

Books in the Age of Anxiety

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While preparing remarks for this panel, my thoughts drifted back to the first professional conference I attended as a librarian newly fledged among the last graduating class of Columbia University's Rare Book Program. This was in 1992, when the Houghton Library hosted a symposium to honor its fiftieth anniversary, entitled "Rare Book and Manuscript Libraries in the 21st Century."¹ The event offered an impressive assemblage of twenty-three speakers—librarians, scholars, and dealers—each bringing considerable insight to bear upon the question of what the future would hold for institutional collections of rare books and manuscripts, especially in light of revolutionary information technology changes then on the horizon. That conference, like this one, took place during a period of economic stress, and assumed that hard times would lie ahead for some, if not all books.

Seventeen years later, in the midst of that long predicted revolution, research libraries still struggle to answer the same questions raised at that conference: How will our collections transform in response to the digital landscape? What can and cannot be saved? In which formats? And how will we *pay* for it all?

Some of the dire forebodings circulating in 1992—about the wholesale takeover of libraries by a futuristic and threatening "virtual library"—have since been dispatched. But now, as then, such forecasts continue to play a prominent part in both professional and popular discussions of libraries and their futures.

I work for a university founded in 1865 on progressive ideals of non-sectarian, co-educational, universal educational access for all persons interested in any subject. Cornell's library has always been digitally advanced, and so my remarks today are informed by that context. As I've learned by talking to fellow curators and librarians, no one working in a major academic special collections library is experiencing our current economic downturn in exactly the same way, so it is difficult to make generalizations about consequences. For that reason, my contribution to this conference will look beyond the present fiscal crisis to broader underlying causes that may explain why some books in institutions could be facing hard times ahead.

In recent decades, predictions about the fates awaiting institutional collections of books and manuscripts tend to swing between two imagined outcomes:

1. The Special Collections Graveyard. We will become vast warehouses containing physical artifacts few will desire to see, once their digitized surrogates are made freely and globally available.

Or, option two:

2. The Special Collections Renaissance. We will remain the one true locus for authenticity and scholarly activity. Our online arsenals of searchable full-text and digital facsimiles will, on the contrary, spur ever greater desires to study, view, touch, smell, and experience increasingly precious originals.

The graveyard argument supposes that rare book and manuscript repositories will partake of the fate that surely must eventually lie in store for many book collections in libraries: declining audiences, declining support, and cold storage for lonely, neglected pieces of paper superseded by the tempting convenience of digital access. Librarians and scholars may be able to make a convincing case for paper collections, but our passionate and well-reasoned arguments will not convince enough provosts, administrators, scientists, and elected officials. Collections will be seen as too expensive by those who have to pay for them, if not by the dwindling numbers who use them, and many collections will be tragically dispersed.

The renaissance model argues that, on the contrary, all books will someday become rare books, and that more people, not less, will think them important. The increasing ubiquity of digital information will continue to enhance their rarity, luster, and scholarly interest. In the digital realm, paper is newly exotic, deserving of reverential study. One hundred years after the Hinman Collator, analytical bibliography will enjoy a *second* fifteen minutes of fame, after the discovery of eighty-six variants among copies of the first printing of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. And a nostalgia-driven populace will stampede our doors craving the experience of artifactual authenticity lacking in their humdrum digital lives.

In hard times, anxieties and utopian fantasies proliferate.

Perhaps because I am in the midst of writing Cornell's Abraham Lincoln exhibition, I am inclined to see a wide range of possibilities located between these two overstated extremes, conceding points where pressures and prejudices would appear insurmountable, yet pushing subtly forward in pursuit of subversive goals, like the formation of a more perfect union, where all books are created equal ... Though we believe in the eternal and universal value of our books, we are now engaged in a great war, testing whether any collection, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure ...

I do not doubt that most institutional special collections will endure and prosper into the future. At the same time, I see evolutionary changes—in some cases quietly underway for decades—that in these hard times may increase pressures that will shape the destinies of books in university research libraries.

Institutional Acquisitions

First, I would like to reassure my antiquarian book trade friends that despite our current hard times, most special collections institutions *do* still have acquisition budgets to spend. Unlike private collectors, who may choose to stop buying at any time for any reason, institutions are bound to spend their budgets

to fulfill their missions, year after year. Many healthy and long-established institutions depend at least in part upon income from endowments to fund acquisitions. While such income has recently declined—the payout on Cornell's endowments declined by fifteen percent in 2009—it will someday recover. Lucky for us, in these hard times, that restricted acquisition endowments cannot generally be redirected to service other institutional priorities. If they could, I suspect some of us would have seen far harder times this year.

