James P. Ascher

Guest Editor's Note

AS GUEST EDITOR, I am delighted to introduce this special issue of *RBM*—a project that came to me after organizing the 54th Annual Preconference of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, “O Rare! Performance in Special Collections.” Words cannot express my debt and gratitude to the entire rare book and manuscript community in helping find superb presenters for the conference who distilled their ideas into writing. I hope that these written traces on paper continue to bring new thought to bear on the ideas presented and illuminate important issues for future thinkers.

Where *De Rerum Natura* reads “propterea quid sit prius actum respicere aetas nostra nequit, nisi qua ratio vestigia monstrat.” Ronald Melville translates “Therefore our age cannot look back to see those early things except where reason may point out the traces.” Whoever Lucretius was and whatever he was doing, this text comes to us at the end of a long chain of manuscript copies, print copies, libraries, readers and intermediation. The poem announces itself as an aural performance, dispelling myths and explaining the true nature of things, but most of us read it as a distant trace, or *vestigia*, of some long past history.

Even our more recent performers leave traces of their personality and their behavior on our materials. As custodians for the cultural record, we think about how these traces of humanity can be uncovered, studied, bought, sold and understood. This journal issue presents five exciting essays in roughly chronological order of the materials they treat:

- The first essay discusses the earliest printed books and traces of performance found within them. Eric White argues that rather than being silent witnesses to their own history, these books are alive with utterance, voice and music.
- Our second essay is a collaboration between three librarians about the collaborative nature of collecting ephemeral theater material. Theirs is a case study that explains how a collection's structure can be a trace of the history of a project and how this trace can be exposed to users of library materials.

- The intermezzo is given by E. Haven Hawley, who introduces us to her research in mimeographs which continues to uncover the role of technology in transmitting ideas. She exposes the performative nature of some modern printing techniques and how these traces can be analyzed as part of a network of production.
- Ann K.D. Myers and William Andrew Myers join forces with new insight to discuss artists books. As a librarian and book artist team who know each other very well, they meditate on providing access to artist books and explain how these meditations can lead to best practices.
- Our finale is Doug Reside who delivers an encore of his closing plenary talk about digital manuscripts, examining how the patterns of textual transmission have changed and how these changes demand that we collect materials differently. Looking to the future he encourages us to honor our papery past, but to think in terms of where the traces of history can be found in digital materials.

These essays speak for themselves in their acute insights into performing arts materials, performing work in libraries and how networks perform. I can say no more as introduction other than bravo and enjoy the show!

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