Serendipity, Tactility, and Community: 
Library Research as a Practice of Wonder

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Slide 1: Introduction: Where does my thinking come from:

First, some questions:

• How do we (collective ‘we,’ as in ‘academia at large) approach scholarly research and writing?
• What has been the effect of efficiency narratives on scholarly research and writing?
• Where does my work (and where do I) fit into the picture?

The words that have kept returning to me over the past few years have been space, wonder, magic, dreams, longing, desire. These words are of seemingly little value in our current ‘efficiency driven’ models of academic work.

Second, my own research context:

My most recent research project appears in book form in September 2019. *What the Oceans Remember* demanded a lot from me, not just intellectually, but also emotionally and physically. It forced me to confront myself and my research in sometimes unexpected ways.

• It demanded my vulnerability.
• It needed my openness.
• It wanted me to wonder.

*What the Oceans Remember* is based on archival research. I’ve worked with archival materials for decades now, first music archives (treatises and music manuscripts) and then text-based archives. I have developed working systems to manage my research processes. But those systems proved inadequate to the intellectual and emotional complexities of this project.

*What the Oceans Remember* haunts this presentation; it is present in all of my musings, all of my thinking, and in all of my considerations. It will in this way, also be part of any research project I develop after this point.

But because it was so present in my work, I wanted it also to physically haunt this presentation. As a way of making serendipity, tactility, and community visible in this presentation (which, I acknowledge, must still remain a virtual presentation offered by distance),
Slide 2: Sarah plantation

This is a photograph of one page from my archival research, which I have included as a background to every slide. There is nothing particularly serendipitous about this image. It’s something that I knew existed. It’s something I knew I would find.

Here’s what I see when I look at this (now virtual) image. I can:

- feel the paper, how its smooth pulpiness slides against my skin, how the corners crumble to dust as I touch it.
- feel its weight. I know its size.
- I know how it was put together. I know how it is constituted in relation to other documents in that particular file
- I know how that file fits into the larger collection of files of which it is a part.

This is the first page of the accounting declaration for Sarah plantation in Suriname, the plantation on which at least sixteen of my ancestors were enslaved. The declaration was made in 1862, the year before slavery was abolished, and it came about because enslavers wanted compensation for lost property. Needed registration to get compensation.

On this page, you can find the name Frederick, a man born in 1798, and the furthest back my family tree has been recorded (on that side of the family).

This page was something I tried to distance myself from, when I first saw it. My first instinct was to document, to organize, and to catalogue. To remain objective. But I was unable to do this. This research demanded my whole body. It demanded a practice of wonder. And so it remains here, in this presentation, as a reminder of the need for whole body knowledge, and about the promise of whole body knowledge.

It reminds me, too, that while wonder is about awe and inspiration and curiosity, it is also about vulnerability and horror and grief. And that a research practices – whether in the archives or in libraries – needs to make space for all of this.

What this presentation is:

Considering some intersections between archives and libraries, this presentation might be seen as:

- A gentle manifesto for a return to the idea of libraries as spaces of wonder and imagination, not just as places for the efficient consumption of knowledge.
- A series of questions that will hopefully lead to further reflection – on my part and on those of you listening – on possible ways forward, an in that way, an opening to a conversation, rather than a series of answers.

How might we move beyond “efficiency” narratives to work instead towards an engagement with the wonder of library research, and more than this, to cultivate wonder as a practice; that is, as a foundational principle for academic research.
Slide 3: Loving Libraries

I come at a presentation about libraries as someone who has held many positions in relation to libraries.

- A lover of libraries, someone who has had a library card for decades; indeed, for as long as I can remember. Probably read most books in the kids’ section of my local public library. From this experience: Libraries as a safe, creative space. Libraries as a space of the imagination that allowed me to travel through time and to inhabit different bodies.

- Someone who has worked in libraries
  - My first job as a high school student was as a library assistant, shelving books 8-12 hours/week
  - Also worked at Vancouver Public Library both shelving books and also at the checkout desk. Learned much about the community of library users: elderly people who came in just to chat with the librarian because they were lonely; young people studying for exams; immigrants preparing for citizenship tests; families bringing Rubbermaid bins of books to the library and stopping in for storytime; newcomers hoping to plan summer vacations; and folks who hadn’t read a book in decades but were hoping to find something to read.
  - From this experience: library as a vital community hub, that brought people, imaginations, and communities together.

