

RBM:

A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage

Volume Twenty-seven, Number 1, Spring 2026



Rulon-Miller Books

Interesting & Unusual Books
in Many Fields

Including...

Language & Literature

Fine & Unusual Printing of all periods

Voyages & Travel

Americana

...and the generally unexpected

APPRAISALS :: CONSULTATIONS
CATALOGUES ISSUED REGULARLY
FAIRS & AUCTIONS MONITORED

400 Summit Avenue
St Paul, Minnesota 55102-2662
800.441.0076 or 651.290.0700
rulon@rulon.com www.rulon.com



CONTENTS

- 4** **Contributor Guidelines**
- 7** **Editor's Note: Organization**
Diane Dias De Fazio
- 11** **Contributors**

ARTICLES

- 12** **Algae in Special Collections: Making Room for STEM**
Lucy Perrin
- 25** **The Ordinary Numinosity of the Book: A Framework for Understanding Affective Encounters in Book Exhibition Contexts**
Dr. Susana Sanchez-Gonzalez
- 35** **Widening the Poison Books Scope: Addressing Bibliotoxicology at a Medium-Sized Public University Library**
Judith L. Silva and Zachary Voras

PAPERS FROM "THE POWER OF NEW VOICES"

- 50** **Cataloging a Life's Work: Notes from the George Bixby James Baldwin Collection**
Indica Mattson

FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

- 59** **On Crafting a Policy: Reflections on Membership and Community**
Sarah Allison, Anne Bahde, Jeremy Brett, and Juli McLoone, with Diane Dias De Fazio

REVIEWS

- 63** Jen Hoyer, Kaitlin H. Holt, and Julia Pelaez with Brooklyn Public Library. *What Primary Sources Teach: Lessons for Every Classroom.* Reviewed by *Laura French.*
- 66** Matt Cohen, Kenneth M. Price, and Caterina Bernardini, eds. *Futures of Digital Scholarly Editing.* Reviewed by *Chelcie Juliet Rowell.*

On the Cover:

On the Cover: Special Collections librarians conserved algae press specimens using reversible, water-activated, gummed linen tape. Credit: Lucy Perrin.

RBM:

A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage

Volume Twenty-seven, Number 1, Spring 2026

RBM (ISSN 1529-6407) is a publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association. It is published twice yearly at 225 N. Michigan Ave, Suite 1300, Chicago, IL 60601. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: CHOICE/ACRL Subscriptions, P.O. Box 977, Lincolnshire, IL 60069. The paper used in this publication is recycled and acid-free.

Instructions for authors and further information on submission of manuscripts are available at <http://rbm.acrl.org/index.php/rbm/about/submissions>. For questions about submitting your manuscript, please contact the editor, Diane Dias DeFazio at diane.diasdefazio@gmail.com. Inclusion of an article or advertisement in *RBM* does not constitute official endorsement by ACRL or ALA.

RBM is indexed in *Library Literature* and the *MLA International Bibliography*. Production office: ACRL, 225 N. Michigan Ave, Suite 1300, Chicago, IL 60601. Advertising office: Melissa Carr, sales manager (US East, South, West, International), 704-491-7789, or Ryan King, sales manager (US Midwest: IL, IN, MI, WI), 773-414-9292. Circulation office: Change of address and subscription orders should be addressed to: ACRL Subscriptions, P. O. Box 16715, North Hollywood, CA 91615, at least two months before the publication date of the effective issue; phone: 844-291-0455 (toll free); fax: 818-487-4550, e-mail: ACRLSubscriptions@pubservice.com.

Annual subscription price: \$56.00, U.S.; \$62.00, Canada, Mexico, Spain, and other PUAS countries; \$73.00, other countries. Single copies and back issues, \$26.00 each.

© American Library Association, 2026. All materials in this journal subject to copyright by the American Library Association may be photocopied for the noncommercial purpose of scientific or educational achievement granted by Sections 107 and 108 of the Copyright Revision Act of 1976. For other reprinting, photocopying, or translating, address requests to the ALA Office of Rights and Permissions, 225 N. Michigan Ave, Suite 1300, Chicago, IL 60601.

Except where otherwise noted, content in this issue is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 United States License. Some rights reserved.



Spring 2026 | Volume 27, Number 1

EDITOR

Ms. Diane H. Dias De Fazio
diane.diasdefazio@gmail.com

EDITORIAL BOARD

Dr. John Henry Adams
Sarah M. Allison, Sacramento State University Library
Anne McDougal Bahde, Oregon State University
Tad Boehmer, Michigan State University
Jeremy Wil Brett, Texas A & M University
Marta Fernandez Golbano, University of Southern California
Dr. Alison Fraser, University at Buffalo
Margaret Gamm, Library of Congress
Jennifer Garland, McGill University
Samantha Garlock, Colby College
Meredith Louise Hale, University of Tennessee Knoxville
Fiona Kovacaj, Toronto Metropolitan University
Alicia Rae Leathers, University of Missouri–St. Louis
Juli McLoone, University of Michigan
Joel Warren Minor, Washington University in St. Louis
Virginia Sytsma

EX OFFICIO

Teresa Anderson
ACRL Executive Director

Dr. Anna Simonson
Chair, ACRL Publications Coordinating Committee

Dr. Brian Shetler
Chair, RBMS Publications and Communications Committee

Dr. Leo S. Lo
Past-president, ACRL

David Free
Staff Liaison

Contributor Guidelines

Manuscript Submission

Manuscript submissions for *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, along with related questions, should be sent to the editor, Diane Dias De Fazio, at diane.diasdefazio@gmail.com.

Overview

RBM is a peer-reviewed journal publishing articles on the theory and practice of library special collections, archives, cultural heritage institutions, and related fields. Content in *RBM* generally assumes two forms: articles and reviews.

Deadlines, Updated April 2026

Fall Issue: June 20

Spring Issue: December 20

Submission and Publication Process

- Contact *RBM* editor via email before sending manuscript(s) to discuss topic(s), length, illustrations, or other issues prior to submission.
- Submit email attachments in MS Word (.docx) to the editor.
- Submit original, unpublished articles only. Contributions published elsewhere or under consideration by other journals are ineligible for publication in *RBM*.
- Authors are responsible for the accuracy of the statements and sources in their articles.
- If the article was presented at a conference, identify the conference by name, sponsoring organization, and date.
- If approved, authors will be asked to provide 100-word biographies for all contributing authors.
- *RBM* uses an identity-hidden peer review process to review all submissions. At least two readers and a member of the *RBM* editorial board are assigned to each article. Authors receive reviewer feedback, in addition to a publication decision from the editor. Submissions are reviewed according to the journal's [Criteria for Evaluation](#).
- At acceptance after peer review, authors are provided with a timeline for revision and re-submission.
- Authors are asked to sign and submit the ACRL publications agreement form, in which ACRL asks for "the non-exclusive right to print, publish, reproduce, and distribute your work both in print and online. ACRL also has the right to use your name in association with the article for advertising purposes." Additional information may be found in the [ACRL Publications Agreement FAQ](#).

- Authors receive a copy of the first-round page proof of their article to proofread.

Content

- Articles may take the form of theoretical or scholarly submissions, revisions of conference presentations, articles that describe specific libraries or collections, interviews, or historical articles. Articles may address membership and Section assessments, acquisition and collection development, access to and use of special collections, conservation and preservation, cataloging and technical services, protection services and loss prevention, fundraising and donor relations, digital humanities, exhibition preparation, trends in the antiquarian market and collecting; and other topics. Articles must relate to special collections librarianship, archives, or museum practice, and the writing style should be formal. Authors are asked to avoid use of the first-person voice.
- Articles should be 3,000 to 5,000 words, plus any accompanying tables, charts, or images. Maximum length for an article is 5,000 words.
- Copyright clearance and permission for publication for any portion of the submitted article, including images, must be obtained, *in advance*, by the author.

Style and Form

- Articles must be double-spaced.
- Submissions will be edited for content, style, spelling, grammar, and syntax. Editor makes final decisions about journal content and form.
- Acknowledgments, if any, should appear at the end of the article.
- A 200-word abstract precedes the body of the article.
- Articles must follow the “**Notes-Bibliography**” and style guidelines provided by the latest edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. References should be consecutively numbered throughout the manuscript, and formatted as footnotes. Bibliographies are not included in published articles.
- Articles must be submitted in English, using American spellings, following *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (current edition) for preferred spellings of words.
- Articles submitted in languages other than English must also provide an English-language copy of the text.

Visual Materials

- Authors are encouraged to send illustrative material with their submissions.
- Charts and tables should be submitted as separate Word files, captioned, and otherwise clearly identified. Indicate the desired placement in the text by adding an instruction in parentheses; *e.g.*: (Insert table 2).

- TIFF files are preferred for illustrations. Files should have a minimum of 300dpi.
- Full captions should be submitted for all images, including information regarding copyright permission, source of image, and photographer credit.

Reviews

RBM reviews new publications pertinent to a wide range of cultural heritage collections. Resources for which *RBM* is currently looking for reviewers are listed [here](#). If you are interested in reviewing one of these resources, please contact *RBM* Reviews Editor John Henry Adams at john.henry.adams.41@gmail.com. Publishers, readers, or prospective reviewers who would like to suggest additional resources for review may do so through the [Review Suggestions Form](#).

Author Rights

ACRL, as publisher of *RBM*, supports copyright retention by submitting authors. For more information on ACRL author agreements, visit the [ACRL website](#). ACRL does not charge author processing fees (APCs) to publish in *RBM*.

Privacy Statement

The names and email addresses entered in this journal site will be used exclusively for the stated purposes of this journal and will not be made available for any other purpose or to any other party.

[ALA Privacy Policy](#)

Diane Dias De Fazio

Editor's Note: Organization

Editor's Note: TL; DR—skip to the end for a summary of this issue.

What keeps us together?

Without descending into a paragraph that makes me one of *those* writers, the ones who dissect words, dwell on etymology, fuss over syllables, only then to declare some insight on a topic, solely based on “analysis” of—or, more likely, mild simmering over—word origins, I can only offer this: what keeps us together is community. That seems like the easy way out, the saccharine, the glass-half-full response to a bad situation. And, in the global scheme of things, ALA taking a “RIF”—which, while I’m at it, is clearly some bygone corporate wordsmith’s attempt at gallows humor, transforming “mass layoffs” into a more military-industrial-complex-friendly “Reduction In Force,” one wonders what came first, the acronym, or the action—RIF-ing, if you will, in the fourth quarter of an already dark year seems like a trifle of a “bad situation,” when compared against the daily toll of America’s backslide into autocracy. I digress. In the *Before Times*, an RBMS member might take a stance on their parent professional group’s shearing off staff, and say something like, “It’s right-sizing,” or, “I imagine it’s going to make things more efficient,” or, “I’m not really sure what those people do at ACRL, anyway.” But, this time . . . this time, it’s different, *right?*

To those who are unfamiliar, to summarize: smack in the middle of the production of *RBMS*’s last issue, The Library Association Mothership, the American Library Association, laid off eight percent of its staff. Eight percent, if you don’t do math, may, again, seem trifling, but it amounts to numerous employees, including an important handful who worked for the division that includes the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section—the Association of College and Research Libraries. From what I understand, the decision was not ACRL’s choice. Staff who coordinated Member of the Week, liaised with awards, and performed critical work for this very publication were terminated, leaving their work to be distributed amongst outside contractors and ALA’s remaining employees.

America’s Library Org Sweetheart/ACRL Conference Coordinator Tory Ondrla was among the dismissed, right during the crucial period of RBMS conference planning and future conference site selection. These were people who created our professional

© 2026 by Diane Dias De Fazio (CC BY-NC [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>]).

third space; familiar faces, dependable voices on the other side of Zoom meetings, trusted quasi-colleagues who did the unseen labor that made forging a community possible for the rest of us. They took care of the messy details most of us cannot even begin to have the capacity to do—negotiated contracts with hotels, answered near-endless questions, kept receipts and interfaced with donors past and present, wrote scripts for conference events, managed untold spreadsheets and databases, and ran point on the ground to ensure everyone had a valuable experience. These cuts to our division left RBMS members feeling sad, betrayed, helpless—a whole panoply of emotions, really—but, also, unheard. The age-old cry, “Where does the money [for membership] go?!” rang out. Some expressed themselves—many through silence, mind you—and a few simply continued to bemoan the limits of ALA Connect.

First, ALA Connect is not the problem, and RBMS has the power to change both how we interact there, and how it serves us, but that’s something for another day. Let me be clear: I chose to use my platform here, as editor, to address this situation, because *RBM* was directly affected. Dismissal of Dawn Mueller, the journal’s senior production editor and, apparently, graphic design whiz behind many an ACRL product did, in fact, affect the status quo. Dawn facilitated the 108-page Spring 2024 issue of *RBM*—the longest in years, if not ever—which brought greater representation of authors and institutions. Dawn wrangled author agreements, managed deadlines, and endured the primadonna-iest personalities amongst us. We—that is to say, I, the journal editorial board, and David Free, in his capacity—*will* continue, where we left off, with our goals, and we will deliver on our promises from the 2024–2025 and 2025–2026 work plans, but things have changed.¹

Now, back to the silence: while They say there is value in silence, I don’t know that silence is useful, here. I think we, RBMS—as an organized group of special collections professionals—can do more to defend our needs, interests, and be heard. What we have here is disorganized communication failure—between ALA and ACRL, RBMS and ALA, RBMS and ACRL, and RBMS leadership and its members. Note that I put RBMS first in those groupings, but individual participation is also part of how change is made.

In the fallout, I found myself thinking about other names of ACRL leaders who RBMS worked with, and landed, as one does, on LinkedIn, as a kind of “Where are they now” moment. Interestingly, Kara Malenfant, who led ACRL, parted ways around 2020. Jay Malone? Gone. Mary Jane Petrowski, former associate director of ACRL, retired in 2023, which meant that RBMS lost another longtime advocate from ACRL to sing our praises and worth to ALA. It made me think about a longer-term decline in services and

1. Albeit on a slightly altered timeline. See “On Crafting . . .,” this issue.

support for ACRL sections, not just RBMS. Taking a wider view, it seems that support *for* ACRL and its sections has steadily decreased for years, but I could be wrong. I am also a member of ACRL Arts, and it would be interesting to see what their leadership/membership committee chairs are experiencing in terms of loss of support. The ACRL Publications Coordinating Committee seems generally unfazed. Does RBMS need to care about what's happening with our peer ACRL sections? I'll argue that we ignore them at our peril. If RBMS leadership has the opportunity to network with and learn from their peers across the larger libraries universe—and they do, through ACRL Communities of Practice Assembly—why do the folx who participate not feel seen?

Speaking of participation, the last RBMS Exec meeting—the one that takes place biannually and is free, on Zoom, where major decisions are publicly made—had fewer than sixty attendees. —About 4% of RBMS's membership showed up to an open online meeting, scheduled at a mutually agreeable time for all continental time zones! Information Exchange, for that matter, can't seem to get an audience, despite all of RBMS's leadership being present to provide short summaries of their work. RBMS has just over 1,800 members, but until recently, our election results regularly clocked in with around 400 votes. That's 22% turnout, just under a quarter of RBMS membership, for online-only voting. And, in the 2026 election, a mere 172 members—fewer than 10%—selected the next RBMS Chair. That's right: it's the lowest turnout we may have ever had. Over the last decade, having co-chaired the Membership & Professional Development Committee, serving on Conference Program Planning and Development, and as Member at Large from 2020–2023, the one thing I observed is: participation is not high. What does this say about the voices of our organization?

But, we don't have opportunity or time, Diane; we have a Board Liaison for that, you say. Well, how could our ACRL Board Liaison better advocate for RBMS, now, and going forward? Our most recent liaison regularly attended RBMS Exec, but never attended Information Exchange, and not only missed all the ACRL Section Membership meetings when I was Chair, but also never communicated with me or my predecessor on that committee, despite the fact that it includes Chairs from all sections of ACRL. While I appreciated hearing from her during RBMS meetings, I wonder if the board liaison—whoever they might be—might do more for the Sections in the future. Again, it would be interesting to hear from other ACRL sections as to how they feel about their representation on the Board and these recent staffing “reductions.”

Personally, I found I had a lot of questions—but, mostly, they were for *you*, dear reader: What organizations/groups were you a part of in library/info/grad school? How did you feel about those experiences? What did your mentors do? Are you involved at the state or regional level? To what degree, and why or why not? Are you a part of any other ACRL Section or ALA Division? Do you serve or consider yourself “involved,” there, and why? Have you ever attended an ALA town hall or

ACRL session? Did you get anything from it, or why did you not attend? Did you ever notice if RBMS Executive Committee members go beyond RBMS Chair, and serve on ACRL or ALA committees?

Have you ever found yourself thinking, How do they pick candidates for Exec?, Who/What is Exec? or, I don't know that person/these people; should I know that person/these people? What would you like from your leadership? What do you think would strengthen this organization?

And to the other questions that may roll around in your head—Can I protest? Should I withhold my dues?—I offer only this: if I withhold my dues, and others also do the same, then the Library Mothership will read that as a decline in interest. This is not hyperbole: it may interest you to know that, if membership falls below a certain number for three years, a Section will be dissolved. RBMS is nowhere near in danger of this; don't panic. But also consider the literal cost of starting an organization from the ground up: a reborn and rebranded RBMS will need hundreds of thousands of dollars to operate, somewhere around \$25,000 annually for IT/accounting/insurance alone, and most of that future Archives, Rare Books, and Manuscripts Org—or whatever it's called—will draw its revenue from “programming,” i.e., the conference experience will be more expensive. (Just a thought.) More to the point, though, the annual RBMS budget depends on membership numbers, and—small as that fund is now—it will only exponentially shrink, as members flee, thereby allotting fewer funds to significant yet marginally mundane things, like the website.

It's been just over eleven (*gasp*) years since I joined RBMS, taking a plunge into a professional world for which I'd previously only danced at the margins. I am grateful for and hope that I have contributed as much as what the Section provided me. That's what this is about, I think: we want an organization we give to *and* receive from, but organizing anything takes more than just annual dues.

Now, about this issue. The STEM theme of Fall 2025 continues, with Lucy Perrin's case study from Pepperdine about an algae press collection. Judy Silva brings us perspective from Western Pennsylvania's Slippery Rock University, and the real-world challenges of toxic materials mitigation at a non-Big-10 institution with limited resources. For those of you who crave theory in this journal, Susana Sanchez-Gonzalez celebrates the Ordinary Numinosity of materials, focused on the potential of the exhibition setting. Power of New Voices 2025 panelist Indica Mattson showcases cataloging challenges related to a collection of James Baldwin materials. As ever, there are book reviews to round things out, and, this time, the Generative AI Policy subcommittee presents a tale of creating a framework in unsteady times. Stay tuned for an update on rbms.info on the *RBM* Editorial Board's Work Plan, and other announcements about our new publication timeline!

