Faculty Development Grant Report

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Funded Project: Travel to Yale University to document for transcription “Notes on Various Trees, with leaf specimens” a notebook kept by Mary Gibbs Shapter in 1879-1880 (DA625.S53 S43 1866a, Yale Center for British Art, Rare Books and Manuscripts).

I met Elisabeth Fairman, the Chief Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at the Yale Center for British Art when she visited my table at the Codex International Book Fair in February of 2015. Ms. Fairman was quite excited to see the work that involved my relation with the natural world and the native plants I had been studying. She suggested that I look at the Yale University Press book “Of Green Leaf, Bird and Flower: artists’ books and the natural world” that documents an exhibition she curated in 2014. The exhibition investigated the aesthetically oriented activities of self-taught naturalists in 19th century Britain who gathered flowers, ferns, seaweed and feathers into albums. The exhibition includes the work of 20th and 21st century book artists that respond to the natural world and the work of their like-minded ancestors.

I feel a strong kinship with these, mostly women, self-taught explorers and made plans to visit the Yale Center for British Art in May, 2016 to see work I had admired from “Of Green Leaf, Bird and Flower” in person. A number of pieces were pulled for me to closely examine in the Study Room of the Center. I was deeply moved and honored to spend time with the work of long-ago fellow naturalists. One book in particular grabbed my attention and to this day I can’t stop thinking about it.

“Notes on Various Trees, with leaf specimens” is a notebook kept by Mary Gibbs Shapter in 1879-1880 (DA625.S53 S43 1866a, Yale Center for British Art, Rare Books and Manuscripts). The little book, 4.5 x 7 inches, is doubled in girth by the insertion of additional sheets and approximately 75 leaf specimens. Some specimens are labeled with a note on the specific tree from which it was collected. The hand-written notes give the English and Latin name, characteristics and information with quotations from various printed sources, accompanied by drawings in pen and ink.

I have plans to make an artist’s book edition inspired by Mary Gibbs Shapter “Notes on Various Trees” in 2019-2020 based on the many heritage native trees in the area where I live. Because of Shapter’s method of finding individual trees during her walks in the Hyde Park area of London and writing notes on that specific tree, I am keenly interested in reading and transcribing this work. To understand the process and thought that went in to the notebook made well over a century ago and a continent away, I hope to illuminate our shared passion for the trees in our daily lives.

The Otis Faculty Development Grant that I requested made it possible to travel back to Yale to spend three days documenting and photographing the Shapter book for the transcription.
When I arrived at the Study Room at the Yale Center for British Art on May 17, 2019 I was met by Elizabeth Fairman, the Chief Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts; Charlotte Padden, Senior Curatorial Assistant and Manager of the Study Room and Molly Dotson, Assistant Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts. We discussed how best to handle the book for documentation and study. The book had been recently treated by the Conservation Department to prevent any further deterioration in order to preserve it. The decision was made at that time to not rebind it. Due to its bulging nature and the inclusion of so many leaf specimens, loose papers and drawings it was a challenge to handle and photograph. We decided the best approach would be to place it in a cradle of foam wedges and use flexible string weights to hold it open. I used a micro spatula to carefully turn the pages and move aside the inserted material. Although I used my digital SLR to document the spreads, my smart phone proved to be very effective at capturing detail.

Over the course of three days, I meticulously went through the delicate book. Along the way I discovered that Shapter followed the table of contents of “Our Woodland Trees,” written by Francis George Heath in 1878 as inspiration for her volume.

I was able to track down and purchase a splendid copy of “Our Woodland Trees.” It has been a valuable reference as I sit down to transcribe Mary Gibbs Shapter’s “Notes on Various Trees.”

The list of trees Shapter studied is found in “Our Woodland Trees” by Francis George Heath, 1878.

Mary Gibbs Shapter referenced a variety of sources for her notes including “Our Woodland Trees” by Francis George Heath, “Forest Trees of Britain” by Rev. Charles Alexander Johns and “Wild Life in a Southern County” by Richard Jefferies.

While Shapter likely used a steel dip pen and ink to write “Notes on Various Trees,” I have chosen a contemporary fountain pen. Context is helpful but deciphering her handwriting is a challenge. Some letters look mysterious to my modern eyes such as the lowercase p and s.