- As a researcher who has used libraries – and archives (often housed in libraries)
  - What could be better for a book lover than to work as a researcher who lives in libraries and archives? I have spent many happy hours fondling books, smelling them, reading them… and indeed, carrying them around towns and cities in North America, Europe, and South America. I have never lost my sense of wonder; it is wonder that underpins all of my work….
  - From this experience: libraries as spaces of knowledge, and the linking of wonder and knowledge.

- As a faculty member who teaches students 8 months of every year, and who supervises graduate students every single month of the year:
  - Frustrated by the ways that discourses of efficiency have infiltrated library training and library systems (not singling out a single library here; this is something that I have seen at numerous libraries)
  - Interest in how to foster wonder in students, how to encourage wide sampling, grazing… how to bring the library alive beyond the immediate instrumental concerns of the next paper, the next thesis chapter, etc.
  - From this experience: Libraries as spaces to encourage generations that come after me to think about wonder, imagination, knowledge, community, and more.
Slides 4-6: Thinking about Slow Scholarship

What does slow mean and why embrace it?

In a 2013 article, Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, the authors of *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, make a case for bringing the slow movement into the university.

They point to the increasing corporatization of universities as well as increased stress levels on faculty members, who are asked to do more and more administrative work in the face of increasing casualization. They argue: “If there is one sector of society that should be slowing down in order to cultivate deep thought in themselves and others it is academic teachers.” (2)

Academic learners, too, are impacted by this. As they point out, “Time for reflection is not, then, a luxury, but crucial to effective teaching and learning.” (5)

They advocate for a slow approach:

In response to the colleagues who have told us to wake up and get with the program or that they are simply too busy to slow down, we wish to emphasize that the slow movement is not nostalgia for the “good old days” that never existed in the first place. Rather, it is, as Parkins and Craig put it, “a process whereby everyday life—in all its pace and complexity, frisson and routine—is approached with care and attention...an attempt to live in the present in a meaningful, sustainable, thoughtful and pleasurable way” (2006, p. ix). And we agree with Parkins and Craig that the Slow movement has the “potential” to not only “reinvigorate everyday life” (2006, p. 119) but also “repoliticize...everyday life” (2006, p. 135). (6)

What I like about the first Parkins and Craig quote, which comes from their book, Parkins, W. and Craig, G. (2006). *Slow Living*, are the specific values and principles they share: the goal is for meaningful, sustainable, thoughtful and pleasurable living.

It strikes me that these principles can and should also be central to student learning, and I want to argue that cultivating a practice of wonder in our students might be a way forward.

Some questions to ponder:

- What potential might slow hold for transforming student research processes?
- How can we think through slow as a principle of wonder?

Slide 7: Neil Gaiman

In a now viral essay about why libraries matter, Neil Gaiman writes:

But libraries are about freedom. Freedom to read, freedom of ideas, freedom of communication. They are about education (which is not a process that finishes the day we leave school or university), about entertainment, about making safe spaces, and about access to information.

We all – adults and children, writers and readers – have an obligation to daydream. We have an obligation to imagine. It is easy to pretend that nobody can change anything, that we are in a world in which society is huge and the individual is less than nothing; an atom in a wall,
a grain of rice in a rice field. But the truth is, individuals change their world over and over, individuals make the future, and they do it by imagining that things can be different.

(https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming)

Interestingly Gaiman doesn’t talk at all about efficiency or about speed. He doesn’t mention targeted searches. His essay is about libraries as: safe spaces, learning spaces, dreaming spaces, world changing spaces…. In other words, spaces of magic, wonder, community, discovery, learning, safety…. I don’t think most people listening to this would disagree; it’s why many get into library work in the first place.

I’m not sure all the students I teach understand libraries this way; most are instrumental about their engagement with libraries. They want a direct line to the exact thing they need to read for the exact essay they are working on at any given time.

I’m interested in thinking about how it might be possible to change this situation.