CONTRIBUTORS

Indica Mattson is a Catalog/Metadata Librarian at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. She received her Master of Science in Information from Florida State University in 2022 and holds a Bachelor of Arts in History and English from the University of Florida. Her research interests include critical cataloging, modern book history, and controlled vocabulary work in special collections.

Lucy Perrin is Director and Archivist for the Rushford Center for Research at Pepperdine University Libraries' Special Collections and University Archives. In this role, Lucy works to preserve the cultural and spiritual heritage of Pepperdine University and serves as a special collections librarian. She received a Master of Library and Information Science and a Graduate Certificate in Archival Management from University of North Texas in 2022. Lucy has a bachelor's degree in biology from Lubbock Christian University.

Dr. Susana Sánchez-González is an art historian and librarian with experience in exhibitions, public engagement, creative heritage, and reader development. With a PhD in book exhibitions and an MA in Art Galleries and Museum Studies, she has worked across museums, special collections libraries, and public and school settings, including coordinating the Special Collections Reading Room at the John Rylands Research Institute and Library. Based in the UK, she is currently HE Innovation Fellow (Libraries and Network Engagement) at Creative Manchester, University of Manchester, collaborating in a research-informed knowledge-exchange capacity with Manchester UNESCO City of Literature and The Portico Library.

Dr. Judy Silva is a full professor at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, serving as the Fine & Performing Arts Librarian, University Archivist, and Special Collections Librarian. She is the library liaison to the Departments of Art, Dance, History, Philosophy, and Theatre, and conducts instruction in all areas of responsibility. Silva holds a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from the University of California, Santa Cruz; a Master in Library and Information Science from the University of Pittsburgh; and a Doctor of Education in Curriculum & Instruction from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Silva served as the project manager for this study.

Dr. Zachary E. Voras is an Assistant Professor in the Chemistry Department at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, a public primarily undergraduate institution in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. He received his B.S. in Forensic and Toxicological Chemistry from WCU, and a Ph.D. in Analytical Chemistry from the University of Delaware. His research expertise is in the forensic chemical analysis of materials, particularly that of cultural and archaeological objects.

Lucy Perrin

Algae in Special Collections: Making Room for STEM

Pepperdine University Libraries' Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) accessioned an algae press collection belonging to a distinguished professor of biology. The first of its kind in these archives, the natural history collection of aquatic plant material provides for inquiry-based and participatory student instruction and research. The algae press collection also provides real-time professional development for special collections librarians more accustomed to stewarding rare books and manuscripts. Providing an overview of developing the collection to full and effective use, this case study addresses challenges and opportunities encountered, including building departmental consensus, researching best practices for preservation and conservation, and developing new use and handling policies. Increasing accessibility of the specimens to the wider scientific community through a national consortium of herbaria will add value to the collection beyond the university.

Introduction

The Pepperdine University special collections department is less than a century old. The department supports instruction through intentional acquisitions and generous donations of valuable rare books and unique archival collections. However, the materials are largely paper-based and focused on literature, religion, art, and history. To meet growing demand to demonstrate their impact on student learning, university archivists are including a broader array of materials, recognizing the archives as not just literary, but scientific.

This case study examines one such effort at Pepperdine University Libraries, and describes the particular circumstance that presented the opportunity to accession a natural history collection. The literature review presents the research potential for natural history collections, reflects the call for special collections departments to impact student learning, and compares the policy differences between herbaria and traditional archives. Further, the case study describes challenges and opportunities the department encountered as it endeavored to add a natural history collection, revealing strategies for adding value to such collections as they are incrementally developed to their highest and best use.

© 2026 by Lucy Perrin (CC BY-NC [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>]).

The Setting

The author received an inquiry from Stephen D. Davis, Distinguished Professor of Biology at the university. He was clearing out his lab as he transitioned to retirement from a highly successful, fifty-year career as a botanist. Would the archives be interested in preserving his herbarium collection of pressed and mounted macro-marine algae, commonly referred to as seaweed? Over the years he had accumulated mounted specimens, but most were collected from the rocky intertidal zones of Pacific Grove and Monterey Peninsula of northern California. The specimens were pressed, dried, and mounted on herbarium paper, in preparation for teaching and scientific research and to preserve their historical record.

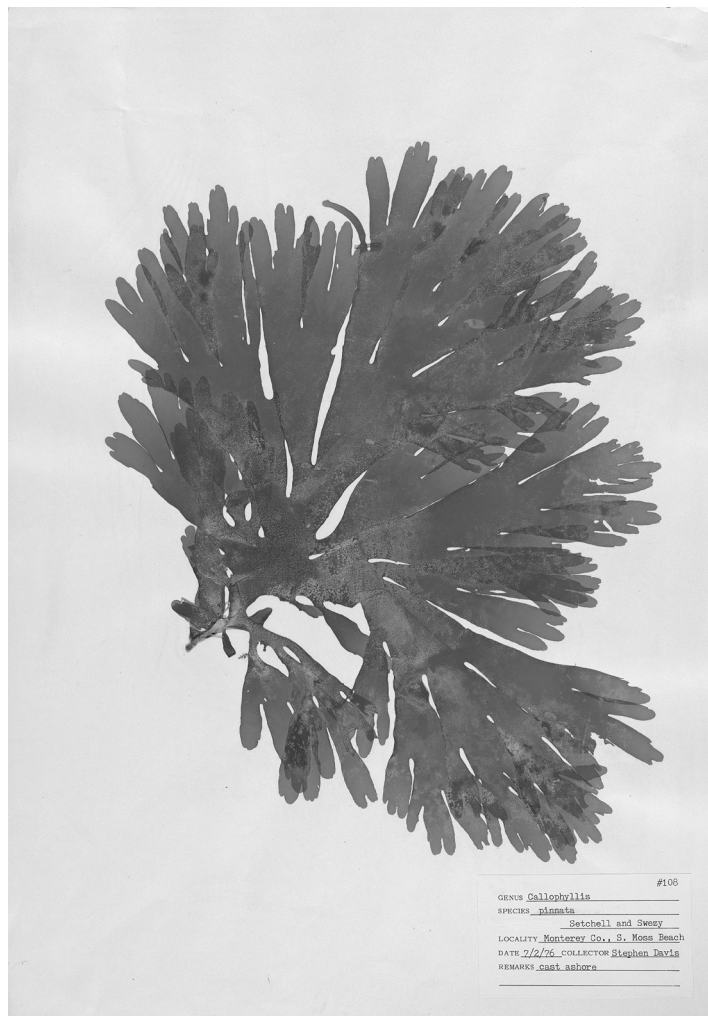


Fig. 1. *Callophyllis pinnata*, 07/02/1976. From the Stephen Davis Algae Press Collection, Pepperdine University Libraries Special Collections and Archives. All rights reserved.



Fig. 2. *Botryocladia pseudodichotoma*, 06/18/1976. From the Stephen Davis Algae Press Collection, Pepperdine University Libraries Special Collections and Archives. All rights reserved.

The professor gathered most of the specimens from the coastal waters of California in 1976. While the samples were meticulously mounted and labeled, they also spent the subsequent fifty years in a filing cabinet, in the suboptimal, inconsistent environment of his teaching lab. Dr. Davis collected the specimens under the supervision of world-renowned botanist, Dr. Isabella Abbott.¹ This collection of one hundred ninety-eight specimens is a rich and irreplaceable record of the environmental history of California's coastal waters. It also preserves the historical record of algae distributional data, morphology, and species-naming. Moreover, it documents the academic researchers' scientific practices and those of the universities with which they were associated.

In the last twenty years, SCUA at Pepperdine University Libraries grew from one cramped storage room to a recently renovated special collections wing.² The special collections instructional program steadily expanded, as well, to include undergraduate classes from a range of disciplines, including STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. And yet, when the algae press collection inquiry came, SCUA had only one other natural history collection in its archives.³ The algae press collection offered a perfect opportunity to grow the collections toward greater support for faculty engagement and student

1. Abbott, a widely published seaweed scholar at Stanford University and University of Hawaii, discovered over 200 new species of algae during her career. Jennifer Crites, "Pioneering Professor Is First Lady of Limu," 21 October 2010, www.hawaii.edu/malamalama/2010/10/isabella-abbott/

2. In addition to two sustainable preservation environments, the SCUA wing hosts a reading room, an outfitted processing room, a digital lab, and dedicated instructional and display spaces. These areas feature large glass viewing windows so that the work of special collections is visible, accessible, and inviting to students, faculty, and researchers alike. Marc Vinyard et al., "A Pop-up Service Point and Repurposed Study Spaces: Maintaining Market Share During a Renovation," *Journal of Library Administration*, 58, no. 5 (2018): 449–467, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2018.1468193>

3. SCUA's previously existing natural history collection is an inorganic one—non-living, non-carbon-based material—consisting of small stones that document the geological and archaeological history of the coastal ranges of the Santa Monica mountains. Pepperdine University Archaeological Survey and Excavation Collection, Collection no. 0114, Malibu Historical Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, Pepperdine University.

learning in STEM fields. It also provided opportunities for professional development and showcasing SCUA's newest platform for digital collections and exhibits.⁴

Literature Review

Overall, the literature calls special collections librarians to explore adding STEM materials—and reveals the research potential of natural history collections—but cautions that preservation policy shifts may be necessary. To remain relevant and central to the educational enterprise, academic libraries must demonstrate their impact on student learning in all disciplines, and they must explore ways to collaborate “across [academic] borders,” as they teach students how to critically examine archival materials.⁵ Mulrennan points out the diverse range of stakeholders—from “budget holders and department heads,” to the “undergraduate student [and] the senior academic,”—that must be engaged to make the case for, and realize, the full value of archives.⁶ This case must “[reach] beyond mere novelty. . . using every channel available to spread consistent key messages about the value of the department and its services. Here, [imagination] is key.”⁷ Likewise, Flynn identifies archives “as a trigger-point for students to shift from passive to active engagement with learning,” and calls “for bringing multiple stakeholders, from a range of disciplines. . . [to reveal] new avenues for engagement.”⁸ Quoting Button and Buttars, Mulrennan encourages archives departments to be “imaginative” and “flexible” in their approach.⁹ Mulrennan calls for “making a conscious effort to reach beyond ‘familiar’ disciplines in Arts, Humanities and Social Science.”¹⁰ The algae press collection, though the first of its kind at Pepperdine, directly responds to this, by preserving organic natural history materials. These materials invite the academic community and special collections librarians to “to ‘think deeper’ about the archival record,” and the power of STEM primary sources.¹¹ The algae specimen collection invites special collections librarians to develop effective instruction sessions for STEM students, and supports the possibility of future research, using

4. <https://pepperdine.quartexcollections.com/malibu-historical-collection/algae-press>. Pepperdine's data asset management runs on AM Quartex, a product of AM, which provides a cloud-based and hosted “digital collections platform for libraries and archives.” “Showcase Your Digital Library,” Adam Matthew Digital Ltd., Sage, 2026, <https://www.amdigital.co.uk/am-quartex>

5. Theresa Quill et al., “Working Across Borders: Building Collaborations for Primary Source Instruction,” *Journal of Map and Geography Libraries* 15, no. 2–3 (2019): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15420353.2020.1719268>

6. Kirsten Mulrennan, “Lessons in Making the Unique Ubiquitous: Diversifying the Role of the Special Collections and Archives Department to Enhance Teaching and Learning at the University of Limerick,” *Archives and Records* 41, no. 2 (2020): 140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2020.1713070>

7. Mulrennan, “Lessons,” 140.

8. Paul Flynn, “Towards a Pedagogy of Archival Engagement,” *Archives and Records* 41, no. 2 (2020): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2020.1758048>

9. Clare Button and Grant Buttars, “People Power: Models of Engagement for Diverse Special Collections,” *SCONUL Focus* 60 (2014): 61. Quoted by Mulrennan, “Lessons.”

10. Mulrennan, “Lessons,” 128.

11. Mulrennan, “Lessons,” 138.

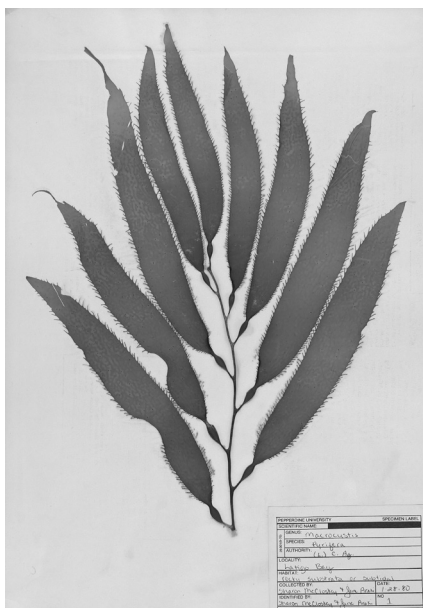


Fig. 3. *Macrocystis pyrifera*, 01/28/1980. From the Stephen Davis Algae Press Collection, Collection no. 0220, Pepperdine University Libraries Special Collections and Archives. All rights reserved.

the STEM-based materials in collaboration with campus programs, such as the university's Summer Undergraduate Research Program in Biology.¹²

Long recognized as contributors to the scientific record, herbaria, such as the algae collection, serve as libraries—of dried, pressed plant samples and their associated data. They provide biological and environmental histories, allow scientists to track changes over time, and document past scientific practice.¹³ This material can be tapped not only for research but also for creative use in primary source STEM instruction. Herbaria can effectively engage students in active learning and discovery that addresses personally relevant issues including public health, emerging diseases, global food insecurity, and challenges associated with a changing climate.¹⁴ Algae specimens can support learning through engaging, student-led activities, such as asking open-ended questions. Such methodologies allow students to develop their own interpretations and theories about scientific concepts. As primary source materials with an unfamiliar format, the specimens inspire an appreciation for “herbaria as essential resources for understanding the

12. Pepperdine University hosts an annual program, Summer Undergraduate Research in Biology, in which science faculty work closely with students to complete original biological research. “Summer Undergraduate Research in Biology,” Pepperdine University, 2026, <https://seaver.pepperdine.edu/surb/>

13. Macarena Marin-Rodulfo et al., “Old Meets New: Innovative and Evolving Uses of Herbaria Over Time as Revealed by a Literature Review,” *Plants, People, Planet*, 6 (2024): 1261–1271, DOI: 10.1002/ppp3.10541

14. Shawn Krosnick and Kelly Moore, “Rooting Students in Their Botanical History: A Method to Engage Students in Botany and Herbaria,” *Plants, People, Planet*, 7, no. 2 (2025): 838–849, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppp3.10595>

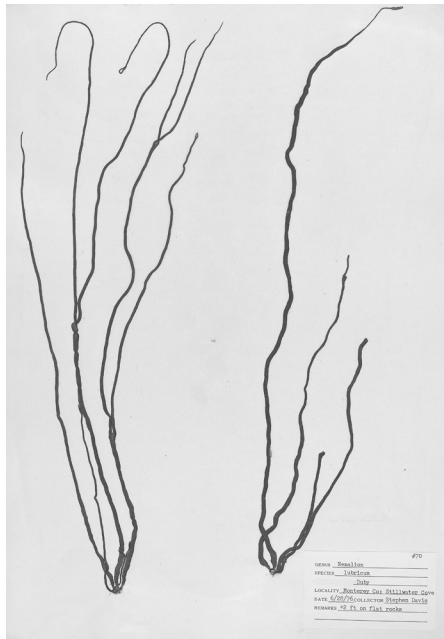


Fig. 4. *Nemaion lubricum*, 06/28/1976. From the Stephen Davis Algae Press Collection, Collection no. 0220, Pepperdine University Libraries Special Collections and Archives. All rights reserved.

natural world.”¹⁵ By weaving contextual information into instruction sessions with the algae specimens, Pepperdine special collections librarians shed light on past scientific practices and societal norms, encouraging students to consider not only the scientific value of the materials, but the voices represented in the scientific record.

Cook et al. point out that “physical resources and digital data associated with natural history [collections] provide a superb but underused platform for innovative, relevant, and significant educational experiences.”¹⁶ Inasmuch as algae press specimens serve as a “key indicator of the impact of anthropogenic activity on environmental conditions,” they are foundational to understanding our changing planet’s history, and are expected to become increasingly important for research on climate change.¹⁷ Building on the success of Pepperdine University’s undergraduate research program and highly-regarded natural science division, the algae press collection represents an undergraduate student research project not only waiting to happen—and one that is highly relevant to students’ concerns.¹⁸

15. Krosnick and Moore, 847.

16. Joseph A. Cook et al., “Natural History Collections as Emerging Resources for Innovative Education,” *BioScience* 62, no. 2 (2014): 725, doi:10.1093/biosci/biu096

17. Cook et al., “Natural History Collections,” 726. See Casey A. Jones and Curtis C. Daehler, “Herbarium Specimens Can Reveal Impacts of Climate Change on Plant Phenology; A Review of Methods and Applications,” *PeerJ* 6, (2018): e4576, <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.4576>

18. University students with high awareness of climate change were subject to slightly higher levels of anxiety and feelings of hopelessness. Galip Usta, “Determining the Climate Change Anxiety Levels of University Students,” *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 51, (2023): 159–167, <https://doi.org/10.52642/susbed.1282642>



Fig. 5. *Coilodesme californica*, 06/26/1976. From the Stephen Davis Algae Press Collection, Collection no. 0220, Pepperdine University Libraries Special Collections and Archives. All rights reserved.

Inspired by the retiring professor's algae press collection, a younger colleague in the natural science division plans to lead a student research project that would compare current levels of nutrient pollution to levels reflected in the specimens collected nearly fifty years ago. Isotope analysis of specimen tissue can determine the extent to which the main nutrients in the algae come from anthropogenic sources, providing a mechanism to examine the effect over time of land-based and human-based sources of pollution.¹⁹ In addition to its usefulness in primary source instruction, this algae specimen collection, like all herbaria, is preserved for its usefulness to scientific advancement.

