

28 Monday Oct
2013

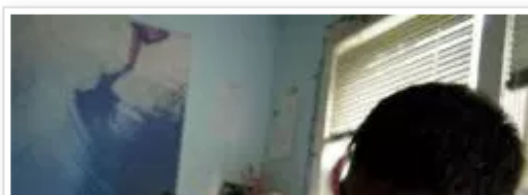
Featured Project: "In principio erat Algonquin: Native American Writings in America's First Bible" by Nick DeFina

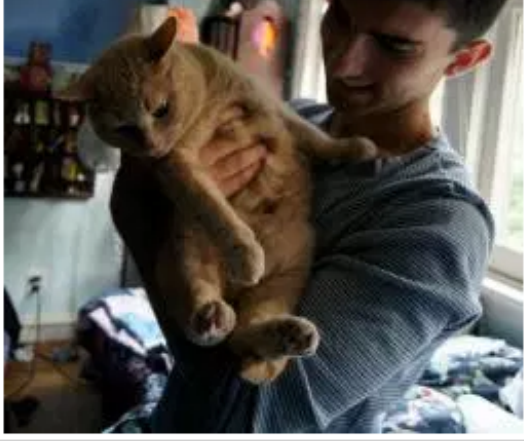
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POSTED BY JOHN BARANIK IN ACADEMIC YEAR 2013-2014, STUDENT WORK

≈ 1 COMMENT

Crisp air, falling leaves, and [exhausted students](#) sweep campus as fall and midterm season enter full swing. With one [meeting](#) under our belt and next Friday's meeting upcoming, the Penn Manuscript Collective is now hitting its stride, too. As we begin new research projects, reflecting on our past work can help us improve our current work: what did we do well? How can we improve? Along with these questions, our group strives to celebrate original research. To this end, we will begin posting the past work of students, along with interviews about their motivations, methods, and ideas for future research. Our first featured project is Nick DeFina's work from [The Bible](#) with [Professor Stallybrass](#) in the fall of 2012. Nick is a sophomore in Penn's College of Arts & Sciences. An [English](#) and [German](#) major, he is co-editor of [Symbiosis](#), Penn's collaborative arts literary magazine. He also reads and writes in his free time. He likes the 19th century, [Kronos Quartet](#) and [Emily Dickinson](#).





– Nick

Nick's paper, "In principio erat Algonquin: Native American Writings in America's First Bible," Nick traces the path of Native American literacy and conversion to Christianity, beginning with [Harvard](#) and [Dartmouth](#)'s founding as schools for the education of both ministers to Native Americans and Native Americans themselves. Recognizing the value of an English education in negotiating missionary politics, trade, and land ownership, many Native Americans educated in colleges and charity schools also sent their children to these schools, beginning a culture of Native American literacy in written English. In spite of these educational advances, however, many Native Americans frustrated the ministers sent by hallowing the object of the book—touching it, counting the pages, even sleeping with it—instead of the text of the book itself.

Nick explains [John Eliot](#)'s translation and printing of the Bible in the [Massachusetts Language](#), the first printed Bible in the New World. Exploring the marginalia of a number of Algonquin bibles, Nick notes inscriptions of specific times, owners, and even cryptic moral admonishments.



– "John Eliot Preaching to the Indians"

I spoke with Nick about this project and his future research.

Why did you choose [Stallybrass's seminar](#)?

I was initially drawn to the advertised topic of his seminar — the Bible — because I hadn't read any portions of the Bible in depth, and wanted to gain exposure to it. While the course didn't really cover the entirety of the Bible itself per se, I still learned a great deal about exegesis and biblical analysis, which is in itself an invaluable skill-set.

What drew you to this project? Did you have past interests in Native American culture and/or literacy?

I've always had a strange and fairly inexplicable fascination with Native American culture. Perhaps part of the reason why is that Native Americans are relatively invisible to the rest of the Western world, yet they played an incredibly central role in the conquest of the New World. It's a part of American history that people tend to overlook or distance themselves from, in much the same way that people tend to overlook or distance themselves from the slave-owning tendencies of the so-called "founding fathers." I'm also an avid reader, so thinking about those two concepts by way of a synthetic research project was attractive right from the start.

Where and how did you do research for this project? Did your work involve different libraries?