**Slide 8: Wonder (Definitions)**

Pulled from *OED Online*

What I get from that definition:

- Wonder is about something that is *beyond* the ordinary, *beyond* the everyday.
- There is something *supernatural* about wonder: things happen beyond rational explanation, beyond conventiona structure and order.
- *There is magic in wonder.*

But because of this magic, because of this extraordinariness, there is also a wariness: there is a potential for evil, destruction, grief…. *Wonder disrupts the seemingly natural order of things*…. In this way, wonder is perhaps also about vulnerability and openness and porosity: a willingness to reach beyond the everyday, a willingness to be moved by something that defies rational explanation.

A practice of wonder, then, is not just about going into the library and thinking about which books we want to read; rather, it’s about centering wonder in all of our approaches,

- from the searches we conduct,
- to the books we decide to pull off the shelf,
- to the way that we choose to engage with those books,
- and to the questions that we ask about them.

And it’s about bringing this into the everyday of our work.
Slide 9: Practice

Celebrated memoirist, Dani Shapiro, writes:

“I sit down every day at around the same time and put myself in the path of inspiration….
If I don’t sit down, if I’m not there working, then inspiration will pass right by me…..” (49)

Importantly –

“The practice is the art.” (51)

This brings to mind a quote from Virginia Woolf’s autobiographical Moments of Being, where she writes:

Behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are
connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of
art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But
there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God;
we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

“We are the thing itself.” - habits that not only lead to the creation of art but are, in themselves, art….

A practice, Woolf and Shapiro suggest, is a deeply embodied commitment; it is never just routine. It
is something we live in and through every breath we take. It is a principle for living and working.

A practice of wonder then, I would suggest, is an openness to awe, to making oneself vulnerable to the
sensuality of research and to the way that research can fundamentally move us, not just intellectually,
but also emotionally and in deeply embodied ways. A practice of wonder is a dedicated openness to
the things that happen beyond us; that are outside our control but that led us to remarkable insights
that we would never have thought of.

Slide 10: Serendipity, Tactility, Community – some basic definitons

Slide 11: Serendipity

Slide 12: A conversation

A library job candidate, upon being asked on a recommended strategy to encourage students to go to
the library, responded: “Serendipity.” They elaborated, stating that while a student might go into a
library with a specific call number in mind, once they get to the stacks, they’ll discover some other
books that they hadn’t know about before, books that might be even more relevant to their work
than their original choice.

I can’t count the number of times I’ve done this. I’ve found my book, but then reached over to the
purple book just a few over, or on the next shelf, or I’ve been drawn in by a title on the book next to
the one I was looking at or noticed something else unique. These encounters led down paths I wasn’t
originally anticipating, but these paths were quite wonderful, better, even, than the one I’d originally laid out for myself.

Serendipity is a drug for those of us who work with archival materials. We live for those moments when material just appears for us; when all the puzzle pieces fit together because of a single, possibly misfiled, document, a hint of a letter, a scrap of information. We live for the stories that seem to emerge out of nowhere.

**Slide 13: Julia Gaffield and Serendipity**

In 2010, Canadian historian Julia Gaffield, now working at Georgia State University, found the long-rumoured but never seen Haitian Declaration of Independence, something historians had been looking for over a century during the course of her PhD. It was bound together with a series of letters.

Serendipity is the holy grail. It’s what keeps us going back into the archives, what propels us forward, what makes us want to continue, even when the going gets tough (and sometimes, archival research is dull, dull, dull). We wait for that ray of light to shine on us and to illuminate something nobody else has seen, to reveal a document that nobody else has ever found, to allow us to put together a story that we’d never thought possible, even if we’d dreamed it might be….

**Slide 14: Maritime History Archive**

In my own work, serendipity was discovering that the ships’ logs for almost all of the ships that brought indentured labourers from what was then British India to the West Indies were actually on my own campus, at the Maritime History Archive (https://www.mun.ca/mha/).

In some respects, there was nothing new about this – maritime historians know this collection well; indeed many have made careers out of these documents. But what was new for me was how this material linked up with the story I was telling, and how, suddenly, my life in Newfoundland intersected directly with my family history in Suriname, something I never expected at all. This changed the work I was writing, the story I was telling.

- It made me think differently:
- New ideas percolated to the surface.
- New connections.
- New links.
- New possibilities.
- New questions.

I see serendipity as a **pause**; it’s a moment of suspension where what comes before recedes but what comes after isn’t at all defined. It is a moment of possibility, awe.