Traditional archives give priority to preserving original items, and their intellectual content, to every extent possible,²⁰ and aim to maintain materials by “intervening minimally, prioritizing reversibility [in conser-

vation treatments] and ensuring [the long-term] safety of the material.”²¹ Herbaria, with intellectual content “both on the labels and [in] the specimens themselves,” are a special case of archival materials.²² While scientific research methodology will sometimes necessitate destroying at least a small portion of a specimen to fully access the specimen's intellectual content, institutional herbaria prefer non-destructive use of the specimens whenever possible.²³ In an effort to balance the twin goals of

19. Florybeth La Valle, Professor of Biology, email message to author, April 8, 2025.

20. “Session 1: Introduction to Preservation,” Northeast Document Conservation Center, 2015, <https://www.nedcc.org/preservation101/session-1/1what-is-preservation>

21. M. Lin et al., *Preservation and Conservation of Library and Archival Materials* (Guangzhou: Sun Yat-Sen University Press, 2012), Quoted by Yan Li et al., “Conservation Strategies for Palm-Leaf Manuscripts from Yunnan, China,” *Restaurator International Journal for the Preservation of Library and Archival Material*, June 11, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1515/res-2024-0029>

22. Marin-Rodulfo et al., “Old Meets New,” 1261.

23. See “Destructive Sampling Policy,” Harvard University Herbaria and Libraries, The President and Fellows of Harvard University, 2025, <https://www.huh.harvard.edu/pages/destructive-sampling-policy>. “Herbaria Policies,” The University and Jepson Herbaria, University of California, Berkeley, Regents of University of California, 2025, <https://ucjeps.berkeley.edu/main/policies.html>

preservation and scientific understanding, institutional herbaria establish “destructive sampling” policies, to minimize the damage to the specimen while allowing scientific advancement to continue.²⁴

Case Study

At first mention, the idea of accessioning the algae press collection was met with understandable skepticism from SCUA librarians. It would require staff development to successfully steward this natural history collection, use precious shelf space, and divert limited human and budgetary resources. Although there was potential benefit for preserving such a collection, department stakeholders needed to understand the project’s rationale, be open to collections diversification, and imagine what purpose an algae press collection could serve. Pepperdine’s natural science faculty helped justify the collection’s significance and research potential. Dean of Libraries Mark Roosa was persuaded and supported the effort, providing the budget for supplies. Roosa encouraged the author to look for resources that would provide information to properly house and preserve aquatic plant specimens.

In researching best practices, the author consulted the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) for recommendations for the paper-mounted algae specimens. NEDCC confirmed that the environmental set points in SCUA’s preservation environment—forty percent relative humidity and sixty degrees Fahrenheit—were appropriate. NEDCC recommended that each specimen be matted—some with a deeper “sink” mat if the specimen was significantly elevated—and stored in archival boxes.²⁵ The author consulted resources available from another university and the National Park Service before ordering supplies.²⁶ Special collections librarians deemed custom-matting for nearly two hundred individual specimens exceeded available budget; instead, each specimen was covered with acid-free paper and stacked in drop-front archival boxes. Over the next few months, SCUA librarians noticed the stacked mounts drooped, putting pressure on the specimens. To avoid breakage, special collections librarians moved the specimens to shallow, one-inch, four-flap enclosures lined with archival-quality board to add rigidity. These enclosures, each holding only four specimens, were stacked in archival boxes. This increased the collection’s shelf space, but prevents abrasion and drooping, and better cares for the specimens, long-term.

24. University of California, Berkeley, “Herbaria Policies.”

25. Michael K. Lee, Director of Paper and Photograph Preservation, NEDCC, email message to author, April 11, 2024.

26. A comprehensive summary of supplies and resources is freely available from the University of Florida Herbarium. See “Ordering Supplies and Equipment,” Florida Museum University of Florida Herbarium, <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/herbarium/methods/supplies/>. “Preparing and Storing Herbarium Specimens,” National Park Service, November 2009, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/museums/upload/11-12_508.pdf



Fig. 6. *Gigartina exasperata*, 06/27/1976. From the Stephen Davis Algae Press Collection, Collection no. 0220, Pepperdine University Libraries Special Collections and Archives. All rights reserved.

Due to the presence of colloidal “glues” in algal cell walls and inter-cellular spaces, most algae specimens naturally affix to the mounting paper as they dry.²⁷ Indeed, most of the specimens in the collection remain affixed to the mounting paper. However, as SCUA librarians became more familiar with the specimens through their occasional use in instruction, they began to observe that several of the specimens had pulled away from their paper mounts, making some specimens too fragile to bring out for display. SCUA works to conserve materials that are unique, irreplaceable, and used for instruction, such as these specimens. Further research was required to discover the best way to conserve them. Again SCUA librarians turned to more established herbaria, as well as to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History to learn best practices, taking care to recognize that, while the specimens will be

available for scientific research, the mounted specimens should also be preserved as archival objects.²⁸ SCUA librarians are hesitant to make any repairs that would not be reversible in the future, and have agreed it is best to conserve with a light hand, re-affixing specimens that were most in need of repair and used in instruction. Learning to conserve mounted algae specimens was an area for SCUA librarians’ further development as preservationists; a new frontier for this department (see Figure 7).

Academic institutions with herbaria typically quarantine new specimens upon arrival at the herbarium, until they can be treated by freezing for several days.²⁹ Because the specimens had not been quarantined, and SCUA did not yet have a freezer for such purposes, specimens needed to be carefully examined for evidence of pests before

27. “Algae Preservation Techniques,” Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, <https://www.naturalhistory.si.edu/research/botany/research/algae/algae-preservation-techniques>

28. “Algae Preservation Techniques,” <https://www.naturalhistory.si.edu/research/botany/research/algae/algae-preservation-techniques>. “Herbaria and Herbarium Specimens,” University of Florida Herbarium (FLAS), May 5, 2023, <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/herbarium/methods/herbaria/>

29. “Herbaria and Herbarium Specimens.”



Fig. 7. Special Collections librarians conserved algae press specimens using reversible, water-activated, gummed linen tape. Image by author.

they could be stored with the collections. Working in the SCUA processing room, the author and a student employee used a lighted magnifying glass for this purpose and continued to check the specimens intermittently for the first several weeks after accession to ensure that there was no detectable insect activity. (Figure 7.)

The author developed a processing plan in which student employees completed data entry and folder labeling. Because there was no discernable original order, the author looked at the arrangement schemes of other herbaria to discover a range of options for dried aquatic plant material.³⁰ Again, natural science faculty were helpful partners for the question of how researchers might use the collection.

Together, it was decided it would be most

helpful to arrange this specimen set alphabetically by the geographic location at which the algae specimens were collected. The planned future project (above) would likely require current samples collected in the same California locations: Malibu—in Los Angeles County—and various locations in Monterey and Sonoma counties.

Before a finding aid could be completed, the collection needed a use policy. Biological specimens, including algae in institutional scientific collections, have historically been subject to “destructive sampling,” a “procedure performed on [a] specimen that results in the permanent removal of material” in the course of analysis.³¹

Therefore, the author developed a destructive sampling policy, based on one at a neighboring university, and in consultation with the natural science faculty.³²

When the policy was complete, SCUA librarians posted the finding aid for the

30. University of Florida Herbarium suggests possible arrangement schemes including: 1) alphabetical by circumscription system—the system used in the process of defining the precise boundaries of taxonomic groups; 2) by phylogenetics—the evolutionary relationships of the specimens; 3) by genus and species; and 4) by the geographic location at which the specimen was collected. Each arrangement scheme has pros and cons. “Upkeep and Organization of the Collection,” University of Florida Herbarium (FLAS), February 2, 2022, <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/herbarium/methods/upkeep/>

31. “Destructive Sampling Policy,” Harvard University Museum of Comparative Zoology. <https://www.mcz.harvard.edu/destructive-sampling>

32. Pepperdine University Libraries, “Guidelines for Destructive Sampling of Specimens,” Internal policy, Special Collections and University Archives. Pepperdine’s Use Policy is included in the Finding Aid at <https://oac4.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8tq68hh/>

collection to the regional online archives.³³ Special collections librarians were afforded the opportunity to research best practices for the preservation and conservation of aquatic plant materials, for addressing issues of insect threat, and for re-housing. SCUA librarians, therefore, expanded their horizons of understanding for herbarium arrangement, description, and preservation, and adapted the knowledge to the local collection.

In addition to the planned student research project above, SCUA is incorporating the algae specimens into special collections instruction sessions in STEM classes. The effort began with one enthusiastic professor of environmental biology who brought all sections of her labs, for three consecutive semesters, to engage with the algae specimens, about 150 students as of February 2026. The special collections instructional librarian has used the algae press collection as a draw for professors who teach botany and marine biology, growing the number of STEM classes who visit SCUA. Two additional professors will bring their classes to engage with the algae press specimens in the 2026 spring semester. “Turning undergraduates loose in the archives,” as Taylor put it in 1972, invites them to wonder and inquire of primary scientific sources, making the case for the archives, and for the centrality of special collections in STEM student learning and research.³⁴ Students are given the opportunity to consider how these specimens preserve the history of our region’s aquatic plant life and how they might be used to study scientific phenomena like climate change. As an exercise in inquiry-based learning, students are asked to consider how these specimens reflect the natural world and human experience. They are asked to wonder what evidence these specimens hold and what questions the specimens could answer. Students are invited to compare the professional algae press specimens with those collected by citizen scientists into herbarium scrapbooks, prompting them to consider the question, Who makes scientific knowledge?³⁵

Student responses to these questions give insight into the impact of the algae press collection.³⁶ First, students appreciate the tangible experience of connection to the past, noting that the preserved specimens pre-date their own lives, show actual proof of plant life years ago, and—significant to students in the digital age—can be

33. Stephen Davis Algae Press Collection, Collection no. 0220, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, Pepperdine University. Online Archive of California, UC Libraries. <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8tq68hh/>

34. Hugh A. Taylor, “Clio in the Raw: Archival Materials and the Teaching of History,” *The American Archivist* 35, no. 3/4 (1972): 317, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40291435>

35. The special collections instructional librarian uses a guided inquiry handout to prompt student responses to these ideas as they engage with the algae specimens. Alicia Petersen, “BIOL 107 Visit to Special Collections, Payson Library” (unpublished worksheet, October 2025), internal document, Payson Library, Pepperdine University.

36. Anonymized student feedback was collected from students in Dr. Krista Lucas’ Environmental Science Lab, fall 2025. Student responses were grouped and summarized by the author according to themes discussed.

touched. Second, because of the information contained in the specimens themselves, students are hopeful that they can be used to demonstrate how plants are affected by human action, and how the natural world changes over time. Students are struck by the way herbaria demonstrate humanity's curiosity and its need to observe, collect, document, and study nature. Students find the human effort expended to harvest and preserve the plants fascinating, noting that humans decided that it is worthwhile to protect these specimens for their usefulness to answer scientific questions. With continued engagement with natural science faculty and students, opportunities abound for this collection to continue to impact student learning and inspire discovery.

Looking ahead, the algae press collection could take on more value as it becomes more accessible; there is more work to be done. Herbarium specimen data and images are increasingly made available to researchers through online databases.³⁷ To that end, the author and the SCUA digital curations librarian are completing steps to join a consortium—Algae Herbarium Portal—a data management and publishing platform which serves as a resource to advance algal research and educate the public.³⁸ As of this writing, digital imaging of the algae collection is complete. When metadata construction is completed, the metadata and associated images will be uploaded to the portal so that the specimens can take their place in the “truly global digital natural history collection.”³⁹ Although departments with limited resources may not be able to realize the full potential of natural history collections immediately, adopting an incremental process to bring them along can be an effective means to achieve worthy ends.

Conclusion

The idea of preserving the algae press collection initially seemed far-fetched for Pepperdine's special collections department. The author was challenged to make the case internally for the material's value, balancing other repository priorities and the available departmental resources. In actuality, the collection provided opportunities for significant professional development for special collections librarians, impactful STEM instructional sessions, and made possible future student research projects. This outcome requires that archivists remain flexible and open to diversification of the archives, learn and grow in their ability to properly steward such a collection, and take an incremental approach to developing the collection to its full potential, as time and resources allow. Such an investment can pay big dividends for students, researchers, and special collections departments alike. Increasingly under pressure

37. Brenskelle et al., “Maximizing Human Effort for Analyzing Scientific Images: A Case Study Using Digitized Herbarium Sheets,” *Applications in Plant Sciences* 8, no. 6 (2020): e11370, DOI: 10.1002/aps3.11370

38. “Algae Herbarium Portal: A Consortium of Algae Collections,” Integrated Digitized Biocollections (iDigBio). <https://macroalgae.org/portal/index.php>

39. Brandon P. Hedrick et al., “Digitization and the Future,” *BioScience* 70, no. 3 (2020): 243, doi:10.1093/biosci/biz163.243

to do the work and tell the story, special collections departments within the higher education setting will need to move responsibly beyond their paper-based comfort zones.

There are still further opportunities that await SCUA to develop this collection to its full potential. Opportunities include telling the story of this algae collection through the library's social media and news posts, and the development of a digital exhibit. The consortium project must be completed. SCUA librarians will explore ways to further incorporate this collection into student learning and research projects at this university and beyond. This collection provides real-time professional development for the special collections department, and firmly establishes the archives as a place of scientific discovery in the university.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful for the support of colleagues in Pepperdine University Libraries, including Bailey Badger, Bailey Berry, Lillian Damphousse, Jess Kovie, Chris Miehl, Elizabeth Parang, Alicia Petersen, and Mark Roosa, as well as the support of colleagues in Pepperdine University's natural science division, Stephen Davis, Florybeth LaValle, and Krista Lucas. The author also gratefully acknowledges the helpful feedback and input from peer reviewers, the editorial board, and the editor of *RBM*. The completion of the project was made possible by generous encouragement and helpful writing advice from the author's family.

Susana Sanchez-Gonzalez

The Ordinary Numinosity of the Book: A Framework for Understanding Affective Encounters in Book Exhibition Contexts

This article proposes a framework for understanding how books function as affective agents in exhibition contexts. Drawing on museum studies, book history, material studies and the history of emotions, it argues that books participate in meaning-making through their material presence and emotional resonance. Developed through doctoral research on visitor experiences in book exhibitions, the concept reframes emotional response as a precondition for engagement rather than simply an outcome of curatorial mediation. In doing so, this article offers a perspective for rethinking exhibition practice, particularly useful for special collections librarians working with limited resources.

Introduction

The numen—drawn from religious and anthropological discourse—refers to a spiritual or ineffable quality that certain objects or places seem to possess, commanding responses of wonder, respect, or profound connection. In museums and library exhibitions, books often sit behind glass, closed or partially open, their texts partly or entirely inaccessible. Despite these constraints, expressions of wonder or delight before a book are no less common than before a celebrated work of art, suggesting that encounters with books can exceed the limits of access and legibility. Yet the study of book exhibitions has long been framed around a perceived incompatibility between the exhibition format and the book's nature as a medium for reading.

But what if this framing misunderstands how books operate in exhibitions? What if books possess their own capacity to generate meaningful experiences, independent of curatorial intervention? Within museum and heritage studies, such unmediated experiences have often been described as *numinous*: moments of intense resonance or heightened awareness that seem to exceed the material properties of the artefact itself.¹ Numinous experiences are most often discussed in relation to historically significant or

1. Kiersten F. Latham, "The Poetry of the Museum: A Holistic Model of Numinous Museum Experiences," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 22, no. 3 (2007): 20.

culturally valued artefacts.² Applied to books, however, a different question emerges: Might books in exhibitions evince numinosity not only because of the works they contain or the histories they represent, but also because they are books, that is, familiar forms that carry their own emotional and cultural associations?

This article addresses that question by examining how books function as affective agents in exhibition contexts. Drawing on museum studies, book history, materiality studies, and the history of emotions—as well as the author’s doctoral research on visitor experiences—it argues that encounters with books often begin with acts of recognition, shaped by viewers’ lived relationships.³ To describe this process, I introduce the concept of the Ordinary Numinosity of the Book (ONoB), a model that shifts attention from exhibition mediation toward the emotional histories visitors bring. The discussion begins by considering how New Materialist approaches to object agency reshape thinking about books as exhibition objects, before examining the limits of materiality alone in accounting for the intense affective responses a book on display can evoke. It then turns to emotion, as a mediating force between object and viewer, drawing on museum scholarship on numinous experience alongside key concepts from emotion theory. Finally, after outlining the ONoB model, it reflects on the theoretical and practical implications of applying this framework, with particular attention to special collections librarians working in exhibitions.

In an age dominated by digital media, books have undergone what Wurth et al. describe as a process of “de-materialization, repositioning, and re-conceptualization.”⁴ No longer the primary means of accessing information, physical books have been revalued as material and cultural objects as well as affective ones—a shift that makes understanding these additional layers of meaning increasingly important.⁵

Books as Agentic Objects: A New Materialist Approach

Materiality studies offer a useful starting point for recognizing books as agentic objects. Within this broader field, scholars working in new materialist traditions argue that objects actively participate in production of meaning and experience. Jane Bennett’s

2. Rachel P. Maines and James J. Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” *The Public Historian* 15, no. 1 (1993): 9.

3. For a more detailed account of the research informing this article, see Susana Sánchez-González, *Hooked by the Book: Bookish Emotions and Book Exhibition Experience* (PhD diss., University of Manchester), <https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/hooked-by-the-bookbookish-emotions-and-book-exhibition-experience/>

4. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth et al., *Book Presence in a Digital Age* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018), 7.

5. For discussions on emotional response and contemporary book culture, see Jessica Pressman, *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Leah Price, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* (Basic Books, 2019); and Tom Mole, *The Secret Life of Books: Why They Mean More Than Words* (Simon & Schuster, 2019).

concept of “thing-power” helps clarify this idea.⁶ “Thing-power” refers to the capacity of objects to act, to produce effects, to make a difference in the world, or, “the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness.”⁷ Books don’t simply exist, inertly, on shelves: they are “vibrant matter”—they lean, gather dust, yellow with age, emanate particular smells, and occupy space in ways that shape how people move through rooms, make meaning in those rooms, and organize their lives, inviting us to consider what books do as objects, as well as what they signify.

Applying New Materialism to Books in Exhibitions

New Materialism thus offers a different view: even without access to their content, books communicate through physical presence. A gilt-edged folio may signal prestige or careful preservation, while a small, annotated volume suggests repeated and intimate engagement. These qualities do more than illustrate historical facts; they make other stories—within, around, and about the book—visible and sensed. The assumption implied in Beasley that “no amount of gazing at Shakespeare’s first folio will convey its intangible value unless we have already read Shakespeare” is thereby challenged, in exhibition contexts.⁸ When books are viewed only through this lens, they risk appearing as impossible exhibition objects, as their primary function—being read—is suspended within the display case.