But though most of us still have budgets to spend, temporarily smaller though they may be, today's economic contraction—in combination with the advancing digital revolution—will influence what special collections spend their budgets *on*, in the future.

Consider another often-told tale that circulates among those responsible for running the nation's university and college libraries. The story goes like this: As access comes to replace ownership as the defining measurement of success for academic libraries, the scholarly resources they offer become increasingly identical. Out of necessity, libraries now use the same automated acquisition approval plans, rely on cooperative purchasing contracts, and buy electronic journals from the same multi-national information aggregators. This is now true everywhere in academic libraries—except within special collections—where *distinctive and unique* scholarly resources remain. Upon special collections, then, they say, now rests a university library's competitive advantage on behalf of its parent institution, helping to attract the best students, faculty, and highest rankings—alongside perhaps its number of cafes and electrical outlets. Like the “graveyard” vs. “renaissance” argument, this theory has received wide play in our profession over the past decade or two.

I see no reason to disagree with this received wisdom, which has been beneficial to the fortunes of special collections in recent years. But while this belief may have been advantageous for special collections repositories as a whole, it has not necessarily been good for the future prospects of *books* within university research libraries—in or outside of special collections.

It is easy to observe how lack of precision in our understanding and deployment of concepts like “unique and distinctive” may in fact undermine the place of books in a university's special collections. This outlook is likely to advance a trend long underway, tilting acquisition programs further in the direction of *unique* materials such as archival and manuscript collections, which will receive an increasing proportion of institutional purchasing resources going forward. If special collections departments have become a more significant measure of what make our institutions unique, then why not make them (to use a nonsensical term everybody hates) *more* unique by acquiring more of what makes them *most* unique? This trend has been advancing steadily over the past fifty years or more, with many special collections institutions having long focused primarily on the acquisition of archival materials. But as the digital revolution advances in lockstep with the contraction of higher education resources, this pattern may spread and accelerate.

Will library curators need better reasons, or use different reasons, to justify the purchase of some rare books, when the informational content of most books can be accessed at a keystroke? I think they will. I do not suggest that university special collections repositories will cease to collect books, or cease to celebrate, promote, and teach with the books they have. I, for one, still buy lots of books and welcome them into Cornell's collections. But I *do* believe that institutions will ask some printed books to pass a tougher scarcity test, or a higher relevance test against collecting priorities, especially in a period of shrinking resources.

Digital conversion efforts now underway may lead us to bestow increasing favor upon those items unique in absolute terms, or items embodying totemic status, more obviously visual characteristics, or artistic value. Original paper boards, an unusual example of hand coloring, a scarce paper stock, a famous wood engraver, a notable dust wrapper, or any physical quality less likely to satisfy on a screen. Where many books are concerned, desired ownership of the informational content may no longer be the driving factor that will convince an institution to buy.

Those of us who understand that every copy of every book is a unique artifact offering crucial forms of historical evidence can see that these pressures, should they bring widespread change to institutional buying patterns, may leave significant gaps in the historical record.

On the other hand, a greater focus on unique, scarce or previously ignored categories of printed materials may better serve the interests of future scholars by preserving categories of evidence that may have otherwise disappeared. The last two hundred years, for example, have produced a rich variety of printed documentation, much of it so far overlooked by many collecting institutions: ephemeral broadsides and pamphlets, underground and fugitive literature, popular culture in all formats, and countless printed artifacts likely to have survived only in a copy or two. It is to these nearly limitless collecting opportunities that more institutions may turn, where collecting print is concerned.

The largest acquisition I made for Cornell over the past two years was an archival collection of mixed format documenting the origins of hip hop culture in Bronx in the 1970s—the incunables of hip hop. The collection's vinyl records, hundreds of event flyers, and original photographs are now the focus of four classes offered in Cornell's departments of Music, English, African American Studies, and History.

The prospect of immediate and enthusiastic teaching and research use may also play a greater role in university acquisition decisions going forward. This goes against the grain of much of our curatorial training, which assumes that we collect for the ages, and it little matters whether someone looks at a volume we add to our collections once, a hundred times, or no times over the next century. For university research collections in hard times, however, an increasing emphasis on the assessment of our activities in the form of proven utility and usage statistics may influence librarians and curators who understand that this

data that will help justify their existence to administrators during times of shrinking resources.

The Case for the Stacks

If the transition to a fully digital world is having an impact on the shape of collections within the relative safety of rare book and manuscript repositories, it's easy to imagine how hard times may prove dangerous for millions of unlucky books innocently minding their own business on the circulating shelves of research libraries.