Serendipity is a central theme for archives-based researchers. But it’s also vital to library research, and indeed, to cultivating a practice of wonder… it’s vital to opening up research, to asking more questions, to making connections, to opening ourselves up to possibilities…..
But I wonder about current academic library systems, which prioritize efficiency, speed, and focus. Library searches are becoming increasingly precise. Plug in the right keywords, and the library’s collection opens up to you. You’ve quickly got a list of materials that seems perfect for what you want to be doing.

And often, for many students, that’s it; that’s where the journey ends.

Don’t get me wrong.

- I love being able to find something immediately on a topic, and to be able to zero in.
- It’s deeply satisfying to make a long list of call numbers and then, to find each one of them in the stacks.
- I also fully acknowledge that deeper electronic search functions have made it possible to recover the hidden voices of marginalized folks in the archives: folks who will never have a fonds names after them, folks who will never be the subject of an essay in the finding aids, but whose lives and stories matter.

But current cataloguing systems (and often, the education that accompanies the use of such systems) prioritize efficiency to such an extent as to inhibit serendipity.

Slide 15: Mapping Metaphors

To use a mapping metaphor, we might plug our address (my office) into Google Maps and then follow the shortest route to our destination (in this case the local independent bookstore). We get there quickly, pile out of the car and head to wherever we’d planned to go.

- But what side roads and vistas might we have missed along the way?
- What might we have seen if we’d followed our instincts?
- Who might we have met?
- What experiences might we have missed?
- And how might our stories be different as a result?

What happens if we embrace serendipity if instead of just following the most efficient route, we meander along the way, and we open ourselves to the possibilities that emerge from surprising encounters?

- What happens if we allow our minds to wander, rather than following the most direct route?
- What new research possibilities emerge then?

Slide 16: Back to Julia Gaffield

Of course, serendipity is never just about chance encounters. To experience serendipity, we first have to have laid the groundwork. Would Julia Gaffield have found the Haitian Declaration of Independence just by poking around randomly at the UK National Archives? Hardly. She’d likely still be there today. She needed to have some sense of where such a document might be.
But would she have found it if she’d just plugged coordinates onto a map? No. After all, nobody else had found it in over a century. She found it because she had a sense of the direction she wanted to go in, and because she then followed instincts and poked around.

As she indicated, she knew from correspondence that she’d read in Jamaica that a printed copy of the Declaration had been sent on. And so she knew to look out for it. Interestingly enough, she found another document, a one page broadside designed for public display a year later.

Neither had a road map that led directly to them. As she observes

Both extant versions are located in unexpected archival locations; unexpected, of course, unless we recognized the complex and integrated place that Haiti occupied in the Atlantic World in the nineteenth century.


Slide 17: Too Many Questions

- How might we arrange library training, and how might I arrange my teaching, in ways that encourage students to embrace serendipity, in ways that ask them to engage with the library as a living, breathing space where chance encounters are as important – and sometimes more important – than planned journeys?

- How can we work to bring the library alive to students, so that their journeys include not only the routes they’ve preprogrammed (which are vital beginnings), but also the roads less travelled?

- How do we encourage them to reach for the purple book? Or the one with the interesting title? To flip through the pages of the “wrong book” to discover a sentence that jumps out of the page? To spend time wandering the stacks, just because?

- How can we move beyond the electronic cataloguing systems to encourage students into the library itself, and to imagine the library like archival researchers might, as a space of treasures (possibly hidden), that you sniff out?

- As a space governed not only by efficient cataloguing systems but also by chance encounters, aisles that you didn’t expect to go down, kick stools that didn’t let you reach quite far enough, books that you didn’t expect to find, conversations you didn’t at first expect to have?

All of these questions, of course, lead me to my second point, which is tactility.

Slide 18: Tactility

Tactility, or touch, is not just about the materiality of archival materials (and library resources), but about acknowledging touch as a site of knowledge. The tactile as a source of knowledge as a source of insight.

If those who work in archives fetishize serendipity, they also fetishize tactility: how things feel can be as important as their contents.

As an example from the research that underpinned my new book: MCC, Zeeuws Archief.
In fall 2014, I went to Middelburg, the Netherlands, to the Archives of Zeeland (https://www.zeeuwsarchief.nl) to work with the materials of the MCC (Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie), a company that got into slave trading just before the middle of the eighteenth century and transported thousands of enslaved Africans to ports in South America and the Caribbean.