Work in book history further develops this perspective.⁹ Gerome McGann describes books as operating through a “double helix of perceptual codes,” in which both linguistic content and bibliographic form work together to convey meaning.¹⁰ Gérard Genette’s concept of paratext likewise shows how titles, images, and layout shape interpretation, before any reading begins.¹¹ From this perspective, the book can be understood as a material form whose external appearance already communicates cultural and historical significance. The codex also carries expectations shaped by lived experience: visitors recognize the structure of pages and may imagine turning them, even when the object is sealed behind a case. Engagement emerges through embodied memories and the object’s material presence.

6. For discussions of New Materialist approaches, see Timothy J. LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 74–75 and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

7. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

8. Gerald Beasley, “Curatorial Crossover: Building Library, Archives, and Museum Collections,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 8, no. 1 (2007): 26.

9. Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford University Press, 1994); Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 65–83; D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (The British Library, 1987).

10. Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

11. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

This approach does not diminish the importance of content: it reveals how privileging text over form reflects an anthropocentric habit, the tendency to equate the book with the message it conveys. Because text is often understood as the primary channel through which authors address readers, exhibition interpretation frequently focused on compensating for restricted access through extensive *human-centred* interpretative mediation—labels, audio guides, digital interfaces, etc. While these strategies remain valuable, they can unintentionally narrow focus to what the book itself communicates through its material presence alone.

The Limits of New Materialism for Understanding Exhibition Contexts

New Materialism, however, does not fully explain how books function as agents of exhibition experience as it assumes forms of engagement—touch, handling, sensory proximity—that are restricted in exhibition settings. What visitors encounter is primarily visual: form, scale, color, condition, illustrations, annotations, erasures, and marginalia. These qualities matter, but they do not fully account for the intensity or significance of the experience. Something else must activate this objectual agency; I argue that this is emotion.

Books carry layers of association shaped by personal histories of reading and by broader cultural imaginaries. When viewers encounter a First Folio, for example, they meet a canonical work and a familiar kind of object: a book. Encounters with familiar objects activate prior knowledge, memory, empathy, and imagination, directing attention toward the object's aspects that resonate with lived experience. Smith's concept of "bookhood" offers a useful way of naming this mode of engagement, foregrounding relations to books that encompass material familiarity and affective response; bookhood involves "remembering the smell and feel of a loved story, not just its plot or characters."¹² This response is shaped by a particular title's meaning, and also by recognition of the object as a book, with all the embodied memories and expectations that form entails. In this way, exhibited books communicate through *weight* as the carrier of a specific text and as an object, whose form and cultural life convey meaning.¹³

Emotion's Role in Activating Agency

If books communicate in exhibitions as *books*, the question becomes how that communication is realized and felt by the viewer. This is where emotion theory becomes relevant. Sara Ahmed's work, in particular, describes emotion as something that takes shape in the

12. Emma Smith, *Portable Magic: A History of Books and Their Readers* (Allen Lane, 2022), 11–12.

13. I borrow the notion of "weight" of the book from Susan Cox, who described books as carrying "certain connotations evident to the viewer which are based on the book's position in the scheme of human knowledge." Cox used this idea to inform exhibit design, encouraging curators to consider the intellectual and cultural associations books bring into the gallery. Her framework, however, situates weight primarily within established hierarchies of knowledge and literary value and does not fully account for the affective dimension explored here. Susan Cox, "The Book Exhibition as Artistic Medium: Theory and Practice" (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1973), 4.

contact between people and things. For Ahmed, emotions are shaped by histories that continue to leave their impressions on us.¹⁴ By “impression,” Ahmed refers to how we respond in the moment of encounter: experiences remain active, and influence is shaped by accumulated effects with similar objects.¹⁵ Therefore, viewers do not encounter books as neutral observers; their responses are shaped by accumulated experiences that resurface through visual recognition of the displayed object. These *bookish emotions* may include tactile, psychological, and sensory memories, and moments associated with reading. What begins to surface here, then, is a mode of attention that moves beyond interpretive reading: a way of being with books, in which meaning emerges through presence and resonance, as much as through curatorial mediation.

Book Presence and the Immaterial Made Material

The concept of “book presence” provides additional nuance. In Wurth et al., books evolved into objects, that are simultaneously material artifacts and immaterial “mirrors of our experiences.”¹⁶ This immateriality “still partakes of the material in an infinite feedback loop,” because of its ability to elicit sensorial responses.¹⁷ This dual nature creates double agency: one that impacts through material properties and another one that signals through accumulated meanings. In exhibition, where direct sensory engagement is limited, this feedback loop operates at a visual and emotional level. In this context, the book on display is a “semiophore”—an object that mediates between visible and invisible worlds.¹⁸ It is a conduit for associations, memories, and feelings that extend far beyond itself. As such, the book self-referentially speaks, about its own content, the category of books more broadly, and about the viewer’s personal relationship with that category.¹⁹ In this sense, books in exhibitions allow viewers to re-experience worlds inhabited during previous encounters. This mediating function helps explain why some books can still produce powerful affective responses even when placed behind glass. Although central to many exhibition experiences, this quality of books as exhibition objects remains surprisingly underexplored in current theory and practice.

From Numen to Ordinary Numinosity

While librarianship has often prioritized access and preservation when discussing exhibitions, museological scholarship offers a more developed vocabulary for unpacking the type of affective responses outlined above. Maines and Glynn introduced the term “numinous” in 1993, to describe intense emotional experiences elicited by places, such as historical battlefields, whose “psychological rather than material significance”

14. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 6.

15. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 8.

16. Wurth et al., *Book Presence*, 7.

17. Wurth et al., *Book Presence*, 5.

18. Krzysztof Pomian, quoted in Maines and Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” 10.

19. J. T. Hamilton, “Pagina Abscondita: Reading in the Book’s Wake,” in Wurth et al., *Book Presence*, 34.

makes them seem “as if they were inhabited by a spirit that calls forth in many of us a reaction of awe and reverence.”²⁰ Kristen Latham extends the numinous experience concept to museum artefacts, arguing that objects can also produce moments of heightened sensory, emotional, and intellectual “awareness,” comparable to those felt in historical sites, and akin to aesthetic encounters with art.²¹

Since numinosity has origins with the sacred or the extraordinary—objects and experiences set apart from everyday life—its application to books in exhibitions requires recalibration of how numinosity is understood. If viewers encounter books as rare artefacts and familiar objects, then their numinosity cannot be confined. In books, the numinous may also emerge through familiarity, repetition, and lived experience. In this context, “ordinary” in the ONoB does not diminish affective intensity, but reframes it, away from exceptionality, and toward familiarity, recognition, and emotion. This shift resonates closely with Kathleen Stewart’s concept of “ordinary affects,” which describes forces that circulate through everyday life: impulses, sensations, habits, and modes of attention. Ordinary affects do not operate through explicit meaning-making, but through the densities and intensities they accumulate as they move through bodies, objects, and social worlds.²² When read alongside museum scholarship on numinous experience, Stewart’s work helps explain how seemingly unremarkable objects can generate powerful emotional responses, not because they are extraordinary in themselves, but because they are entangled in personal histories, embodied memories, and repeated acts of care.

ONoB brings these frameworks together. Following Latham, Maines and Glynn, and Stewart, it recognizes that books in exhibitions can function as numinous objects because they are books: iterations of the codex, an object with which most visitors will have some kind of emotional history. The ONoB captures both the extraordinary and the ordinary—the cultural weight and symbolic significance that books carry collectively, and the personal, even mundane, emotional associations they hold individually.

A Model of Engagement Through the ONoB

In addition to providing a new vocabulary for articulating affective responses to books in exhibitions, the ONoB offers a model for understanding how engagement unfolds in this context. This process is structured around the following overlapping moments:

Initial Visual Contact: The viewer’s eye falls upon the book in the display case. Even before conscious cognitive processing occurs, the form of the codex—its familiar shape, structure, and presence—registers at an affective level.

20. Maines and Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” 9.

21. Kiersten F. Latham, “The Poetry of the Museum: A Holistic Model of Numinous Museum Experiences,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 22, no. 3 (2007): 20.

22. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

Emotional Activation: The viewer's accumulated emotional investments in books—their bookish emotions—surge forward. These may include specific memories (e.g., bedtime stories, classroom experiences, cherished reading moments) as well as more diffuse feelings about books as objects (e.g., comfort, curiosity, reverence, nostalgia, excitement, boredom, struggle, stress).

Agency Awakening: This emotional charge activates the book's material agency (its thing-power) as a specific kind of exhibition object. Simultaneously, it imbues the book with symbolic meanings shaped by personal experiences and broader cultural contexts. This awakens the ordinary numen residing within the book.

Affective Encounter: The now-activated book "speaks" to the viewer, compelling closer attention. This moment represents a "bookish experience"—an encounter grounded in the recognition of the book, not primarily as a specific historical artifact or literary work but as an iteration of the codex with which the viewer has an emotional relationship.

Interpretive Integration: From this foundation, the viewer then engages with curatorial mediation—reading labels, processing contextual information, and appreciating design choices. Yet this interpretive engagement is now situated against, and inflected by, the emotional landscape established through the activation of the ONoB.

Critically, this model suggests that the strength and character of the affective encounter are contingent upon the depth and nature of the viewer's emotional investment in books. In Ahmed's terms, the greater the accumulation of positive impressions left by books throughout a person's life, the stronger the activation of the ONoB, and the more vivid and meaningful the resulting experience.

Because this experience emerges from, and is shaped by, an emotional response to the book-as-codex, I refer to this moment as a *bookish experience*. However brief or consequential, this experience unfolds alongside curatorial mediation, adding further layers of meaning to the encounter with the book, and to the exhibition visit as a whole, which can now be understood, among other things, as an opportunity to undergo bookish feelings—an appealing prospect for those with a strong affinity for books and perhaps one of the key sources of the appeal of book exhibitions more broadly. In this sense, the model also introduces two new analytical categories useful for the theory and practice of book exhibitions: the *bookish visitor*, defined by their emotional relationship with books, and the *bookish experience*, a mode of encounter in which the book as book shapes interpretation and engagement. Together, these concepts provide a language for recognizing emotional resonance as an outcome of exhibition practice.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the ONoB model thus challenges the assumption that books are inherently disadvantaged exhibition objects. It demonstrates that books possess multiple modes of communication and affect that can operate powerfully within the visual and spatial context of exhibitions. This aligns with and extends Berger's insight that "we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves."²³ In encountering a book on display, viewers interpret it not only through knowledge of that specific volume, but also through the accumulated cultural, emotional, and personal meanings associated with books more broadly. Visitors therefore encounter books through broader meanings and associated experiences.

This perspective aligns with museological research on affect, which recognizes that encounters with objects are shaped by embodied experience and emotional resonance.²⁴ While scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of emotion in museum experiences, affect is often treated as an outcome of curatorial strategy—something intentionally produced, through design and interpretation.²⁵ The ONoB understands affect as something visitors already bring with them through their prior relationships with books. Exhibit creators are thus encouraged to consider not only the feelings they hope to evoke but also the affective resources visitors already carry.

Example: The History of the Book Interpretation Approach

During my doctoral research, I explored this idea by developing an experimental interpretive strategy that shifted the focus of object labels toward what visitors could immediately see and relate to in the display case. Later named the *History of the Book Interpretation Approach*, this method foregrounds bibliographical and material details alongside narrative explanation, creating moments of recognition through labels that highlight how books were used, prompts that connect displays to reading histories, and arrangements that draw attention to qualities shared across many books. For example, one alternative label noted that early volumes "were bound when sold," directing attention to the bookbinding as evidence of ownership and use. Another label described the metal clasp of a manuscript as a functional feature, designed to keep the book under tension, preventing parchment leaves from cockling or warping as humidity changed. Such details were absent from those books' original labels, which focused primarily on content. Participants in my study often described these prompts as helping them "know what to look at," suggesting that material interpretation can guide attention while still leaving space for personal response.

23. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 2008), 8. Originally published 1972.

24. See Sandra H. Dudley, "Museum Materialities: Objects, Sense and Feeling," in *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (Routledge, 2010), 21–38; Christopher P. Boyd and Robyn Hughes, *Emotion and the Contemporary Museum* (Springer, 2020).

25. Marzia Varutti, "Affective Encounters in Museums," in *Heritage Ecologies* (Taylor and Francis, 2021), 129–144; Marzia Varutti, "The Affective Turn in Museums and the Rise of Affective Curatorship," *Museum Management and Curatorship* (2022): 1–15.

Adopting this approach, however, also brings a practical challenge. Providing the additional context needed to guide attention toward material and historical use elements risks producing text-heavy labels that overwhelm. One possible response may lie in the integration of digital interpretation, an avenue that would benefit from further research beyond the scope of this article.

Practical Relevance for Special Collections Librarians

Taken together, these implications highlight the relevance of the ONoB framework for exhibitions developed within library contexts. Many of the strategies outlined above—guiding attention through material interpretation, working with visitors’ existing familiarity with books, and allowing recognition to shape engagement—draw directly on forms of expertise that librarians already possess. In environments where time, space, and access to specialized technologies are often limited, the framework suggests that powerful encounters need not depend on elaborate display strategies. Instead, they can emerge from librarians’ deep knowledge of books as objects, and of readers’ relationships to them, reframing perceived constraints as opportunities to foreground material familiarity, use, and recognition.

Ultimately, the approach presented here encourages libraries to recognize their own authority in the context of book exhibitions. Librarians’ deep familiarity with books as objects, and with readers’ relationships to them, constitutes a form of expertise that is both intellectual and professional. Seen in this light, library exhibits need not aspire to replicate museum models but can assert their own strengths thanks to the librarians who curate them—specialists whose expertise in books and bookish audiences can enable distinctive and powerful forms of exhibition-making.

Limitations and Future Directions: Toward a New Museology of the Book

Several important caveats must be acknowledged. First, the ONoB framework assumes a level of emotional investment in books that may not be universal. The concept is therefore most directly applicable to what might be termed “bookish” visitors, that is, those who identify as readers, collectors, or enthusiasts, and for whom books hold significant emotional weight. Nonetheless, examining the responses of such visitors can yield valuable insights for enhancing engagement among less book-oriented audiences, and may even serve as a means of attracting new publics who have yet to form strong affective connections with books. Second, the model focuses on the unmediated response of visitors to the books on display, understood as an encounter shaped directly by the book itself as a codex rather than by curatorial decisions. This helps clarify the affective dynamics at the center of the ONoB, but it also means that the framework does not fully consider how these experiences relate to, or help with, the wider aims or narrative of an exhibition. Third, the visual nature of book

exhibition encounters means that the ONoB framework may be most relevant to exhibition formats where books are enclosed in cases. Alternative exhibition strategies that allow handling, page-turning, or other forms of physical engagement would activate different aspects of books' affective agency, and might require modified theoretical approaches.

These limitations suggest productive directions for future research. Empirical studies could investigate how emotional investments in books vary across different demographic groups and how these variations influence exhibition experiences. Comparative research might explore how the ONoB operates differently for manuscripts versus printed books, literary works versus reference materials, and contemporary versus historical volumes. Additionally, experimental studies could test interpretive strategies designed to deliberately activate bookish emotions and assess their impact on visitor engagement and satisfaction.

While the ONoB framework focuses on affective agency, it represents only one step toward a broader *museology of the book*. Museology, as a field, is concerned not simply with how books are displayed, but with the theoretical, curatorial, and institutional questions that arise when books enter exhibition spaces. A museology of the book would examine the material, sensory, and intellectual dimensions that distinguish books from other cultural artefacts and artworks, and it would address the interpretive challenges created by their partial inaccessibility behind glass. Moreover, it would also interrogate the historical divide between libraries and museums, advocating for collaborative models that draw on the expertise of both sectors.

Conclusion

This article proposes the Ordinary Numinosity of the Book as a framework for understanding how books generate meaning and affect within exhibition contexts. It has argued that the emotional force accumulated through lived relationships with books shapes how visitors look, feel, and interpret them. The ONoB acknowledges that bookish experiences remain active, even when the codex becomes unreadable and untouchable within a vitrine. By bringing together insights from New Materialist thought, museum studies, the history of emotions, and book history, the ONoB offers a language for describing a phenomenon long recognized but rarely articulated: books in exhibitions resonate as objects. Seen in this light, books in exhibitions are not diminished but transformed, their significance extending beyond textual content to the memories, expectations, and cultural meanings that gather around the codex—a dimension of books often overlooked in contemporary exhibition practice.

Judith L. Silva and Zachary Voras

Widening the Poison Books Scope: Addressing Bibliotoxicology at a Medium-Sized Public University Library

This case study documents a project to research and identify arsenical bookcloth at a medium-sized public university. Use of arsenic as a color agent in nineteenth-century British and American bookcloth is summarized, and the librarian's timeline, including sabbatical-funded research, inter-institutional collaboration with a chemistry professor at an R2 university, and remediation of toxic books through grant funding is outlined. The essay addresses health and safety recommendations within the context of academic libraries.

Academic libraries face the challenge of what Drs. Melissa Tedone and Rosie Grayburn called “poison books,” or bibliotoxicology.¹ Researchers at large institutions are conducting studies of library holdings, testing books for heavy metals, identifying health and safety guidelines, and sharing new knowledge via published case studies. Small- to mid-sized academic libraries, however, may lack equipment, expertise, funding, or time to investigate their holdings, or the space to safely segregate such items, and must develop their own strategies to address health and safety issues surrounding bibliotoxicology. This case study explores activities at a medium-sized public university.

Slippery Rock University (SRU), established in 1889, is a member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). With a student enrollment of 8,625 FTE, SRU is classified as a Professions-focused Undergraduate/ Graduate-Doctorate Medium institution.² Each faculty librarian fulfils a number of roles; there are no book conservators. After attending a 2022 webinar,³ Dr. Judy Silva, whose responsibilities include special collections, sought sabbatical funding to research bibliotoxicology and to pursue identification and remediation of poison

1. Rosie Grayburn and Melissa Tedone, “From Poison Books to “Bibliotoxicology”: Highlighting Hazards in Paper-Based Library Collections,” *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 21, no. 1 (2024): 152–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15501906241255706>

2. Carnegie Classification of Institutes of Higher Education, n.d., <https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/institutions/?inst=slippery+rock>

3. Melissa Tedone and Rosie Grayburn, *The Poison Book Project: Arsenic in Mass-Produced 19th-Century Cloth Books* (2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWY08Ye8rtM>

books in any of Bailey Library's collections. Silva sought assistance from chemistry professor, Dr. Zachary Voras, at sister PASSHE institution West Chester University (WCU) to test books identified as potentially hazardous. Ultimately, Silva and a student co-authored a grant to fund removal of identified hazardous books.

