

**Project Title** Readers' Marks: tracing the past in Fondren's rare book collections

**Proposal summary** This project will investigate the way books in the Woodson Research Center have been used by previous readers/owners. Many of these books have traces of past reading and ownership. Fellows will be tasked with researching these and making information about them available in the library catalog and other venues.

**Project description** This project will continue an investigation into the way books and other objects in the Woodson Research Center have been read and used by previous readers/owners. Rice has an important collection of books and manuscripts at the Woodson Research Center dating from the medieval period to the present. Many of these materials have traces of past reading and ownership marks. These traces include handwritten notes in their margins, book plates, names and dates written on flyleaves, as well as numerous other marks by well-known figures such as Charles Darwin as well as numerous lesser-known (or even unknown) readers. The work of historians, literary scholars, and others is especially attuned to the way books have been read in different ways at different times. Helping catalog these different reading practices will ensure the Woodson Research Center can continue to meet the needs of these scholars already at Rice as well as bring in new researchers from around the world.

Over the past year, fellows, in consultation and collaboration with Dr. Philip Mogen, Professor Aysha Pollnitz, and the Archivist and Special Collections Librarian Rebecca Russell, have begun to uncover numerous examples of readers' marks and provenance in the library's collections. They have developed a list of materials to focus their inquiries into reading practices. They have subsequently studied these books; and described and transcribed identified marks in order to catalog them and make information about these reading marks and ownership histories available to researchers. They have currently analyzed over 150 books in the collection and over 75% of these books have annotations or provenance information within them - much of which is not recorded in the catalog. We have been astonished by the sheer amount of material they have uncovered and would like to ensure that we are able to continue to chronicle and catalog this important aspect of these collections. While we have made headway in analyzing English-language materials there are still many books to analyze, and we would also like to begin to take a look at works in other languages as well - which comprise a large portion of the collections - something we have not yet had the time or capacity to do.

To continue this project, fellows will simply need time and access to the special collections materials at the Woodson Research Center. They will continue to develop our database of metadata about the reading practices and ownership marks observed in their analysis of collection materials. Ultimately, they will be expected to make this material available to be inserted into the library catalog and write a short document detailing their experiences tracing reading and provenance marks in the archive. They will also be well placed to further present information about their discoveries to the Rice community - which current fellows are going to be doing later this spring - and even help develop a small exhibition (either physical or digital) highlighting the way Rice's collections have been used by readers in decades and centuries past.

## Key tasks

- Developing a coherent subset of materials at the Woodson Research Center on which to focus their research.
- Examining books in the Woodson Research Center.
- Investigating and transcribing readers marks within these books.
- Researching the provenance/ownership history of these books.
- Creating a database of information about these books that could then be incorporated into the library catalog.
  - As part of this database also specifically creating catalog entries.
- Producing a written summary of their work that outlines their research/contributions and highlights particularly interesting discoveries.

**Anticipated project outcomes and impact** The primary goal of this project is to update catalog records (and finding aids) of collection materials at Woodson Research Center that better describes their use and ownership history. In the past year the fellows have made great progress in this effort and we are currently in the process of updating catalog records with the fellows' findings and descriptions.

These updated records should provide researchers both at Rice and elsewhere with useful information about the unique readers' marks within the materials at Woodson and the often interesting provenance of the collections.

## Qualifications

- Interest in history/literature and rare books
- Experience working in the Woodson Research Center or other special collections library/archive
- Introductory knowledge of printing history/processes
- Basic/reading knowledge of languages other than English (many collection items are in Latin, for example)

## Learning outcomes

- Techniques for studying/examining books (bibliographic description) and readers' marks (provenance/paleography)
- Qualitative research and communication skills
- A greater knowledge of the way books have been used and read in the past
- Basic library cataloging skills