“NO DAY BUT TODAY.” The cast of the long-running musical Rent sings this anthem of consolation at the end of Act Two before sending its audience out into the neon-saturated day-for-night world that is Times Square after dark. After a modest beginning composer Jonathan Larson’s Pulitzer prize-winning work about the lives and loves of starving artists inhabiting abandoned buildings made its way uptown from an authentically grungy theatre in New York City’s East Village to the posh Nederlander Theatre. Newly refurbished, the better to emulate a shabby downtown performance space, the Nederlander evokes for upmarket audiences the downmarket and theatrically seductive world of struggling artistes, writers, and musicians.

So critically and commercially successful was Larson’s postmodern retooling of Puccini’s La Boheme that the New York production quickly spawned lucrative national and international touring companies, each executing a deft sleight-of-hand eight times a week. While we, along with the show’s obscure counterparts, busied ourselves with the play’s poignancy, their real-life stories were appropriated by a well-heeled entertainment industry, becoming the stuff of middle class chic. Quicker than anyone could say Three Penny Opera, Rent entered the cultural mainstream.

How was low-rent culture transformed into high-Rent mass entertainment? What impulse drives audiences to buy up the T-shirts, coffee mugs, and other tschotchkes emblazoned with the Rent logo? How did
a modest pop opera about impoverished and very geocentric avant-garde artists lay claim to such a large slice of the popular imagination? Given culture’s endless ability to replicate, why should anyone spend time thinking about the processes of cultural transformation and appropriation?

To the extent that cultural heritage professionals are the gatekeepers deciding what pieces of material and intellectual culture will and will not be preserved, we should take note of the processes by which cultural change happens. Special collections librarians, museum professionals, archivists, and others involved in the preservation of cultural materials are in a better position than most to understand cultural transformation and appropriation as reflected in the artifacts we collect. We often worry, perhaps needlessly, that everything worth collecting has been institutionalized or, that if anything remains it has become too expensive for all but the wealthiest institutions to acquire. We fear being left behind in the rush toward literary theory in academic departments, or that library-wide digitization programs have consigned special collections departments to the role of “content providers.” We squander time on the quotidian when we should invest it in the visionary, specifically the ways in which our work is integral to the processes of cultural definition and the development of academic and scholarly trends.

This issue of RBM takes up where the last issue left off, extending the discussion. Noted scholar, editor, bibliographer, and digital guru Jerome McGann challenges us, along with our textual studies peers, to begin using our skills to solve many of the problems caused by the digital revolution. McGann cites problems stemming from the lack of authenticated texts and misunderstanding of contextualization, and dares us to confront both the fear of and the blind faith that has been placed in digital technology.