While doing book restoration work in 2019 at the Winterthur Library in Wilmington, Delaware, conservator Tedone, aware of the Victorian-era use of arsenic as a color agent in wallpaper and other household items, considered whether that use included an emerald green book in hand.⁴ Her colleague, Grayburn, tested the book's cloth binding, confirming Tedone's suspicion: the vivid green was a toxic, arsenic-based pigment (copper acetoarsenite). Spurred by safety implications for library patrons and staff, Tedone and Grayburn conducted "an analytical survey of the collections to better understand how many of the library's case bindings might be covered in potentially toxic bookcloth."⁵ They established the Poison Book Project and subsequently the Bibliotoxicology Working Group, to alert colleagues and promote collaboration among professionals internationally including book conservators, librarians, archivists, and health and safety experts.⁶ Since Tedone and Grayburn's initial publication, numerous researchers have added to the public record on bibliotoxicology, documenting the breadth and potential impact of arsenic and other toxic heavy metals in bookcloth, including in large academic libraries.

Literature Review

The focus of this review is arsenic as a color agent in nineteenth-century British and American bookcloth. The use of other heavy metals has also been discovered.⁷ The history of arsenical hues and libraries' identification and remediation thereof are explored. While the use of toxic pigments in bookcloth was overlooked for much of the twentieth century, use in other household items was well-documented during the Victorian era (1837–1901), with dangers and associated illnesses identified as public health issues at the time.⁸ Revival of interest in this topic in the late twentieth century, eventually spurred the rediscovery of arsenic's use in bookcloth.

4. Shirley Hibberd, *Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste* (Groombridge & Sons, 1857).

5. Melissa Tedone and Rosie Grayburn, "Arsenic and Old Bookcloth: The Safe Handling, Treatment, and Storage of Victorian-Era Cloth Case Bindings," *Book and Paper Group Annual* 39 (2020): 108, <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v39/bpga39-10.pdf>

6. Tedone and Grayburn, "Arsenic and Old Bookcloth," 108–113.

7. Amy Baldwin, Paul Garside, and Nicole Monjeau, "Addressing the Presence of Arsenical Bindings in the British Library's Collections," *Collections* 21, no. 1 (2025): 125; Teresa Cecchi, Deborah Dorotei, and Maria Chiara Leonori, "Poison Books: First Comprehensive Analysis of 23 Elements in Suspected Old Books," *Science of the Total Environment* 981 (2025): 179583; Mitchel Gundrum, "Orpiment on Seventeenth-Century Blue-Coloured Textblock Edges," *Studies in Conservation* (2025): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2025.2450977>

8. O. W. Doe and Charles E. Taft, "A Case of Paris-Green Poisoning," *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 115, no. 13 (1886): 301–302; George S. Hale, "Arsenical Poisoning from Domestic Fabrics," *Science* 472 (1892): 104, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1767836>; "The Manufacture of Mineral Pigments," *British Medical Journal*, 1 no. 1684 (1893), 753–754, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.1.1684.753>

The Victorian era “cult” of domesticity was a world where “home and family life were regarded as ‘sacred’ . . . ‘a private arena far removed from the unpleasantness of the outside world.’”⁹ The discovery of vivid new shades of green fit perfectly into this era of domestic bliss in Europe and America. Carl Wilhelm Scheele first synthesized copper arsenite to create a brilliant green pigment in 1775.¹⁰ *The Conservation and Art Materials Encyclopedia Online* dates “emerald” green—copper acetoarsenite—around 1800, adding that it was commercially produced beginning in 1814.¹¹ The new arsenic-based green pigments, including Mitis Green, became wildly popular and had various names depending on manufacturer.¹² While arsenical greens’ toxicities were soon realized, they continued to be sold and used widely, appearing in a variety of household items, while simultaneously being used as rat poisoning.¹³

The dangers of using arsenic to create vivid greens were discussed broadly when their use peaked, with public debates and demands for legislation. Manufacturing these colors also came under scrutiny, with calls for protection of industry workers’ health. Despite warnings in the popular press, trade publications, and medical journals about illness and death,¹⁴ the general public appears to have been reluctant to accept that their home goods might be harmful, or to give them up.

The earliest documented reference to arsenic in the context of books is 1859, but only in terms of using the element as a pest-deterrent.¹⁵ In 1872, *Scientific American*

9. By the 1860s, the question was not whether arsenic was present in such products as wallpaper, “but whether that arsenic could contaminate the atmosphere.” Scheele’s Green was eventually banned for use in foodstuffs; labelling of other products was compulsory. By 1878 reforms were well-established in England. Eventually a change in fashion trends was as much responsible as any legal restraint or public health awareness for the move away from the flashy greens. The dangers reappear in the *British Medical Journal*, with a special report on the still-prevalent issue of workplace safety for those engaged in the manufacture of green pigments. See P. W. J. Bartrip, “How Green Was My Valance? Environmental Arsenic Poisoning and the Victorian Domestic Ideal,” *The English Historical Review* 109 no. 433 (1994): 891–913, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/574537>; James C. Whorton, *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain Was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play* (Oxford University Press, 2011): 189; and “The Manufacture of Mineral Pigments,” 753.

10. Cecchi, Dorotei, Leonori, “Poison Books.”

11. “Emerald Green,” CAMEO (Conservation and Art Materials Encyclopedia Online), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accessed February 8, 2024, https://cameo.mfa.org/wiki/Emerald_green

12. Mitis Green is copper arsenate. Kim Bell and Robin Canham, “Pages of Poison: Identifying 19th Century Arsenical Green Books at Queen’s University,” *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 11 (2025): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v11.43087>; Cecchi, Dorotei, Leonori, “Poison Books”; “Dangers in the Manufacture of Paris Green and Scheele’s Green,” *Monthly Review of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* 5, no. 2 (1917): 78–83; Andy Meharg, “Killer Wallpaper,” *Spectroscopy Europe* (2004), https://www.spectroscopyeurope.com/system/files/pdf/X-ray_16_5.pdf

13. Cecchi, Dorotei, Leonori, “Poison Books.” 2.

14. John Leighton, “On the Library, Books, and Binding, Particularly with Regard to their Restoration and Preservation,” *Journal of the Society of Arts* 7, no. 327 (1859), 209–219; “Beware of Green Colors,” *Scientific American* 26, no. 15 (1872) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26042737>; “Arsenic Colors,” *Scientific American* 28, no. 7 (1873): 98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26050365>; “Dangers in the Manufacture,” 78–83; William Michell Clarke, “On Arsenical Disease, or the Disorders Produced by Arsenical Papers and Colours,” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 651 (1886): 698–701, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25234878>; Doe and Taft, “A Case of Paris-Green Poisoning,” 301–302.

15. Leighton, “On the Library,” 218.

warned of the dangers associated with use of arsenic in “certain shades of green.”¹⁶ While arsenical green household items are listed, books are not mentioned. A follow-up piece documented test results on specimens submitted by readers: fabric, wallpaper samples, and notably “toy books with green covers,” deemed suspect the test found, as, in “all instances sufficient traces of arsenic,” which proved the “dangerous character of the articles presented.”¹⁷ That single paragraph is the earliest identification of *arsenical books* in an American publication—in this case, children’s books. Despite what we now know was decades of use, the late nineteenth-century literature seemingly fails to caution readers about the existence of arsenical green as a color agent in bookcloth, focusing instead on other household goods and manufacturing concerns.¹⁸ Researchers at Queen’s University Library in Kingston, Ontario, connect nineteenth-century technological changes leading to the mass production of books—“publishers’ bindings”—with the arsenical green revolution. The new pigments, however, were “acutely toxic through ingestion and inhalation.”¹⁹ By 1900, these heavy metal colors had largely been replaced by coal tar dyes.

Despite arsenic’s well-documented use in a wide variety of household items, until the early twenty-first century, its use as a color agent for bookcloth is scarcely mentioned.²⁰ A late twentieth-century revival of interest in Victorian bookbinding and, separately, use of arsenic in household items, again failed to mention use in bookcloth. Tomlinson’s 1996 classic text describes one company’s evolution in technology and machinery in great detail; however, very little is included about color and nothing about arsenic’s use.²¹ Similarly Krupp’s 2008 *Bookcloth in England and America* focuses on patterns and their production methods, omitting the question of color agents altogether.²² Beginning with Bartrip, researchers began to document the widespread use of poisonous colors during the Victorian era.²³ The use of arsenic in bookcloth, however, is still mentioned only tangentially. Hawksley’s *Bitten by Witch Fever: Wallpaper and Arsenic in the Victorian Home* brought the topic into popular discourse but did not include bookcloth.²⁴ Solensky hinted at the arsenical books issue in descriptions of the dangers found in children’s scrapbooks from the era.²⁵

16. “Beware of Green Colors,” 225.

17. “Arsenic Colors,” 98.

18. “Dangers in the Manufacture,” 78–83.

19. Bell and Canham, “Pages of Poison,” 4.

20. Bartrip, “How Green.”

21. William Tomlinson and Richard Masters, *Bookcloth 1823–1980: A Study of Early Use and the Rise of Manufacture, Winterbottom’s Dominance of the Trade in Britain and America, Production Methods and Costs and the Identification of Qualities and Designs* (Dorothy Tomlinson: 1996).

22. Andrea Krupp, *Bookcloth in England and America, 1823–1850* (Oak Knoll Press, 2008).

23. Bartrip, “How Green”; Lucinda Hawksley, *Bitten by Witch Fever: Wallpaper and Arsenic in the Victorian Home* (Thames and Hudson Ltd/The National Archives, 2016); José Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez, “Arsenic in France. The Cultures of Poison During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *Compound Histories: Materials, Governance and Production, 1760–1840* (2018): 131–58; Whorton, “The Arsenic Century.”

24. Hawksley, *Bitten*.

25. Jeanne Solensky, “Deconstructing a Scrapbook House,” *The Ephemera Journal* 22 no. 3 (2020).

Grayburn used portable X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (pXRF) and Raman spectroscopy to confirm Tedone's suspicions about arsenic in a nineteenth-century volume.²⁶ This led to an investigation of the entire Winterthur Library collection. Their survey focused on cloth-case English and American bindings published from the 1840s–1860s initially, and, later, the entire nineteenth century. They noted that most emerald-green bindings identified were “highly decorated, with gold titling, gold and blind blocking, and often gilt edges.”²⁷ Identifying more arsenical bookcloth, Tedone and Grayburn set out to determine safe handling and storage procedures, and began to conduct outreach to others likely to encounter this issue.²⁸ Again, this was the beginning of the Poison Book Project and the broader Bibliotoxicology Working Group (BibTox). The work of Tedone and Grayburn is well-documented, and has served as a springboard for other researchers.²⁹ BibTox has become the research nexus for investigations at cultural heritage institutions internationally, including the British Library,³⁰ the National Library of Finland,³¹ KB National Library of the Netherlands,³² as well as academic libraries in Germany,³³ Canada,³⁴ and in the United States.³⁵ These academic libraries are of particular importance to this case study.

University Libraries

At Queen's University Library, researchers consulted the Poison Book Project identification bookmark and created a test set of 150 books published between 1820–1900. They also compared the Poison Book Project Arsenical Books Database³⁶ against

26. Tedone and Grayburn, “Arsenic and Old Bookcloth,” 109.

27. Tedone and Grayburn, “Arsenic and Old Bookcloth,” 5. They also mention that although arsenical book covers remain bright green despite their age, “spine cloth shows more variation in color, likely from exposure to oxidizing air pollution as the book sits on the shelf.” Hence their recommendation that each green book in a collection under review be pulled to examine not just the spine, but also the cover.

28. Melissa Tedone and Rosie Grayburn, “Toxic Tomes: Understanding the Use and Risks of Heavy Metals in Nineteenth-century Bookcloth,” *Collections* 19, no. 2 (2023): 189–201.

29. Rosie Grayburn and Melissa Tedone, “From Poison Books,” 152–156. Also see other works by these authors cited in this article, and their “Editorial Introduction to the ‘Bibliotoxicology’ Special Issue,” *Studies in Conservation* (2025): 1–2.

30. Baldwin, Garside, and Monjeau, *Addressing*.

31. Liisa Katariina Ruuska-Jauhijärvi et al., “Congress Review: Hazardous Heritage: Working with and Around Dangerous Materials in Cultural Heritage, 23 to 24.10, (2023), Antwerp, Belgium,” *Collections* 21, no. 1 (2025): 170–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15501906241289621>

32. Foekje Boersma et al., “It's Not Easy Being Green: The Challenge of Having Poisonous Arsenic Containing Books in a National Library Collection,” *Studies in Conservation* (2025): 1–12.

33. Juliana Wetten et al., “Arsenic Pigments in Libraries: Testing Methods, Contaminated Spaces, and Occupational Safety Measures,” *Restaurator: International Journal for the Preservation of Library and Archival Material* 45, no. 4 (2024): 297–323.

34. Bell and Canham, “Pages of Poison.”

35. Susan Russick et al., “Multi-Analytical Investigation of Arsenical Transfer and Remediation on Nineteenth-Century Green Books,” *Studies in Conservation* (2025): 1–16; Susan Russick et al., “Toxic Tales: Arsenic's Legacy in Nineteenth-Century Green Book Bindings at Northwestern University Libraries,” *Studies in Conservation* (2025): 1–17; Marc Vermeulen et al., “Identification, Transformations and Mobility of Hazardous Arsenic-Based Pigments on 19th Century Bookbindings in Accessible Library Collections,” *Journal of Hazardous Materials* 454 (2023): 131453.

36. Poison Book Project, “Arsenical Books Database,” n.d., <https://sites.udel.edu/poisonbookproject/resources/arsenical-books-database/>

their library's holdings. As at Winterthur, pXRF spectroscopy allowed researchers to bring equipment into the library rather than taking books to a lab. Bruker ARTAX software was used to examine the captured spectra to determine the presence of heavy metals.³⁷

In keeping with the BibTox goal of interdisciplinary dialogue, Northwestern University Libraries researchers published extensively about their arsenical books investigation, disseminating their findings to book conservators and to health and safety experts.³⁸ They tested books published from 1802–1878, using XRF for positive identification. As XRF alone cannot confirm arsenic's use, its presence was confirmed for a small group of materials using Raman spectroscopy, X-ray diffraction (XRD), Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), and other analytical techniques.³⁹ Northwestern researchers were “particularly cognizant of circulating materials stored in the open stacks and the safety implications.” They determined that arsenical books hold research value in part because of “the artifactual value of the physical object,” deciding to retain them and identify safe handling and storage protocols.⁴⁰ They also conducted a thorough risk analysis. Rebinding was not considered a viable option as arsenic could have migrated into the books' pages.

Health Implications

Russick et al. “investigated potential hazards to users and caretakers, concluding that handling these materials presented possible health risks.”⁴¹ Noted in Baldwin et al., “The most common exposure route . . . is ingestion, which in a library context is most likely . . . handling a volume and then eating or touching their face.”⁴² In their conclusions, Russick et al. observed, “Library workers could be exposed to small, but frequent doses, which could result in difficult-to-diagnose chronic diseases.”⁴³ Bell and Canham cited Tedone and Grayburn, and cautioned that there are, in fact, “no safe exposure limits for copper acetoarsenite,” as “toxicity can be acute or cumulative, and exposure levels need to be calculated on an individual basis based on body weight, natural resistance to arsenic, and many other factors,” therefore it is important to limit “direct contact, inhalation, and ingestion of bookcloth pigment insofar

37. Twenty-eight titles (18 percent) of Queen's University Library set were found to contain significant indications of copper and arsenic together. The arsenic was found not only in bookcloth, but also in “covering papers, painted surface decorations, endpapers, and fore-edges” (Bell and Canham, “Pages of Poison,” 13).

38. Russick et al., “Multi-Analytical Investigation”; Russick et al., “Toxic Tales”; Vermeulen et al., “Identification, Transformations and Mobility of Hazardous Arsenic-based Pigments on 19th Century Bookbindings in Accessible Library Collections.”

39. Russick et al., “Toxic Tales”; Vermeulen et al., “Identification, Transformations and Mobility.”

40. Russick et al., “Toxic Tales.”

41. Russick et al., “Toxic Tales”; Arsenical bookcloth may trigger serious, long-term health effects and should therefore be viewed as a public health concern. See Tedone and Grayburn, “Toxic Tomes.”

42. Poison Book Project, *Handling and Safety Tips* in Baldwin et al., “Addressing the Presence.”

43. Russick et al., “Toxic Tales,” 3.

as possible.”⁴⁴ Consequently, the potential buildup of arsenic over time is a concern, especially for those who frequently interact with toxic bookcloth.

Factors determining an arsenical book’s potential toxicity may include “humidity, storage conditions, the aging process of the arsenic pigments as well as the binding agents.”⁴⁵ One difficulty with assessing health hazards related to these materials is that no established limitations for intermittent contact have been assigned to libraries.⁴⁶ Whereas Tedone and Grayburn observed that, “within these environments, the type and frequency of interaction with arsenical materials is highly unpredictable,” current permissible exposure thresholds are based on industry standards, difficult to translate to the library environment, particularly where emerald-green bookcloth may go undetected.⁴⁷

The US Department of Health and Human Services Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry warns that identified routes of exposure for copper acetoarsenite include:

inhalation, ingestion, and transdermal exposure, although the latter is not considered a primary route. The degree of exposure is the cumulative exposure of all of these routes, with an acute, lethal threshold between 2 and 5 mg/kg of body weight.⁴⁸

Health conditions arising from chronic exposure to arsenic may include various cancers as well as skin irritation and lesions, respiratory complications, peripheral neuropathy, and anemia.⁴⁹

Safety Measures

Identifying potentially arsenical books is the essential first safety measure. Further library safety protocols include restricting access and circulation by moving arsenical bindings to an access-controlled area.⁵⁰ Contaminated books should be used only in this controlled environment under the supervision of trained staff, with the use of digital surrogates encouraged. Arsenical books should be sealed in polyethylene zip-top bags, labelled as hazardous, and shelved in a designated area with clear signage.⁵¹ In addition to masks and nitrile gloves, one must avoid ingesting or inhaling pigment

44. Tedone and Grayburn, “Arsenic and Old Bookcloth,” cited in Bell and Canham, “Pages of Poison.”

45. Wetten et al., “Arsenic Pigments,” 17–18.

46. Russick et al., “Toxic Tales,” 3.

47. Tedone and Grayburn, “Toxic Tomes,” 197.

48. K. Gehle, “ATSDR Case Studies in Environmental Medicine: Arsenic Toxicity,” *Vol: GRA and I, issue: GRA and I* (2009): 1–124.