I began collecting sources with the help of Professor [Stallybrass](#) and [John Pollack](#). John has actually done a good deal of research on the subject, and knows a lot about the Algonquin bible itself, and he was instrumental in helping me organize my materials and identifying helpful artifacts that would eventually make their way into my paper. Luckily for me, the materials I worked with had been photocopied and transcribed into regular books, so I could do all my research from the comfort of my dorm room, which was itself an anomaly, considering the type of work the project required of me.

In your paper, you discuss the interplay between the Native Americans' interest in the materiality of the book and the European immigrants' insistence on the durability of the ideas of the text outside of a printed or written medium. How has your research with rare books and primary sources involved you in this tension? Has your view of literature and physical books changed?

I've certainly gained a new perspective on the various utilities of the book as a physical artifact. The book became, in the hands of the Native Americans, a literal treasure. But after all, isn't any type of significance subjective? Who's to say the Native Americans wasted their time fondling the books instead of reading them. if

Native Americans wasted their time reading the books instead of reading them, or what they gained from their interactions with the material texts proved to be just as engaging and insightful as Puritans' theological/academic study?

Your paper emphasizes the importance of dating and inscription to the time-centered Native American culture. Can you speak more about this?

Time was an incredibly significant concept to Native Americans. Their livelihoods relied on the duration of the seasons, and their cultural histories were delineated and explicated through the conventions of dating and calendars. I think that learning to write was incredibly instrumental in reinforcing this culture of time-keeping, in the sense that oral or retroactive memory could suddenly be preserved externally (that is, dates and times could exist in the physical world — as text — as well as cognitively or conceptually). By recording things in textual form, the Native Americans were able to preserve essential components of their culture in an entirely novel (and perhaps, just as importantly, *western*) way.

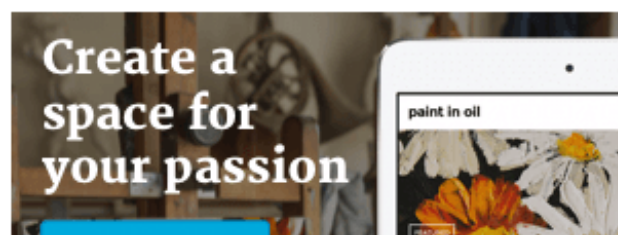
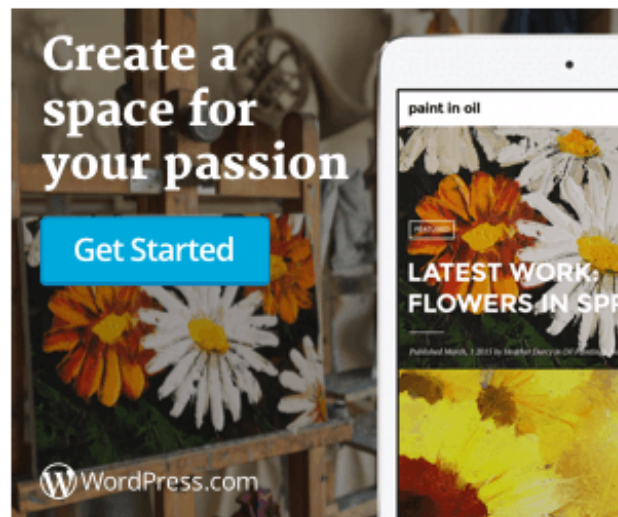
What are you working on now?

I'm currently brainstorming ideas for a project connected with a [Chaucer seminar](#) I'm currently enrolled in. I am intending on working with [Edward Burne-Jones](#) and Chaucer's [Canterbury Tales](#), specifically the [Kelmscott printing](#) of Chaucer's Tales with woodcuts by Burne-Jones himself.

Read Nick's paper: [In principio erat Algonquin. Nick DeFina](#)

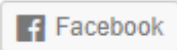
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THOUGHT ON "FEATURED PROJECT: "IN PRINCIPIO ERAT ALGONQUIN: NATIVE AMERICAN WRITINGS IN AMERICA'S FIRST BIBLE" BY NICK DEFINA"



Dianne Mitchell *said:*

October 31, 2013 at 1:30 pm

Terrific paper. I'm really impressed with the work coming out of this group! I loved learning about Native American marginalia.

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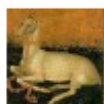
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