My experiences there were profoundly shaped not only by the documents themselves – ship’s logs, employment records, provisioning contracts and more), but also by my ability to touch the actual archival materials.

- I could *feel* the paper,
- I could *smell* it.
- I could *see how thick it was*.
- I could see *how ink soaked into the paper*.

In the commercial invoices, I got a sense of the different kinds of paper available, and I could learn, too, from

- handwriting,
- the way materials were bound (and not bound), and
- I could look at marginalia.

Through the sheer volume of materials, I could get a sense of the bureaucratic structures of the slave trade and the extent of its reach into local economies (while this is possible digitally, the experience is not nearly the same).

My experiences at the Maritime History Archive were similar, but here nineteenth-century boxed and folded after years at sea was crunchy and crusty with salt.

In The Hague, meanwhile, I worked with nineteenth-century paper that seemed to crumble as soon as I touched it…

*Feeling, smelling, touching, and listening to documents made for an embodied research experience; touch became an integral part of my research encounter.*

Since 2014, the Archives of Zeeland has digitized its MCC collection.

I appreciate why they have done this: it protects this UNESCO World Heritage Collection while also making it at least somewhat accessible to researchers around the globe.

But I would argue that much has been lost in the process.

**Slide 19: What does touch do?**

- Sight is the basis of the scientific method: and it’s basic to what we generally ‘common sense’ – you need to see it to believe it.
- Feminist theorists have engaged with touch as a radical alternative to what one thinker, Luce Irigaray, has termed a “specular economy”; that is, a social, political world framed around sight.
• Sight, they suggest, distances. We gaze upon our others, for example. Sight, here, determines the boundaries between self and other. Sight determines what is not us, and also what is not like us.
  o We might think of c19 human zoos, that brought colonized people of colour to European centres for display and entertainment

• Touch, however, brings self and other together. Touch is not about distance; it is about bringing things together. When you touch you are also touched; that is, you can’t tell, in the moment of touching, who is touching and who is being touched; those boundaries between self and other disappear.

**Slide 20: What can we learn from touch?**

Touch is a sense that opens us up to other senses as well.

1. Touch is integral to traditional archival research
   a. We feel paper (its quality and thickness) –
   b. We feel the weight and size of documents
   c. We can feel wax seal

[images are from letters included in the Fonds Tissot, at the Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire de Lausanne, a large repository of materials related to the celebrated eighteenth-century Swiss physician, Samuel-Auguste Tissot.]

Libraries are becoming increasingly focused on sight and as they focus less on touch, they are also become deeply disembodied.

**Slide 21: What happens when we lose access to touch?**

Courtney Maum’s humourous novel *Touch*, describes a technology-obsessed swiping society that has grown almost allergic to touch, a world in which touch has become almost impossible…. (but also one that is yearning for a return to physical intimacy and connection)

What happens to library experience when it is almost entirely virtual?

Again, it is absolutely convenient (and necessary) for students to access materials at any time of day or night to work on their projects. Their schedules are complex; their needs are complex.

It has also been vital to making archival encounters possible by distance: I can access archival materials in a range of countries just via my computer).

It’s vital to protecting valuable and irreplaceable manuscript materials (my own experiences of crumbling paper suggest that some materials may be better kept in online repositories).

But what might we lose in the process?

**Slide 22: Telepathy Book**
From my own university library: a 1945 book on telepathy. Could be made available in digital form and this could be a very useful way of accessing out of print primary source materials. But what might we lose in a digitized copy?

- **Online books can collapse time.** Everything looks the same or almost the same, no matter when it was published. Electronic versions offer us cleaned up, fresh, white pages, that all look to be about the same size. Everything becomes uniform, and we lose the specificity of each book. More to the point, we lose essential context related to time. (cover, colour of pages, binding)

- **Senses:** reading is a sensuous experience. It can – and should – engage all of the senses. Online reading limits our capacity to engage with senses beyond sight: how does the paper feel? What does the book smell like? How much does it weigh? What about how the pages turn? If you stuck your tongue out, how would it taste?