49. Gehle, “ATSDR Case Studies,” 1.

50. Tedone and Grayburn, “Arsenic and Old Bookcloth,” 1.

51. Tedone and Grayburn, “Arsenic and Old Bookcloth,” 111.

dust, and avoid “touching the face, eating, or smoking until hands can be thoroughly washed, even if gloves have been worn to handle bindings.”⁵² Use of a nonpermeable “placemat” of polyethylene or polyester should be placed on tables, and over book wedges and cushions, during any use of arsenical books.⁵³ Tedone and Grayburn also recommend that stakeholders be identified and included in planning an institution’s guidelines, and that safe handling of arsenical materials be included in an institutional disaster response plan.⁵⁴

Northwestern worked with their Office of Environmental Health and Safety, the provost’s office, and general counsel, to develop “a plan to isolate suspect materials, allow for their safe use and storage, train staff, update reader agreement, and other safety measures (such as limiting and controlling access).”⁵⁵ In addition to isolating the books, housing and labels were added. Toxic books from the stacks—including reference collections—were removed and stored in plastic bags housed within larger, labeled boxes. Library catalog records were updated to indicate which books were not available to be checked out, links to any digital copies were added, and a 583-field note was added to the MARC records to specify that items had been tested, and the result. Identified materials from the circulating collection went to off-site storage.⁵⁶

Recommendations at Queen’s University Library largely follow the Poison Book Project’s, taking into account frequency and duration of handling identified books, with more stringent guidelines for conservators and staff. Digitization was considered, but not undertaken, due to insufficient staffing. Bell and Canham note, “By knowing the precise location of arsenical titles, library staff can effectively identify health hazards for emergency responders, thus enabling the use of appropriate personal protective equipment.”⁵⁷ Thus, housing hazardous items together has the added benefit of enhancing disaster preparedness.

The literature suggests that libraries are retaining arsenical items and separating them from other holdings. None indicated items would be removed altogether, but Queen’s and Northwestern University authors note that, if withdrawn, books containing arsenic would necessarily be disposed of as hazardous chemical waste to protect library workers, patrons, and the environment.⁵⁸

52. Tedone and Grayburn, “Arsenic and Old Bookcloth,” 110.

53. Tedone and Grayburn, “Arsenic and Old Bookcloth,” 110.

54. Tedone and Grayburn, “Arsenic and Old Bookcloth,” 10.

55. Russick et al., “Toxic Tales,” 12.

56. Russick et al., “Toxic Tales,” 13. Special collections already had controlled access. Suspected materials in Archives and Special Collections were “housed, labeled, and stored in situ.”

57. Bell and Canham, “Pages of Poison,” 19–20.

58. Russick et al., “Toxic Tales,” 12.

Slippery Rock University Case Study

Bell and Canham acknowledge that reviewing a library collection for green-covered nineteenth-century books is time-consuming and particularly challenging in understaffed libraries. Such a review may be an ongoing task, as materials, old and new, are continually added or moved, and as new revelations about pigments emerge. This case study documents the inter-university collaboration of a librarian and a chemistry professor at two medium-sized public universities in addressing the question of bibliotoxicology and the remediation of toxic books. The project's three phases are outlined, from preliminary research through identification, testing, and, ultimately, removal of hazardous books from the library's circulating collection, and the creation of a new "Poison Books Collection" in Special Collections. Phase one, conducted during the author's sabbatical leave, included a literature review, a preliminary survey of mid-nineteenth-century books throughout the library's collections, and testing selected volumes at West Chester University. During phase two, parameters were broadened to the entire nineteenth-century, while narrowed to the circulating collection, which was deemed more urgent due to unmediated patron access. The scope was simultaneously narrowed from *all* green books to only emerald-green volumes. Phase three widened the survey's scope, in light of Cecchi et al.'s discussion of other colors containing heavy metals,⁵⁹ with the project reframed to consider all nineteenth-century publishers' bindings in the circulating collection, regardless of color. This case study is of particular importance, as SRU is a public Primarily Undergraduate Institution (PUI), having fewer resources available for the testing and management of potentially hazardous books compared to larger and/or private institutions.

Phase One: 2024

Inspired by Tedone and Grayburn's work,⁶⁰ but lacking adequate time for research or collection review, Silva sought and was awarded a two-summer sabbatical. She read extensively on the topic, identifying the scope and challenges associated with bibliotoxicology. SRU's Special Collections⁶¹ seemed the more likely location of any poisonous books, and yet, given the institution's age, and a circulating collection still holding many nineteenth-century volumes, the latter was deemed more urgent. Circulation staff generated a holdings report of books published between 1840–1869 in any collection, including Special Collections, circulating, reference, and children's

59. Cecchi, Dorotei, Leonori, "Poison Books."

60. Tedone and Grayburn, *The Poison Book Project*.

61. Bailey Library's Special Collections consists of fourteen subcollections, including rare books, three geographic collections, four eponymous collections, historical children's and historical music education books, local authors, artists' books, autographed books, and a critical literacy collection (<https://www.sru.edu/academics/bailey-library/archives-and-special-collections/special-collections>). The access-controlled patron space is 840 square feet, plus the author's 133-square-foot office and a 133-square-foot adjacent workroom. The author is the sole librarian in special collections; her other responsibilities include university archives, and liaison to the art, dance, history, philosophy, and theatre departments, as well as instruction in all these areas.

books, and Silva pulled every green book from the stacks, out of an abundance of caution—a total of forty-one books. She housed these in clean, nonarchival boxes, in a separate cabinet pending testing. Technical services staff created a new sub-collection, The Poison Books Collection, in the library catalog. The books' records were changed to this new location, then suppressed pending further investigation. The author drafted local health and safety guidelines for the handling and storage of potentially hazardous holdings, drawing upon those at other institutions (see Appendix). The guidelines were discussed with SRU's Office of Environmental Health and Safety and shared with library coworkers and administration.

During this initial phase, Silva contacted West Chester University (WCU) Chemistry Department faculty member Dr. Voras, who had worked with a librarian there testing archival materials. Voras offered to test Slippery Rock's books at WCU using an Intax ArtTAX micro X-ray fluorescence spectrometer (μ XRF) equipped with a tungsten x-ray source and an XFlash detector. Nine books were tested, five from Special Collections, and four from the circulating collection. While no arsenic (copper acetoarsenite) was detected, lead and iron were found in eight books, chromium in five, and gold in two. Lead and chromium are highly toxic.⁶² Technical services staff added 583-field notes to bibliographic records indicating these findings, and the books were housed in Special Collections.

Phase Two: 2025

Over the 2024–2025 academic year, several new articles informed the project, including case studies at large universities.⁶³ These followed Tedone and Grayburn's recommendation to consider entire nineteenth-century holdings.⁶⁴ Accordingly, SRU technical services staff ran a report of titles published from 1800–1899. This new list, 892 titles, was first compared against the BibTox Arsenical Books database, with no exact matches. Next, Silva reviewed each title on the shelf in the circulating collection, this time pulling 113 emerald-green titles. For books with electronic facsimiles available, the cataloging librarian added new bibliographic records to the library catalog with this hyperlinked information. Silva shared her findings with library colleagues and administrators, hosted two informal sessions for library student employees, and presented at the university's faculty research symposium.⁶⁵

62. Poison Book Project, "IDing Arsenic Bookbindings," <https://sites.udel.edu/poisonbookproject/arsenic-bookbindings/>

63. Bell and Canham, "Pages of Poison"; Boersma et al., "It's Not Easy"; Cecchi, Dorotei, Leonori, "Poison Books"; Ella Creamer, "Tool to Identify Poisonous Books Developed by University of St. Andrews," *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/tool-to-identify-poisonous-books-developed-by-university-of-st-andrews?CMP=share_btn_url; Russick et al., "Toxic Tales"; Wetten et al., "Arsenic Pigments."

64. Tedone and Grayburn, "Arsenic and Old Bookcloth," 109.

65. Slippery Rock University Faculty Research Symposium, September 25, 2025. Proceedings forthcoming.

Phase Three: Widening the Scope

Cecchi et al. note, “While Arsenic stimulated a flurry of research activity, the hazards related to all the other toxic metals in old book pigments still have to be globally investigated.”⁶⁶ With this, and the Phase One test results in mind, Silva determined to reframe the project through a broader lens: a review of all nineteenth-century holdings, regardless of color. Resuming normal responsibilities post-sabbatical in Fall 2025 limited the time available to continue the project. Space was also a concern: with little room in Special Collections, all identified books remained on carts in Silva’s office for much of the academic year.⁶⁷

To address these challenges and move the project forward, Silva reframed the issue, assessing the potentially hazardous books through a more traditional lens: weeding. Weeding is an ongoing library responsibility, yet nineteenth-century titles in Slippery Rock’s circulating collection were long overdue for review. This prompted the broader focus, reinforced by the number of books flagged as weeding candidates during Phase Two. Returning to the spreadsheet of nineteenth-century titles, circulation staff added usage statistics. Silva again reviewed titles in situ. Those with extremely low usage, in poor condition, having newer editions, and/or no longer relevant to the curriculum were pulled and tagged for withdrawal or possible relocation to Special Collections. These included potentially hazardous books in a variety of colors, which would be tested with the emerald green books. An additional 153 titles were pulled and housed in the Special Collections workroom, their catalog records updated and suppressed. Thirty-nine rebound books were separated and deaccessioned via normal procedures: offered to another institution or, if in poor condition, recycled.

The 114 remaining books, plus 113 from Phase Two, were tested March 2026 by Dr. Voras, this time at Slippery Rock, using WCU’s portable equipment: a Bruker Tracer 5 pXRF for preliminary elemental identification and a handheld Bruker BRAVO Raman spectrometer.⁶⁸ As of May 2026, one volume suspected of having arsenic in its endpapers is at WCU awaiting further testing.⁶⁹ Test results also included thirteen books with mercury (twelve from surface cover art suspected to be vermilion, and one from an added binding tape), and 193 with lead and/or chromium. Twenty-seven items with lead and/or chromium were selected for retention in the Poison Books Collection, their bibliographic records unsuppressed to facilitate discovery and mediated access. One hundred ninety-nine books with

66. Cecchi, Dorotei, Leonori, “Poison Books,” 8.

67. See above note for relevant square footage.

68. This portable instrumentation is provided in collaboration with the WCU Department of Anthropology and Sociology, again highlighting the importance of cross-departmental and cross-institutional collaboration.

69. Siegfried Bing. *Artistic Japan: Illustrations and Essays*. Vol. 1. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1888.

mercury, lead, and/or chromium will be disposed of as hazardous waste, as required by law, following Environmental Health and Safety (E&HS) procedures.⁷⁰ Silva and student Leah Harris were awarded an internal grant to fund the books' removal by an EH&S-identified contractor.

Conclusion

Conducting a bibliotoxicology review in an academic library is a substantial undertaking, requiring research time and time on task. Of importance to this case study is the necessary collaboration between sister institutions for medium-sized public universities: testing equipment may only be available at one institution within a public state system, and there may be limited budget for the safe handling, storage, and disposal of the books. Books selected for retention must be segregated and flagged, with health and safety guidelines established and implemented.

Librarians might face a lack of buy-in from stakeholders, who may either view such a project as a niche concern, or simply be wary of handling potentially toxic materials. Administrators might focus on liability and shy away from projects dealing with potentially hazardous materials. Educating stakeholders about health risks "requires translating complex scientific information into accessible terms."⁷¹ Training student employees to handle potentially hazardous materials was deemed ethically unacceptable in this case study. At SRU, Silva handles the physical processing of any potentially poison books, rather than delegating this responsibility to staff or student employees. Library lingo and practices—for example, those surrounding cataloging procedures—may further the communication chasm among stakeholders. The potential for transferability of arsenic to neighboring books is another challenging factor, and remediation efforts are just beginning to be explored.

Silva was fortunate to be eligible for sabbatical leave to research the issue and begin the project. Collaborating with Voras provided the opportunity to test potentially hazardous books, as the library budget did not support conducting an occupational exposure assessment like that described by Sotek Makos, and Hawks.⁷² Voras's testing of the initial set of books found no arsenic but identified other harmful heavy metals, a concern affirmed by the research of Cecchi et al.⁷³ Widening the scope of this project beyond arsenic to include other toxic heavy metals allowed the researchers to safe-guard library employee and patron health, while creating mediated access to selected books in Special Collections' new Poison Books Collection as important historical

70. Adebowale Adeniji, "Bioremediation of Arsenic, Chromium, Lead, and Mercury," U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2004).

71. Bell and Canham, "Pages of Poison," 21.

72. Jeffrey Sotek et al., "Occupational Exposure Risk Assessment of Library Collections Work Tasks and Storage Areas," *Studies in Conservation* (2025): 730–39, doi:10.1080/00393630.2025.2460407

73. Cecchi, Dorotei, Leonori, "Poison Books."

objects of material culture. Weeding provided this broader framework for a collection in need of review due to age, condition, and usage considerations, removing toxic heavy metals from circulation in the process. Next steps include a more robust review of Special Collections' fourteen other sub-collections and adding procedures for safer handling of the items in the Poison Books Collection to the library's disaster preparedness plan.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the groundbreaking research of Drs. Tedone and Grayburn as well as the Bibliotoxicology Working Group. Dr. Silva is grateful for the assistance of Bailey Library's Circulation and Technical Services staff and Cataloging faculty in preparing reports of nineteenth-century titles and updating the library catalog. She is also grateful to SRU Archives Technicians Sara Dickensheets and Jared Negley, and students Leah Harris and Greta Walk for their assistance, and the Slippery Rock University administration for approving and funding her sabbatical leave to research bibliotoxicology. Dr. Voras would like to acknowledge undergraduate student Victoria Pitoniak for her assistance with initial XRF analysis at West Chester University in Summer 2024.

Appendix: Bibliotoxicology Plan for Bailey Library (Draft)

Bibliotoxicology is an emerging area of concern for academic libraries. This plan for the identification and safer handling of potentially toxic books at Bailey Library is informed by, and adopted from, current best practices identified in the literature. It should be reviewed periodically, consulting The Poison Book Project for relevant new literature.

Stakeholders (potentially library faculty, staff, students, and administrators; the Office of Health and Safety; the Office of the Provost; and/or university legal counsel).

1. Craft and communicate policies & procedures for the identification and safer handling of potentially hazardous books in any of the library's collections (e.g., the circulating collection, the Instructional Materials Center (IMC), Reference, Special Collections, Archives, and bound journals).
2. Create and implement training materials for library employees (faculty, staff, and students).
3. Create and disseminate educational resources for patrons regarding safer handling of potentially hazardous books. See Winterthur Library and Northwestern University Libraries materials (cited below) as prototypes.

Library Personnel Activities

1. Run a report of library holdings from 1800–1899.
2. Compare library holdings against the Arsenical Books Dataset. Following the protocols for safer handling included in *Staff Guidelines for Hazardous Materials Collection* (below), pull any direct matches.
3. Using the Poison Book Project bookmark for reference, review physical holdings for green covers. Attention may be focused outward from 1850 in both chronological directions.
4. Pull green books. Have tested, working with WCU Chemistry Department faculty member Dr. Zachary Voras. Follow *Staff Guidelines for Hazardous Materials Collection* (below) for suspicious books and any books testing positive for heavy metals.
5. Create a new Poison Books sub-collection location in Special Collections in the library catalog. Change locations and call number prefixes for books relocated to the new sub-collection. Add 583 notes to bibliographic holdings records for these titles (see [Resources_Warning Labels_MARC notes](#)).
6. Move suspicious and positively tested books into Poison Books sub-collection, placing any arsenical books in 100% polyethylene zipper bags, and flagging all heavy metal books with hazard labels [Resources_Warning Labels_MARC notes](#).

7. Consider testing adjacent books for transferred arsenic as appropriate.
8. Add the location of potentially toxic materials and procedures for safer handling to the library's disaster preparedness plan. (Note: These materials must not be allowed to get wet. In the event of a water disaster, appropriate PPE must be worn).
9. Consider weeding titles based on their circulation statistics and/or availability of digital surrogates. Consult with Environmental Health and Safety about disposal of hazardous materials for any deaccessioned books.
10. Research availability of digital surrogates of potentially hazardous books; add any pertinent links to bibliographic records.
11. Update Special Collections website and brochure, adding new sub-collection.
12. Consider repeating entire process for other colors that were produced using other heavy metals.

Staff Guidelines for Potentially Hazardous Materials Collection

1. All books containing arsenic or suspected of containing arsenic should be handled with nitrile gloves. Hands should be thoroughly washed after handling, even if gloves are worn.
2. Tables and supports used during the examination of arsenical books should be wiped down to protect others who might use the space.
3. All books positively identified as containing arsenic and newly suspected items should be placed in appropriately labelled 100% polyethylene zipper bags with hazard labels Resources Warning Labels MARC notes and stored separately.

References for Bailey Library Bibliotoxicology Plan

- Russick, S., Muratore, K., Grafakos, T., McGeachy, A., & Vermeulen, M. (2025). Toxic tales: Arsenic's legacy in nineteenth-century green book bindings at Northwestern University Libraries. *Studies in Conservation*, 1–17.
- Tedone, M., Grayburn, R., & Wittine, J. (2025). Handling 'Poison Books': Dry versus wet scenarios. *Studies in Conservation*, 1–8.
- Vermeulen, M., S. M. Webb, S. Russick, A. C. McGeachy, K. Muratore, and M. S. Walton. (2023). "Identification, transformations and mobility of hazardous arsenic-based pigments on 19th-century bookbindings in accessible library collections." *Journal of Hazardous Materials* 454:131453. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhazmat.2023.131453>
- Wetten, J., Pataki-Hundt, A., Deering, K., Börngen, M., Presslmayr, D., Spiegel, E., . . . & Blumenroth, D. (2024). Arsenic pigments in libraries—testing methods, contaminated spaces, and occupational safety measures. *Restaurator: International Journal for the Preservation of Library and Archival Material*, 45(4), 297–323.

Cataloging a Life’s Work: Notes from the George Bixby James Baldwin Collection

The following essay originally appeared as a lightning talk presentation during the RBMS annual conference. The Power of New Voices (PONV) is a conference session category featuring the work of early-career individuals, defined as five years post-Master’s. Developed in response to calls for broader representation and opportunity for emerging voices after the 2019 RBMS conference, and through collaboration between then-Committee Co-chairs Elspeth Healey and Katie Henningsen (Scholarships), Diane Dias De Fazio and Erika Jenns (Membership and Professional Development), and Francesca Marini (Diversity); PONV debuted in 2021 and was co-organized by Gina Nortonsmith and Meghan Constantinou, as well as a subcommittee comprised of former scholarship recipients Sara Schliep, Kathryn Whalen, Sarah Allison, and Rachel Makarowski. In advance of this volume, PONV panelists were contacted to submit essays to RBM. Essay included herein reflects the brevity of the lightning talk format.

