When I came to this project, I had little to no knowledge about rhetorical modes, about the history of American sheet music, or about the American realist movement. I was a babe in the woods, surrounded by trees both tall and terrifying. Meeting with librarians and professors assuaged my fears and lifted me up until I could see over the treetops. Each librarian I met had an insight I had not yet considered, and each gave me a little piece of the puzzle as to where I might be able to turn for the next step in my research. Had it not been for librarians guiding me in particular directions, I could have glossed over entire archives of material that proved the concept of my project.

I began my research in the Fanny Arms Collection of American Popular Sheet Music. After running across a song with an interesting portrayal of race, I used the helpful if antiquated Fanny Arms card catalog to find more works by the same publisher, hoping to unearth further socially conscious songs. In pulling those publisher’s songs, I found the term descriptive being used in advertisements, including one for the song that started my search. Intrigued by this potential genre term, I asked librarians about it. They led me to the Dr. Ivan Gilbert Trade Catalog & Ephemera Collection, and there I found the term appearing in sheet music catalogs. At the counsel of librarians, I contacted librarians from the Music/Dance Library, who helped me through musical encyclopedias and dictionaries in pursuit of the term. Just when I felt as though my possibilities were running short, the class introduced me to the Jerry Tarver Collection of Elocution, Rhetoric and Oratory. There, I found descriptive in recitation manuals, and it gave me a new avenue to explore in relation to the term. Through these connections and further discussions with librarians and professors, I found the rhetorical mode I needed to tie it all together. Online digital archives and databases provided much needed supplementary material in a fashion easily searched as I puzzled over the potentials of my subject.

This has honestly been the most rewarding experience of my undergraduate career. Being hands-on with archival materials opened my eyes to the true nature of academic work, and I loved every minute of it. Often during my time at the university, I felt as though I were rewriting things already said, reinventing the wheel without doing any real thinking of my own. This project allowed me to use my full capacity for thought as I pulled together research I did and resources I found to make a cogent statement about my findings. It also opened my eyes to the vast array of resources available to me at the university, both in terms of content and of people. I owe a debt of gratitude to, in chronological order, Elizabeth Renker, Anne Fields, Rebecca Jewett, Beth Kattelman, Alan Green, Michael Murray, David Riede, and Nan Johnson. Their support on this project allowed me to produce the most difficult, most substantial, and most valuable piece of work I have ever completed. For their stalwart input and guidance, I am thankful.