

Award-winning teacher, Samuel Lemley, PhD 2020, Prepares to teach the Works of the Past With Digital Tools

By Richard Milby

As English departments throughout the country brace for the likelihood of at least some virtual instruction this fall due to the novel Coronavirus pandemic, Samuel Lemley may be oddly well-positioned for the challenge. And as the winner of the 2020 Distinguished Graduate Teaching Award in the Arts and Humanities— among the highest honors a graduate student can earn in recognition of their dedication to teaching at the University of Virginia— it would be difficult to doubt him.

Lemley has practice translating centuries-old artifacts and ideas to the virtual world. As a part of a collaboration with fellow-PhD students Neal Curtis and Madeline Zehnder, and with funding from the Jefferson Trust, Lemley transformed Thomas Jefferson’s original design for the Rotunda’s dome— which called for the ceiling to be used as a functioning painted planetarium— into a light installation made possible through the use of projectors. In 2019, the Rotunda-Planetarium project (<http://www.rotundaplanetarium.org/>) saw over 5,000 visitors during its tenure, translating a nearly 200-year-old idea into a contemporary reality.

“We wanted to interrogate how the Rotunda has been bled of its dynamism over the last two centuries and the stories that lie buried in its bricks,” Lemley says. “It’s become a kind of cenotaph for Jefferson’s legacy, even though it wasn’t complete by the time of his death. Rather, its early operation was determined by the University’s students, faculty, and enslaved laborers. We hoped by telling the stories of those that actually lived, worked, and studied under the Rotunda’s dome we might exorcise some of this and provide a window onto what the Rotunda could be in the future: something far more accessible and far less monumental.”

Lemley is now the Curator of Special Collections at Carnegie Mellon University, having received a PhD in English in May 2020, from the University of Virginia, and earlier earning an MLIS with a certificate of concentration in Rare Books & Special Collections from the Palmer School in New York City. He’s a man who is “enamored of provenance, or the stories that individual books carry with them through time.”

Lemley’s own story holds all of the fascinating twists and turns found in many of the books he works with. Well-versed in four languages, Lemley has researched in archives all over the US and Europe, works as a consultant to London bookdealers, and designed and compiled a comprehensive short title catalog listing books housed in the original Rotunda Library, with links to digital facsimiles for the books in the collection that are lost and links to VIRGO records for books that survive on grounds (Rotunda Library Online). With Neal Curtis, Lemley lead the charge in late 2019 to preserve the treasure trove of information held in the Alderman Library card catalogue.

Perhaps it is not out of place to imagine him as a kind of lifeguard of stories long forgotten, plucking them from the vastness and restoring them to life.

For Lemley, handling these historical and literary artifacts “[helps] us realize that the past is impermanent and patchy, more ruin than monument, and that we are the arbiters of this piecemeal record. What a privilege it is to uncover and expose the past’s blemishes and to recover lost stories that can speak to and improve the present. Work with primary sources—books, artifacts, art—is the first, necessary step in making this kind of intellectual exercise happen.”

Teaching, however, remains a difficult and rewarding pursuit in Lemley's mind. He hopes that this award reflects the impact that he has had on his students through the years.

"Teaching is the most difficult thing we do," he says, "far more difficult (and carrying far higher stakes!) than researching and writing, for instance. So to be recognized for something I enjoy deeply but feel I so frequently fall short of cracking: it's special."

In the near future, however, Lemley's work with rare books and literary artifacts is at an interesting fork in the road.

"It's prompted quite a bit of panic and creativity among librarians and curators," he explains. "How do we do what we do in this new landscape, if what we do is bound up with providing access to physically present books and things? I don't think anyone has an answer yet, nor will there be only one right solution... More profoundly, the pandemic threatens some of the most entrenched traditions and habits of the academy."

For the time being, at least, Lemley has "set up a camera and book cradle on my desk that allow me to give seminars via Zoom while illustrating points I'm trying to make about a book in hand. Technology saves the day here, though it's no substitute for the embodied, literally multi-sensory experience of touching a 400-year-old book. But that's a practical problem, that will invite practical solutions."

Whatever practical solutions lay ahead of us, there is a certain comfort in knowing that we can look to the past for assistance.