America's top ten academic libraries alone hold more than 100 million volumes. If we truly want to make a difference in the preservation of what remains to be saved of the past two hundred years of print, then rare book and manuscript librarians should be doing much more to involve themselves in decisions their parent institutions will make, and are now making, about the fate of books held in academic libraries outside special collections.

Many in the special collections profession like to repeat the truism that all books in libraries will be rare books someday. Or they would have been, if given the chance to get that old. The books quietly aging in our nation's research libraries will need to account for themselves, and many books published during the last 100 years will likely not have the opportunity to do so.

Seven years ago, with one eye on the future inevitability of large scale commercial digitization of Cornell's stacks, I was able to convince my Library's administration to transfer control of every book at Cornell published before 1851 to the jurisdiction of special collections. After those books were identified and their locations changed, I'm proud to say that my general library colleagues embraced the second phase of the project. Several volunteered to be trained for rare book boot camp, and were sent off happily to the circulating stacks where they shelf read every inch of Cornell's main humanities and social sciences library. There they hand pulled any book published between 1850 and 1930 that still survived with original cloth pictorial or decorative binding, illustrations at risk, important founding institutional bookplates, and other attributes. Catalogers in the Library's central technical services unit also agreed to be trained to upgrade the records of the rescued volumes for binding and provenance information. The circumstances allowing Cornell to do this are perhaps uncommon. Our upstate New York location permits a series of high density depository buildings on the edge of campus to receive such volumes. A large scale move of books to those annex buildings had already been scheduled to make room for new books in central campus libraries, and I was able to ride the tails of that project.

While not every library will be able to duplicate this undertaking, many more of us could be making greater use of national guidelines that recommend criteria for the transfer of materials from circulating collections to rare book collections.² As a profession, we have not taken our own guidelines seriously enough, in

enough institutions. Will transfer projects guarantee the safety of older circulating books in every campus library? Perhaps not. But transferring older portions of our stacks to a location controlled by special collections will at least increase the likelihood that the right people will be consulted when someone calls their disposition into question.

Ominous predictions about what will happen to books in library collections have been a feature of our professional debates for a long time. Economic hard times may finally push some of these predictions towards actualization. With university and college campuses contemplating how to cut five, ten, or fifteen percent of their budgets next year, they may be left with little choice but to reduce the size of their circulating collections by closing some library buildings and service points. In April of 2009 Cornell University announced the closure of its physical science library, one of its twenty campus libraries, citing budget cuts and the fact that the majority of the collections were already available online. In August, the University of California, Los Angeles said that its arts library would likely close, containing 270,000 books in the fields of architecture, art history, design, film, television, and photography. Later that same month, the University of California, Davis announced it would close its Physical Science and Engineering library, containing 400,000 books and collections. We are at the beginning this trend.

Cooperative Agreements

In conclusion, I'd like to return to the 1992 Harvard symposium, where at least one participant pointed to the lack of coordinated, cooperative efforts between libraries to responsibly address this issue. Today, we are not any closer to forming national cooperative plans that would ensure that every library doesn't simultaneously decide to get rid of the same books at the same time. Only by working together can the nation's research libraries take the steps necessary to safeguard our printed heritage, and the books future generations of historians deserve and will depend upon. Just as only by cooperative, multi-institutional efforts will we have the ability to confront any number of challenges facing libraries, including the oncoming onslaught of born digital information.

In a recent advance publicity article for his upcoming work entitled *The Case for Books*, Robert Darnton observed that: "I have been invited to so many conferences on 'The Death of the Book' during the past decade that I think books must be very much alive."³ I'm sure he is right. On the other hand, the head of Harvard's Library apparently feels nonetheless compelled to make "The Case for Books."

Books will play a central part in our lives and in the creation of new knowledge for centuries to come. But we should not take our monumental institutional collections for granted, especially in hard times.

We may only have one chance to get this right. If we get it wrong, I am certain that the descendants of our antiquarian book trade friends will be happy to sell

our deaccession mistakes from the general stacks back to our institutions' rare book and special collections divisions in 2075, at great profit.

1. Wendorf, Richard, ed. *Rare Book and Manuscript Libraries in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Library, 1993. Also published as New Series, Volume 4, Number 1 and 2 of the Harvard Library Bulletin.
2. Association of College and Research Libraries, Rare Books and Manuscripts Section. *Guidelines for the Selection and Transfer of Materials from General Collections to Special Collections*. Third edition. Approved by the ACRL Board of Directors on July 1, 2008. <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/selctransfer.cfm>
3. Darnton, Robert. *Publishers Weekly*, 9/14/2009. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6696290.html> retrieved on September 19, 2009.