jon. *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary History of the Computer*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003.

Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Augst, Thomas. *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Baker, Cathleen A. *From the Hand to the Machine: Nineteenth-Century American Paper and Mediums: Technologies, Materials, and Conservation*. Ann Arbor, MI: Legacy Press, 2010.

Baker, Nicholson. "Discards" *New Yorker* (4 April 1994) 64-86.

- Basbanes, Nicolas A. *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History*. New York: Knopf, 2013.
- Bayard, Pierre. *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007.
- Becker, Peter and William Clark, eds. *Little Tools of Knowledge: Historical Essays on Academic and Bureaucratic Practices*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Bittell et al., ed. *Working with Paper: Gendered Practices in the History of Knowledge*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019.
- Blair, Ann M. *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Brown, John Seely and Paul Duigud. "Reading the Background" 173-205, *The Social Life of Information*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.
- Calhoun, Joshua. "The Word Made Flax: Cheap Bibles, Textual Corruption, and the Poetics of Paper" *PMLA* 126.2 (2011) 327-344.
- Casper, Scott E., Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship, eds. *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880. A History of the Book in America*. Vol. 3. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Cohen, Matt. "[Time and the Bibliographer](#)" (2020)
- Csiszar, Alex. *The Scientific Journal: Authorship and the Politics of Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Coopersmith, Jonathan. *Faxed: The Rise and Fall of the Fax Machine*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2015.
- Day, Ronald E. *Indexing It All: The Subject in the Age of Documentation, Information, and Data*. Cambridge: MIT, 2014.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Paper Machine*. Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Duguid, Paul and John Seely Brown, "[The Social Life of Documents](#)"
- Duncan, Dennis. *Index, a History of the: A Bookish Adventure*. London: Allen Lane, 2021.
- Duncan, Dennis and Adam Smyth, ed. *Book Parts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Febvre, Lucien and Henri-Jean Martin, "Preliminaries: The Introduction of Paper into Europe" Chapter One, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*. Trans. David Gerard. Ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton. London: Atlantic Highlands, [TK].
- Fleming, Juliet. *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.
- Fowler, Caroline. *The Art of Paper: From the Holy Land to the Americas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.
- Garvey, Ellen Gruber. *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Goldsby, Jacqueline and Meredith McGill, "[What's Black about Black Bibliography?](#)" *Papers of the BSA* 116:2 (2022)
- Groebner, Valentin. *Who Are You?: Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Zone Books, 2007.
- Henkin, David. *City Reading*. Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Henkin, David M. *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- David Henkin, *The Week: A History of the Unnatural Rhythms That Made Us Who We Are*. TK 2021
- Hull, Matthew S. *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- Kafka, Ben. *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*. New York: Zone, 2012.
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- Kaiser, David. *Drawing Things Together: The Dispersion of Feynman Diagrams in Postwar Physics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- King, William Davies. *Collections of Nothing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
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- Lau, Estelle T. *Paper Families: Identity, Immigration Administration, and Chinese Exclusion*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
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- Levy, David M. *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age*. New York: Arcade, 2001.
- Lupton, Christina. *Knowing Books: The Consciousness of Mediation in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Luskey, Brian P. "Jumping Counters in White Collars: Manliness, Respectability and Work in the Antebellum City" *Journal of the Early Republic* 26:2 (2006) 173-219.
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- Nishikawa, Kinohi. *Street Players: Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
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