- **Context:** we lose any connection to the actual physical dimensions of the book, the feel of it, its weight

- **Community:** library books used to have date due slips at the back; a comforting reminder that others were there before you – you can trace a community through those slips. Now the book just floats…

- **Construction:** You can get a sense of how the book was made – how it was bound, how it was designed.

Electronic books, while absolutely beneficial to research endeavours (vital even) can end up reducing “knowledge” and “experience” to the book’s content alone; that is, to the words and images on the page.

And yet, as anyone who has worked with archival materials knows, we don’t ever only focus on the words and images; our encounter with archival materials is holistic.

We gain insight from every element of the document.

- Size
- handwriting style
- margins
- paper type
- wax seals
- hair (or what friends might call icky archives), …

Touch allows us to engage differently with material, but it also encourages to experience knowledge more broadly, not to reduce it to the narrow confines of text, but to the whole encounter.

**Slide 23: More questions…**

What might it mean to embrace touch as a vital source of knowledge and insight?

What might this look like, in a library context?

How do we encourage students to develop touch as a primary research sense?
Slide 24-25: Community

Community isn’t necessarily something that one thinks of immediately in relation to archival work; after all, archives-based researchers often work alone (and if we work in groups, we often get dirty looks from others when the volume level rises beyond a certain point…).

Archives-based researchers are solitary. We like being alone. We love the quiet.

And yet community is central to what we do:

- we build communities with those who live in the materials we’re working with;
- we build community, too, with those who are just as fascinated by the various esoteric things that turn us on (follow #twitterstorians hashtag, for example, or #womenalsoknowhistory, #ickyarchives, #storypast, etc)
- We get to know the archivists. We get to know each other as we go through our daily research routines, and perhaps most exhilarating, we get to know those whose stories we’re chasing around.

Library research is, of course, also about community.

Two examples of this, both from my own university library.

Slide 26: Fat Studies Reader and Dark Side of the Nation

Dark Side of the Nation – a photocopy of a chapter that I use in my classes (the original is out), with what looks like a large splotch of a coffee stain….

Fat Studies Reader – one of early and foundational books in Fat Studies

Slide 27: Inside the Fat Studies Reader

- About four chapters have extensive marginalia in pink highlighter
- Many of the comments are nasty and quite frankly, abusive.
- This is perhaps the most covered page, but the commentary isn’t as nasty or as abusive as on other pages.

I was going to put this on reserve for my class, but I didn’t.

Slide 28: Inside Dark Side of the Nation

This is different.

This is heavily used book (there’s also a completely clean e-version available now) which has been have underlined and highlighted by many students.

What you can’t see quite as clearly are the different “generations” of commentaries – student after student after student.
In some ways, this could be seen as an archaeological artifact, through which you could possibly trace a few generations of students’ engagement with the ideas in this foundational book on the limitations of the imagined community of the Canadian nation (ironically)

Now, this kind of thing is not unique to my university library; I’ve seen it at other libraries, I’ve also seen it at the public libraries where I’ve worked.

If you’re like me, chances are, when you saw the highlighting, coffee stain, underlining, marginalia, etc, you had an emotional response of some sort. Anger. Grief. Rage. Frustration. Exasperation. You may have gasped, winced, averted your eyes. I know I did.

Slide 29: Butchered Books as Sites of Community?

So why include these particularly egregious examples of library book defacement as examples of community?

Looking at these materials from the perspective of someone who researches in archives….

This stuff is golden. Look at all that material there:

- I can learn about print culture,
- I can learn about the history of ideas.
- I can trace lineages and genealogies of learning communities.
- I can get a sense of popular opinions.
- I can also learn something about technologies of learning (kinds of pens, etc),
- and in some cases (not here), I can get a sense of the membership of learning communities (what languages are marginalia written in, what kinds of handwriting).

Marginalia is a treasure, and people have been scribbling in books for centuries (their own books, mind you). I could sit here for hours just unpacking the many stories here. These books, and the notations in them, are layered with stories….they are spaces of wonder: anything is possible here!

My theoretical archival excavations make it clear that library books are inherently about community: they are about people coming together to share a love and need and passion for reading and thinking.

They are also, as The Fat Studies Reader marginalia demonstrates, about venting – about confronting things that provoke visceral and sometimes violent responses.

