Research narrative: I knew I wanted to write about The Battle of Algiers (1966) for my term paper for a class titled Cinemas of Urban Alienation. The film’s reputation preceded our group viewing, though I was nonetheless surprised by its power. Before watching it, and especially afterwards, I felt particularly curious about its influence on activists in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s. I had heard it had been significant to the Black Panther Party (BPP), but after a quick Google search I realized the connection between the BPP and the film would require deeper digging.

With the help of Fondren’s databases, I unearthed newspaper clippings from the time period mentioning The Battle of Algiers screenings in certain U.S. movie theaters and universities coupled by lectures. Through newspaper coverage, I began to understand the official circulation of the film within major urban centers in the U.S. Comparing contemporaneous listings and articles on the film by the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune with those by Black newspapers, such as the New York Amsterdam News and the Chicago Defender—which I could search through Fondren’s Black Historical Newspapers database—framed my understanding of the film within civil rights discourse. Through them, moreover, I learned that the film had been screened in full in 1970 as part of a major New York Supreme Court case—popularly known as the Panther 21—concerning over a dozen members of the New York BPP. I was totally fascinated.

What legal precedent existed for screening a pseudo-documentary film as evidence of an alleged plan for public violence in the U.S.? After hours of searching the web, databases hosting cinema journals, books in the library, and the database WestLaw, I realized my query would be difficult to answer without a legal background. To my dismay, the use of fiction within litigation seemed an unpopular topic for humanities
scholars. However, I found Fondren’s incredible selection of books from the 1970s written specifically on the Panther 21 trial (!) in offsite storage; one in particular discussed the screening at length. Bibliographies from the books led me to rich news and journal articles and even a dissertation on the defense’s performance in the trial. (The prosecution had demanded the screening of The Battle of Algiers.)

The dissertation cited the trial at length, and I could access portions of the legal filings through Fondren’s subscription to WestLaw. Fondren’s law specialist, Kevin Markowski, also provided valuable information on how I may find the (tens of thousands of pages) case filings in full. Opting to rely on analysis by legal experts, recollections from members of the jury, and press coverage—and the film, which I had access to through Kanopy—the foundation of my bibliography was set. At Fondren I quickly located books on the BPP; interviews connected to contemporaneous BPP-related trials, which Fondren has on microfiche; the Civil Liberties Review; and a recent, excellent book on the Arab American left—most of which I cited for context in my paper.