Collection Scope and Introduction

In June 2024, as the rare materials cataloger at Cornell University Library, I began the task of cataloging a near-complete collection of the published works of the writer, intellectual, and civil rights activist James Baldwin. George Bixby, a New York City-based publisher, bibliophile, and book collector, gathered these editions over the course of five decades, with the ultimate aim of creating a bibliography of Baldwin’s work.¹ Although this project remained unfinished by the end of Bixby’s life, the resulting collection consequently represents the tandem bodies of work of both George Bixby as collector and James Baldwin as author. By the project’s close, I successfully enhanced or created 172 individual catalog records in advance of a library exhibition centering on Baldwin’s life and work.²

The collection spans materials published between 1947 and 1989, from Baldwin’s first published work—a book review of a collection of Maxim Gorki’s short stories in the April 12, 1947, issue of *The Nation*—to the limited printed edition of the eulogy given by writer Amiri Baraka at Baldwin’s 1987 funeral service. In tracing the various modes

1. Type Punch Matrix, *James Baldwin: The George Bixby Collection* (Type Punch Matrix, 2024), v.

2. *Know Whence You Came: James Baldwin as Public Intellectual*. Exhibition at Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY, April 18–July 25, 2025.

© 2026 by Indica Mattson (CC BY-NC [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>]).

and publication history of Baldwin's literary production, this collection included materials which posed unique cataloging considerations, such as uncorrected proofs and advance copies, essays in their originally published form within issues of periodicals, and first translated editions of Baldwin's works. Format was not the only concern, as this project also involved the reclassification of legacy Baldwin titles in Cornell's collections. The weight of Baldwin's legacy additionally brought to light reparative descriptive concerns while cataloging. Further, the complexity of the materials covered—and the pressure to do justice to Bixby's and Baldwin's work—made collaborating with colleagues a necessity, and I am grateful for the support of fellow catalogers, archivists, conservators, exhibitions colleagues, and curators, in addition to the assistance provided by Type Punch Matrix and the catalog their team produced for the collection.

Cataloging a multiformat collection acted as an instruction in juggling different cataloging strategies and rare materials considerations. By materially representing the broader bibliographic ecosystem in which special collections catalogers work, this project illuminated the considerations which catalogers must attend to when describing special collections for access, especially in anticipation of use for bibliographic research.

Cataloging Approaches and Challenges

Analytic and Collection-Level Records

A significant portion of the collection consisted of Baldwin's works as first published within individual issues of serials. This collecting area contained examples of essays, short stories, poems, reviews, and interviews in their original context, ranging from the literary to the popular, from *Harper's* to *Commentary* to *Playboy*. Several different cataloging approaches could have been implemented, which required me to decide between cataloging these articles at the analytic level as individual monographs, cataloging the issues in which articles appeared as serials, or producing a collection-level record for all serial issues in the collection. Ultimately, I either cataloged articles analytically or followed a collection-level approach, a decision which was often influenced by housing and shelving needs in addition to descriptive priorities.

This project posed multiple instances in which the physical needs of the materials cataloged, and the space considerations of our on-site storage facility ran counter to ideal descriptive practices, a tension which the periodicals in the collection particularly highlighted. Some issues, for reasons of condition, materiality, or overall significance to the collection, were better suited to individual upright shelving alongside book volumes. For these, I created individual analytic records for the articles within each issue. Below is the record of an individual article cataloged analytically within a serial issue, originally published in *Zero* no. 1, later reprinted in the collection *Notes of a Native Son*.³

3. I have retroactively added 590 fields to these sample records to represent the local fields that I added to holdings records in FOLIO during my cataloging work. Although these notes are not present in 590 form in the MARC records in the Cornell University catalog, I added them to the examples shown here for the sake of readability.

LEADER 02354cam a2200481 i 4500

001 # # 16412247
 008 # # 240822s1949 fr 000 0 eng c
 005 # # 20251219192505.4
 035 # # \$a (OCoLC)1452979976
 040 # # \$a COO \$b eng \$e rda \$c COO \$d OCLCO \$d COO
 042 # # \$a pcc
 050 # 4 \$a PS3552.A45 \$b N68 1949
 100 1 # \$a Baldwin, James, \$d 1924-1987, \$e author. \$1 <https://id.oclc.org/worldcat/entity/E39PBJv4mk4rVHDcMt7RVGgh73>
 240 0 0 \$a Notes of a native son. \$k Selections
 245 1 0 \$a Everybody's protest novel / \$c James Baldwin.
 264 # 1 \$a Paris : \$b Zero Press, \$c 1949.
 300 # # \$a pages 54-58 ; \$c 21 cm
 336 # # \$a text \$b txt \$2 rdacontent
 337 # # \$a unmediated \$b n \$2 rdamedia
 338 # # \$a sheet \$b nb \$2 rdacarrier
 590 # # \$a Original white, red, and black wrappers.
 590 # # \$a Provenance: George Bixby.
 510 4 # \$a Type Punch Matrix. James Baldwin: The George Bixby collection, \$c C7
 520 # # \$a The first appearance of James Baldwin's essay "Everybody's protest novel," later reprinted in the June 1949 issue of the "Partisan review" and included in Baldwin's 1955 essay collection, "Notes of a native son."
 600 1 0 \$a Stowe, Harriet Beecher, \$d 1811-1896. \$t Uncle Tom's cabin \$x Criticism and interpretation.
 650 # 0 \$a Protest literature, American \$y 19th century \$x History and criticism.
 650 # 0 \$a American literature \$y 19th century \$x History and criticism.
 650 # 0 \$a African Americans in literature.
 700 1 # \$a Bixby, George, \$e former owner. \$5 NIC
 700 1 # \$a Baldwin, James, \$d 1924-1987. \$t Notes of a native son. \$k Selections.
 710 2 # \$a George Bixby James Baldwin Collection. \$5 NIC
 773 0 8 \$i Contained in (manifestation): \$t Zero. \$d No. 1 (spring 1949) \$w (OCoLC)70736915 (DLC) 56011332

Other issues which posed more conservation concerns—such as brittle paper or fragile stapled bindings—were better suited to storage in flat archival boxes. In these cases, and after conversations with the curator and conservators, I chose to catalog such items at the collection level and to store them as a collection.⁴ Although one single consistent method of description would have been ideal, these differing cataloging strategies reflected the multifaceted needs of the variety of materials encompassed by this collection.

In anticipation of any potential confusion regarding these dual descriptive approaches for serials, I attempted to provide transparency to patrons by adding a note to the collection-level record indicating that other serials articles in the collection were cataloged individually. For ease of findability, I connected all catalog records in the collection, serials or otherwise, with the phrase “George Bixby James Baldwin Collection” as a 710 field, first indicator 2. Although this MARC field is intended to indicate corporate names as an added entry, this approach resulted in a hyperlinked phrase which could co-locate all collection materials in the catalog.

Translated Works

As this collection's materials demonstrated, translation into multiple languages occurred swiftly following Baldwin's first US and UK publications, with materials cataloged chiefly representing European languages—Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, and Swedish—in addition to some works translated into Japanese. On the next page is the content of the catalog record for a German translated edition of *If Beale Street Could Talk*. From the Type Punch Matrix catalog, I learned that Baldwin's status as an expatriate American who resided in Europe for most of his career influenced the translation of his works into numerous languages shortly after their original English publication.⁵ Existing English-language records for these titles were relatively scarce in OCLC; this portion of the collection primarily required original cataloging. For each of these records, I traced the translators as an added entry field (700) and created these name authority records where none existed in the Library of Congress Name Authority File. To co-locate translations within the collection, and to distinguish these works from their English-language first-edition counterparts, I followed the guidance found in the Library of Congress Subject Heading Manual and added the free-floating subdivision, ¤x Translations into [language], following Baldwin's name in a subject (600) field. Some titles required collaboration with language expert colleagues, and this aspect of the project showed the importance of language proficiency to the professional development of special collections catalogers.

4. James Baldwin magazine and newspaper issues, Rare Books PS3552.A45 J364 1947. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. <https://catalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/17135636>

5. Type Punch Matrix, vii.

LEADER 01574cam a2200409 i 4500

001 # # 16405077
 008 # # 240806s1974 gw 000 1 ger c
 005 # # 20251218193546.1
 035 # # ‡a (OCoLC)1451121630
 040 # # ‡a COO ‡b eng ‡e rda ‡c COO ‡d COO
 041 1 # ‡a ger ‡h eng
 042 # # ‡a pcc
 050 # 4 ‡a PS3552.A45 ‡b I4 1974
 100 1 # ‡a Baldwin, James, ‡d 1924-1987, ‡e author.
 240 1 0 ‡a If Beale Street could talk. ‡l German
 245 1 0 ‡a Beale Street Blues : ‡b Roman / ‡c James Baldwin ; Deutsch von Nils Thomas Lindquist.
 264 # 1 ‡a [Reinbeck bei Hamburg] : ‡b Rowohlt, ‡c 1974.
 300 # # ‡a 186 pages ; ‡c 22 cm
 336 # # ‡a text ‡b txt ‡2 rdacontent
 337 # # ‡a unmediated ‡b n ‡2 rdamedia
 338 # # ‡a volume ‡b nc ‡2 rdacarrier
 590 # # ‡a First German edition.
 590 # # ‡a With dust jacket.
 590 # # ‡a Original textured brown paper boards; pink and red lettering on spine.
 590 # # ‡a Provenance: George Bixby.
 510 4 # ‡a Type Punch Matrix. James Baldwin: The George Bixby collection, ‡c A16.f
 600 1 0 ‡a Baldwin, James, ‡d 1924-1987 ‡v Translations into German.
 650 # 0 ‡a African Americans ‡v Fiction.
 650 # 0 ‡a Man-woman relationships ‡v Fiction.
 655 # 7 ‡a Novels. ‡2 lcgt
 700 1 # ‡a Lindquist, Nils Thomas, ‡e translator.
 700 1 # ‡a Bixby, George ‡e former owner. ‡5 NIC
 710 2 # ‡a Rowohlt (Firm), ‡e publisher.
 710 2 # ‡a George Bixby James Baldwin Collection. ‡5 NIC

First Editions, Publisher's Proofs, and Advance Copies

Additionally, this collection contained an abundance of information pertaining to the publication and marketing history of Baldwin's works, an area which curators highlighted as a priority for description. For this aspect of the collection, I consistently recorded pre-publication and proof information in the edition field (250) in the bibliographic record, and I additionally added RBMS controlled vocabulary genre (655) terms such as "Uncorrected proofs," "Galley proofs," and "Advance copies" to enhance discoverability and further aid in distinguishing between pre-publication and first editions in the catalog. Below is the content of a catalog record for an uncorrected proof copy of *Giovanni's Room*, with corresponding edition (250) and genre (655) fields.

LEADER 02102nam a2200517 i 4500

001 # # 16355717

008 # # 240618s1957 enk 000 1 eng c

005 # # 20251219193814.3

035 # # \$a (OCoLC)1440080268

040 # # \$a COO \$b eng \$e rda \$c COO

042 # # \$a pcc

043 # # \$a e-fr—

050 # 4 \$a PS3552.A45 \$b G56 1957

100 1 # \$a Baldwin, James, \$d 1924-1987.

245 1 0 \$a Giovanni's room / \$c by James Baldwin.

250 # # \$a Uncorrected proof copy.

264 # 1 \$a London : \$b Michael Joseph, \$c 1957.

300 # # \$a 221 pages ; \$c 20 cm

336 # # \$a text \$b txt \$2 rdacontent

337 # # \$a unmediated \$b n \$2 rdamedia

338 # # \$a volume \$b nc \$2 rdacarrier

500 # # \$a Issued in tan paper wrappers.

590 # # \$a With printed paper label mounted to front cover, giving provisional publication date ("September 9th 1957," crossed out in pencil with "30" and "Oct 7th" added) and provisional price ("13/6").

590 # # \$a Publisher's "compliments of" slip laid in.

590 # # \$a Provenance: George Bixby.

510 4 # \$a Type Punch Matrix. James Baldwin: The George Bixby collection, \$c A3.b

Spring 2026 | Volume 27, Number 1

- 650 # 0 ‡a Americans ‡z France ‡v Fiction.
- 650 # 0 ‡a Sexual orientation ‡v Fiction.
- 650 # 0 ‡a Triangles (Interpersonal relations) ‡v Fiction.
- 651 # 0 ‡a Paris (France) ‡v Fiction.
- 650 # 7 ‡a Love triangles. ‡2 homoit ‡0 <https://homosaurus.org/v3/homoit0000976>
- 655 # 7 ‡a Gay fiction. ‡2 lcgft
- 655 # 7 ‡a Bisexual fiction. ‡2 lcgft
- 655 # 7 ‡a Uncorrected proofs. ‡2 rbmscv ‡0 <http://id.loc.gov/vocabulary/rbmscv/cv02001>
- 700 v # ‡a Bixby, George ‡e former owner. ‡5 NIC
- 710 2 # ‡a George Bixby James Baldwin Collection. ‡5 NIC

Many of these advance copies also contained publisher's slips or inserts, which offered insights into the ways in which these works were originally sold, marketed, reviewed, and prepared for publication. I aimed to keep these inserts with the book of origin whenever possible. In these cases, I made a corresponding note at the holdings level in our local FOLIO system, and I housed the accompanying inserts in archival envelopes or mylar sleeves. I separated any oversized or bulky inserts from the titles of origin and routed these to archivist colleagues to be added to the accompanying archival ephemera collection.⁶

Reclassification

Before the acquisition of the George Bixby James Baldwin Collection, titles by Baldwin in our holdings were previously cataloged in two different Library of Congress classification ranges. Some titles were shelved under Baldwin's deprecated classification number, PS3552.A365, in the American Literature range, whereas others were located in the range for African American race relations in the United States, E185.61. Cataloging these newly acquired works under Baldwin's current classification number would have made it necessary to search in three different places in our vault for materials from the collection—a dilemma compounded by the anticipated frequency of retrieval of these materials for exhibition, classroom sessions, and researcher use. After much deliberation with the collection's curator, I decided to reclassify approximately thirty legacy titles, with the goals of saving future labor during exhibition development and mitigating any frustration during retrieval or reshelving.

6. James Baldwin ephemera, #8882. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. <https://catalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/16418025>

This undertaking required the classification of fiction, criticism, translations, and selections in addition to collected works. Ultimately, I classified and shelf-listed all titles under PS3552.A45, Baldwin's current LC classification number, regardless of whether they were written by or relating to Baldwin, for ease of access. This choice reflects the ways in which classification within a noncirculating context can be shaped by priorities at the local level, such as collecting area interests or researcher needs.

Reparative Description and Lingering Questions

Over the course of this work, I asked myself more questions regarding the equitable and reparative description of these materials than I could definitively answer. Over the course of copy-cataloging, I consistently encountered the Library of Congress subject headings, "United States -- Race relations," "Racism -- United States," "African Americans -- Social conditions," and "African Americans -- Civil rights." These heading strings all accurately described dominant themes and concerns in much of Baldwin's work, yet I simultaneously felt that it was impossible to completely convey the expansiveness of these titles—which so often dealt with the intersecting themes of race, sexuality, gender, religion, family, and class—within the circumscribed scope of subject analysis.

This aspect of the project illuminated how metadata is intentionally reductive by design for efficiency of description, access, and retrieval. However, this inherent quality of metadata often resulted in the feeling that I was somehow enclosing or restricting Baldwin's perspective through the act of description. I was somewhat consoled by the knowledge that description is always an iterative and changing process—that one perfect, singularly accurate bibliographic record is an impossibility, and that catalogers must instead use our best present judgment and resources to reduce descriptive harm. I knew that using this best judgment alongside current Library of Congress guidance would ensure ease of metadata maintenance in the future if or when a change to any of the applied subject headings was made, although this knowledge was both comforting and unsatisfying in the moment of cataloging. I wondered whether a more expansive or abolitionist descriptive approach would do more justice to Baldwin's legacy, while also finding few references for what this might look like within the context of cataloging work.⁷

7. "Abolitionist" here means critical metadata work which serves "communities most impacted by mass incarceration" and the legacies of enslavement. See Michelle Brown, Vivian Swayne, Joshua Baco Ortiz, and Mat Jordan, "Digital Collectives in the Carceral Era: Introducing Abolition Now," *Punishment & Society* (2025). doi.org/10.1177/14624745251391306. An abolitionist approach to description operates with an understanding of the ways in which metadata has been and continues to be a tool for carceral surveillance and punishment. See Jose Cruz Guerrero, "Metadata as White Ignorance," In *Critical Race Theory in LIS: Challenging White Supremacy in Libraries*, edited by Mónica Colón-Aguirre, Nicole A. Cooke, Aisha M. Johnson, and Anastasia M. Collins, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2025. doi.org/10.1108/S0065-283020250000056013.

With these doubts in my mind concerning subject analysis, and in the context of a looming deadline, I decided on the side of findability, with the aim of applying subject headings that I had added or retained over the course of copy- and original cataloging work consistently across the entirety of the collection. After conversations with fellow catalogers, I chose to rely on the researchers' potential interest in Baldwin's voice, and the publication history of his works, in lieu of mulling over subject analysis indefinitely. While the broader concerns elicited by the doubt I felt during subject assignment proved instructive at this particular moment in my development as a cataloger, they also illuminated the necessity of honing one's sense of when *good is enough* and further revealed the institutional realities of providing the highest quality of description possible within the always-finite resources of time and knowledge.

Conclusion

Describing these works provided unique insight into the cumulative bibliographical processes of authorship, revision, publication, translation, and collection at a critical moment in my training as an early-career cataloger. Through the act of cataloging, I received a hands-on demonstration of the bibliographic considerations unique to special materials cataloging, the limits of reparative description, and the balance which must be struck between descriptive priorities and institutional constraints.

Crucially, this work represented the role of large, contained projects as opportunities for developing catalogers to build foundational knowledge in specific formats or subject areas. However, this collection was atypical in comparison to the normal pace of cataloging work at my institution; outside of this purchase, a typical acquisitions pattern consisted of isolated materials instead of the "discrete projects" identified as crucial to special collections cataloging training.⁸ Cataloging this distinctive collection revealed how acquired materials directly impact the on-the-job training, development, and specialization of catalogers in a special collections context, offering potential guidance for future approaches to cataloging training that operate alongside collection development considerations.