And in their material form, they reveal this community. Not just in the marginalia and underlining, but also:

- in the date due slips,
- in the thumbed sections, in the way the spine is cracked and the book falls open (or doesn’t), the stains at various points (the book that’s been loved into a bathtub, for example)
- in the number of times it’s been taped up, rebound, repaired…..
- And in the things previous readers leave behind: receipts used as bookmarks, sticky notes, cards, lists of other books they had picked up, photographs…..
Each of these material traces reminds readers that others have travelled her before. That we are part of a larger community of readers, learners, thinkers, doers.

*Library books, as material artefacts, share the stories of their readers (both happy and unhappy).*

Of course, we don’t want researchers (student or otherwise) to deface their library books in order to make communities of learners visible.

**Slide 30: Learning Communities**

What can we take away from examples like these? How might we use examples like these to further conversations about learning communities, about critical commentary, about research practices, about critical dialogue and conversation?

What happens if instead of cursing and tossing such books into the garbage before heading over to order new copies, we keep some of them, and we develop an alternative library, a library dedicated to thinking about how it is that we engage with ideas, with books, with each other…

- Could we construct library or archives assignments about of books like these, so that students can engage with both the ideas presented in the text and those scrawled into the margins?
- Could we develop a collaborative art installation project that asked students to continue and/or reimagine the conversation?
- Could we develop a project around respect, critical responsibility, and care?

All of these possibilities offer ways of making scholarly community visible in spaces – like books – that often seem isolated, alone, and quiet.

They also offer ways into practices that are otherwise harmful, violent, and isolating – they redirect the horror of the vandalized page into possibility, potential. They offer possibilities for practices of wonder.

**Slide 31: Some Conclusions**

Serendipity, tactility and community are, for me, essential ingredients for a practice of wonder. They are about engaging with materials with our whole bodies: all of our senses, our emotions, and our intellectual faculties. *They are about being with my research, in ways that transform me, in deeply embodied ways.*

As I write in my book, my archival research fundamentally unmoored me. It completely undid me. As a purely intellectual endeavour, the project was rich, vital, full of possibility. As an embodied endeavour, it was an emotional minefield.

Wonder, we might recall is astonishment, awe, admiration. It is about magic, about things that shouldn’t be possible. But like awe, and indeed, also like beauty, and like the sublime, wonder is also about danger and possible evils…

*There is a too muchness in wonder, it holds within it the possibility of social disruption and the deep vulnerability of becoming undone.*

I want to leave this presentation with two quotes, from two writers whose thoughts strongly influenced by own research and thinking at different times and in different places.
Slide 32: Mary Wollstonecraft

Eighteenth-century proto-feminist writer and thinker Mary Wollstonecraft: In 1796, Mary Wollstonecraft published her intensely personal epistolary travelogue, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. The book is infused with the thoughts and feelings of a woman of sensibility lamenting the demise of an amatory relationship and equally, experiencing intimately her role as mother.

At a key point in the narrative, while gazing upon pine saplings struggling to grow in stone crevices, Wollstonecraft reflects on the close relationship between life and death, the here and now and eternity. At a waterfall, she reflects:

> Reaching the cascade, or rather cataract, the roaring of which had a long time announced its vicinity, my soul was hurried by the falls into a new train of reflections. The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye produced an equal activity in my mind. My thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery. Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose with renewed dignity above its cares. Grasping at immortality—it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me; I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come.

(https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3529/3529-h/3529-h.htm)

Wonder, here, is that sublime balance between life and death, between the power of the natural world and our position within it, between a life tethered to the earth and a soul that rises above its cares. Wonder is a space of ultimate vulnerability, and equally, ultimate grace.

To enter into this space as researchers is to enter into a space of radical openness; to operate from a position of profound humility, but also, of deep passion, care, and respect. Research as a practice of wonder is also, then, an act of honouring.

Slide 33: Judith Butler

Judith Butler’s 2004 book, *Undoing Gender*, read during the very first term of my PhD:

> Let’s face it. We are undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel…” (19)

Research is never solely an intellectual pursuit. It is about our desires, our griefs, our joys, our sadness. It is about our questions and our searching. It is about putting ourselves in the way of chance, acknowledging multiple ways of knowing, and building connections with others. In the humanities and social sciences, it is about being undone by each other. “We are,” after all, as Virginia Woolf reminds us, “the thing itself.”

Slide 34: Thank You