8. Abigail Connick, Jessica Grzegorski, Libby Hertenstein, and Jessie Sherwood, "Catalogers \$x Training of: Teaching Rare Materials Cataloging on the Job," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 63, 5 (2025): 389–401. doi:10.1080/01639374.2025.2537129

Sarah Allison, Anne Bahde, Jeremy Brett, and Juli McLoone, with
Diane Dias De Fazio

On Crafting a Policy: Reflections on Membership and Community

Every August, ACRL-level committees—including editorial boards like *RBM*—submit a “Work Plan,” which is a review of work from the past “service year”—July 1 through June 30 in ALA parlance—and a series of “activities,” that the Board self-devises and plans to execute in the service year already in progress. The Work Plan is then reviewed by the ACRL Board Liaison—who is the immediate ACRL Past President—along with *RBM*’s ACRL Staff Liaison, and officially submitted to ALA through the ACRL Program Officer who “manages the ACRL division-level committee process, annual ACRL Board elections, ACRL’s IFLA section standing committee appointments, and ACRL meeting scheduling for ALA conferences and ACRL’s virtual meetings scheduling,” and “supports the work of the ACRL Board of Directors, ACRL Budget & Finance Committee, and division-level committees.” Unlike RBMS committees, the work of *RBM* is, theoretically at least, thus highly visible to our parent organization, and directly supported by the second-highest-ranking individual in the ACRL elected hierarchy. —That’s meaningful, right? This service year, *RBM*’s editorial board committed to creating and publishing a policy on generative AI by July 2026. Over the course of five months, a subgroup from the Board researched and drafted a policy, which was reviewed and approved by the full Board in January of this year. But, in the meantime, the members of the subgroup got to experience the growth, connection, and change that can often be discovered within ACRL service work.

We always intended to publish this policy in the Spring 2026 issue of *RBM*, but later it seemed necessary to also share our reflections on the work of drafting a generative AI policy and the shared values about peer mentorship, professional growth, authenticity, and more that we surfaced in the process. There was also a brief, but meaningful, appearance by Keanu Reeves that made us wonder: Cannot we all learn from Keanu, at this moment in time?

This subgroup ended up being very important to all of the members. We are all struggling to adapt to the quickness of AI adoption everywhere—we think about it a lot, like everyone else is also being forced to think about it a lot. We are each struggling to find where we are on the spectrum of approaches to AI—some of us work with people who are enthusiastic adopters and also with others who refuse to use it. We are

struggling to know what role it plays in our own lives and in our work, where it may be assertively engaged with by our institutions. As information professionals, we have to put AI tools through their paces, we must understand what students are using, and how and why. But most of us can't say that we are particularly thrilled about all this, especially with the rapidness of AI adoption. This subgroup, and our conversations, allowed us all to explore further, to hear others' experiences and approaches, and to grow further in our own thoughts and practices than any of the webinars and lectures on AI we have attended so far. Our discussions were far-ranging, full of thoughts about circumstances and consequences, and just really interesting; we learned a lot.

Less than a month into the subcommittee's work, the ALA Forward strategic plan—<https://www.ala.org/Strategic-Plan-2025>—kicked into gear, and 8% of its staff were laid off. (See Editor's Note, this issue.) Among those directly affected were beloved ACRL team members—individuals who had helped shape the identity of RBMS as an organization, and who had enabled important professional experiences for so many special collections professionals in our field. This cut ran deep, particularly with Board members, which prompted sincere reflection in this subgroup and beyond, both about what an organization such as RBMS means to individual members, and how we as members of this organization serve it and each other.

We all struggled this fall because of ALA's actions. We wondered why they would do that to ACRL, the largest and most lucrative division; why they would not value these folks the way we did. We were outraged, frankly, at the news, and having this subgroup helped us each think through that outrage. Everyone on the subgroup is roughly at the same place in our careers, of the same cohort in the profession. ACRL/ALA and RBMS have always been the professional home for each of us. But these actions led us back to conversations we've all had throughout our long memberships in RBMS, about membership in ACRL, and what benefit is derived from it for a group who is made up of far more than academic librarians. This subgroup helped us all think through some of that, and most of all our work led us to appreciate each other deeply, and to value the peership, friendship, and support that RBMS stands for. Reflecting on these struggles while working on a subcommittee is the unseen personal and professional growth that comes with membership in our association. We felt that providing a view into what took place in our subcommittee meetings could help members see the benefits and importance of RBMS.

Midway through our subcommittee work, we had what came to be called the Keanu Reeves Interlude. A member attended a Broadway performance of *Waiting for Godot* with Alex Winter and Keanu Reeves, about which we all delighted in hearing. From the excellent adventure with Ted, to "Vaya con Dios," a high-speed bus, choosing between the red pill and the blue pill, and avenging the death of one's dog, Keanu

(as we are on a first-name basis), has been nearly a mystical figure for our generation. Professional committee work can be boring, difficult, and even intimidating. But what makes it fun and rewarding are the connections and experience one gets to share along the way. Perhaps this is cliché, but the Keanu Reeves Interlude proved it true. The subcommittee reflected on the awesomeness that is Keanu: a genuinely kind, authentic, and generous human being, whose presence could be felt all the way from the stage, to the balcony of a Broadway theater, and through the internet across a Zoom meeting.

In thinking through our intellectual values in regards to AI, the subgroup kept returning to concepts of authenticity, to the important work of doing one's own thinking and making a unique and personal contribution to our scholarly discourse. Subgroup member Juli McLoone penned the inspired bolded paragraph, below, and we all enthusiastically supported this inclusion as a unique—and sincere—element of our policy. As Keanu said, "I have always used writing to learn what it is that I think. And I find myself disinclined to leave these mysteries unexamined. I would like to know what I think about this."¹ And we would like to know what you think, authentically, from your own mind, as we make our way through this brave new information landscape, together.

Here's the policy, approved by the *RBM* Editorial Board in January 2026:

RBM: a Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage publishes articles of interest to the special collections and archives professions on a wide variety of topics. In this field where we seek to collect, preserve, and provide access to the documentary record of human history, it is of particular importance to think carefully about how machine learning, and in particular, Generative AI, is implemented in the process of researching and writing about those practices. Given the rapidly shifting landscape of Large Language Models and Generative AI, this is a conversation that will be ongoing for some time to come, as the field develops a shared set of scholarly norms around these new technologies.

The *RBM* editorial board encourages authors to embrace the hard work of thinking, analyzing, and writing. You have something valuable to contribute to the professional conversation, and it is through the struggle to bring it forth that you will figure out what your contribution is, and how best to communicate it.

1. Keanu Reeves and China Miéville. *The Book of Elsewhere*. Del Rey, 2024: 9.

Beginning with the Fall 2026 issue, the *RBM* Board is implementing the following norms and guidelines surrounding the use of Generative AI.

- The *RBM* editorial board recognizes a distinction between assistive AI, which makes suggestions and improvements to content generated by human authors, and generative AI, which produces text and image content.²
- Articles that consist entirely or primarily of AI-generated prose will not be accepted.
- Authors take full responsibility for all claims, citations, and analyses in their article.
- Authors must disclose any use of AI to the Editor as part of the submission process in an author statement that includes the tool used, the time period during which it was used, and the purpose of that use. Authors should explain how they verified the accuracy of AI-supplied content and how errors were corrected.

Example Statements for Editorial Review:

- I used built-in AI assistant on [platform] to assist in literature review; I used [tool] to create the images in this article; I used [tool] to create a table/graph
- I used GPT-5 to generate the prose in my introduction before revising for accuracy and my authorial voice.
- The Editor may request additional information about where and how Generative AI has been used in an article, as well as AI transcripts.
- Tools used as a substantive part of the research project and article writing—including Generative AI tools—should be specified in an article’s Methodology.
- Use of Generative AI will appear as a note in the first page of the article, when published.

Example Statements for Publication:

- Portions of this article were created with generative AI, as reported by the author(s).
- The author(s) applied generative AI tools in drafting this article.

2. “Assistive and Generative AI Guidelines for Authors: Policies & Guidelines.” Sage Corporate Policies & Guidelines, Sage, www.sagepub.com/about/sage-policies/corporate-policies/ai-author-guidelines.

Book Reviews

RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage reviews books, reports, new periodicals, databases, websites, blogs, and other electronic resources, as well as exhibition, book, and auction catalogs pertaining directly and indirectly to the fields of rare book librarianship, manuscripts curatorship, archives management, and special collections administration. Publishers, librarians, and archivists are asked to send appropriate publications for review or notice to the Reviews Editor.

It may not be possible for all books received to be reviewed in *RBM*, but the reviews appearing in the print journal are supplemented by a larger number of reviews published digitally on the *RBM* digital platform at <https://rbm.acrl.org/index.php/rbm/pages/view/reviews>. Books or publication announcements should be sent to the Reviews Editor: John Henry Adams, john.henry.adams.41@gmail.com.

Jen Hoyer, Kaitlin H. Holt, and Julia Pelaez with Brooklyn Public Library.

What Primary Sources Teach: Lessons for Every Classroom. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2022. Paperback/Ebook, 170p., \$55.00/\$49.50. (9781440878558/9781440878565)

Every year nearly a dozen articles and a book or two are published on teaching with primary sources for librarians and archivists. Cultural heritage professionals with instruction responsibilities attempt to maintain at least a peripheral awareness of this ever-growing mountain of scholarship. However, much of the professional literature (specifically the case studies) can be challenging to apply in practice. Often, case studies are for specific resources or based on content-specific learning objectives. While such literature is inspiring, it can be nearly impossible to replicate depending on an institution's collections and collecting areas or not applicable given the limits of an organization's technology, programming space(s), or human resources. Jen Hoyer, Kaitlin Holt, and Julia Pelaez's *What Primary Sources Teach* provides twelve lesson plans aligned to both the "Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy" and Common Core Standards for 4th–12th grade students that are designed to be replicable with a wide variety of cultural heritage collections. The authors correctly assert that these instruction sessions can be adapted for higher education and community groups. *What Primary Sources Teach* is the best book on teaching with primary sources that I have read since I changed careers from teaching secondary school social science and English language arts to special collections librarianship.

The authors' instructional expertise was honed while working together for several years in the Brooklyn Public Library's Center for Brooklyn History delivering Brooklyn Connections programming. *What Primary Sources Teach*'s introduction traces the implementation and evolution of the Brooklyn Connections program to both frame the content and demonstrate the authors' expertise in teaching with cultural heritage resources. Begun in 2007 for 8th grade students to learn about research in archives and special collections settings and to help students draw connections between their lives and Brooklyn's history, the program quickly expanded. Today the Brooklyn Connections education program is available to Brooklyn students in the 4th through 12th grades. The program provides six instruction sessions where educators take facsimiles to the schools and the classes take at least one field trip to the Center to interact with original materials. Through their work as educators in the Brooklyn Connections program, Hoyer, Holt, and Pelaez have likely delivered hundreds of primary source instruction sessions.

While the bulk of *What Primary Sources Teach* is dedicated to providing the twelve detailed lesson plans, the first three chapters present the authors' teaching philosophy and provide detailed explanations of how to reproduce the later lessons. Every librarian and archivist teaching with cultural heritage resources should take a few minutes to read at least the first and second chapters of this work. Chapter one, "Differentiation," is devoted to defining its title for informal educators who have (probably) not completed a formal education program. Hoyer, Holt, and Pelaez provide a summary of educational scholarship on the role of differentiation in education and how an accurate understanding can and should frame every lesson both formal and informal educators deliver. While the authors do mention a number of differentiating activities, the questions they provide for educators to consider when preparing an instruction session are the most applicable part of this chapter.

In this first chapter, the authors also take a moment to define pertinent educational jargon that informal educators may be unfamiliar with prior to working with primary and secondary students. Most of these terms identify special populations which benefit from differentiation in classroom settings. Throughout the remainder of the work when discussing differentiation activities, the authors refer to students "who require more support" and "who need less guidance." This phrasing captures the spectrum of prior knowledge and skills that exist in the classroom.

The second chapter attempts to address what is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching with primary sources scholarship. Frequently, instructional case studies describe interesting lessons that are dependent on specific resources from the author's institution. In "Choosing Sources: Teaching with Your Collections," Hoyer, Holt, and Pelaez address this by presenting a series of questions intended to help educators

interrogate the collections they steward and then select the most “suitable” source at their institution for each lesson. The authors repeatedly emphasize that there is no perfect source, just the best option available within an institution’s collection. The questions that Hoyer, Holt, and Pelaez have put together will be incredibly useful to new (or less imaginative) educators who are interested in implementing the lessons in *What Primary Sources Teach*. The questions from chapter two will also be useful for informal educators interested in reflecting on the instruction sessions they deliver regularly or when developing new lessons. When faculty request an instruction session utilizing special collection resources it is usually driven by the course’s content. For librarians and archivists with a wide array of responsibilities it is quick and easy to select the resources that most closely match the topic requested. Taking the time to mentally run each resource through Hoyer, Holt, and Pelaez’s questions can help determine if the obvious resource choice is the most accessible choice from a student’s perspective.

Experienced educators or those with some formal education training can skim chapter three and then jump into whichever of the lessons that they find most intriguing. The third chapter explains the parts which make up each of the following lesson plans. Each lesson includes: an aim, objective, anticipated lesson length, materials, choosing sources (authors describe the criteria for their selections), procedure, assessment, differentiation, reproducible worksheet(s) with sample facsimiles from the Center for Brooklyn History’s collections, and alignment with both the “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy” and Common Core Standards.

Those final two parts of each lesson are what makes *What Primary Sources Teach* the best book on teaching for librarians or archivists that I have read since I completed my MLS program. Focusing the lessons on skills-based standards rather than content standards addresses another of the challenging aspects of applying teaching with primary sources scholarship. By emphasizing how to identify suitable resources and presenting lessons that are both skill-based and standards-aligned, Hoyer, Holt, and Pelaez have completed around eighty percent of the work for informal educators interested in partnering with local schools. All that is left for the educators reading this volume to do is to reach out to primary and secondary educators to let them know you can offer standards-aligned cultural heritage resource-based instruction sessions, and then select the most suitable resources for each lesson based on the classroom students grade level and subject. While readers who are new to an institution or unfamiliar with their institution’s holdings may struggle to identify sources appropriate for the lessons, this set of questions is invaluable as a means to select from a larger collection.

Growing as it does out of a program aimed at upper elementary, middle, and high school students, *What Primary Sources Teach* assumes an instruction session focused on learning to use primary sources. Archivists and librarians in special collections

departments at college and university libraries may need to think a bit differently about *What Primary Sources Teach*'s lesson plans since many teaching faculty request instruction sessions based around either a specific course theme or collection item(s), or simply do not know what to ask for, so they want a “show and tell” type of session. Special collections professionals could apply the book's lessons in at least two ways. The first would be to use the skills-based activities in content-based instruction sessions as a secondary instruction session objective (after making sure that the faculty's requested content is at the forefront of the lesson). The second is to utilize the skills-based lessons in this volume to develop a few different instruction sessions to deliver when a “show and tell” session is requested. These lessons could show off various collection strengths and provide meaningful educational experiences when instructors do not know what to ask for. Additionally, having a couple of different sessions ready to go will not rely on the same set of resources again and again.

What Primary Sources Teach is a new type of book for educators in cultural heritage positions. The lessons in Hoyer, Holt, and Pelaez's work are skills-based and aligned to both Common Core Standards and the “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy.” This work is an excellent fit for educators seeking to increase their partnerships with local primary and secondary schools. For librarians and archivists working in higher education struggling to incorporate the “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy” into their content-based instruction sessions, this volume has activities aligned to those standards. Overall, this work has the greatest number of applicable or easily adjustable lessons of any book on teaching with primary sources that I have read in the last decade (that is the third time I have written this, reader). I hope it becomes standard practice in the future for primary source case study scholarship to include the “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy” that each case study addresses. — *Laura French, Baylor University Libraries*

Matt Cohen, Kenneth M. Price, and Caterina Bernardini, eds. *Futures of Digital Scholarly Editing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025. Hardcover/Paperback/eBook, 312p. \$30.00/\$30.00/\$120.00. (ISBN: 9781517916671/9781517916688/9781452972534).

This collection brings together essays that consider not only what digital editions have been, but also what they might become in this moment of rapid technological and social change. Contributors offer both theory and case studies. The editors organize the contributions into two parts. The first traces the history of textual scholarship as a discipline, while the second considers how the practices of scholarly editing and digital collection building intersect. Emerging from a symposium, the volume is less a single unified argument than a deliberately plural conversation, one that places pressure on inherited assumptions about the relationship between scholarly work

and its publics. As the editors note, this moment demands a “rethinking of both the design and the public role” of scholarly editions (ix).

The book situates itself squarely within several ongoing conversations in textual scholarship and adjacent fields. It responds to the maturation of digital scholarly editing as a practice, one now shaped by decades of infrastructural development and by the institutionalization of digital projects within academia. At the same time, it engages with the critical turn in archival studies, feminist and antiracist scholarship, and computational literary studies. Contributors repeatedly emphasize that digital editing can no longer be understood as a neutral technical activity: it is embedded in questions of power and representation, including who gets edited, who gets access, who benefits from such work, and who is harmed. The volume also participates in a broader reorientation toward community-centered scholarly editions, echoing developments in library and archival practice.

Several essays stand out for their conceptual clarity and practical implications. Julia Flanders’s discussion of the social edition, for instance, provides a compelling framework for rethinking editorial work as a network of relationships rather than a bounded product. By foregrounding “multiple, negotiated agencies” and comparing epistemological, affective, and social virtues, Flanders reorients the edition toward shared authority and community engagement (15). This essay serves as a conceptual anchor for the collection, articulating many concerns that recur elsewhere in the collection.

One of the most practically valuable contributions in the volume is K.J. Rawson’s essay on digital archival ethics, which offers a framework that practitioners in libraries and archives could readily adapt into local policy and procedure. Rawson translates ethical commitments into a series of guiding questions that can be applied at multiple stages of project development, from selection and description to access and dissemination. By centering the people represented in collections alongside users, this contribution prompts practitioners to consider potential downstream harms before materials are made publicly available. Particularly useful is the emphasis on slowing down decision-making through structured reflection, e.g., asking who benefits from access, who bears its risks, and whether certain materials should be restricted or mediated. The essay characterizes access not as an unquestioned good but as a responsibility requiring ongoing evaluation. To that end, the piece models policy and procedure that aim to reduce the risk of harm while still supporting meaningful access.

Essays on the Colored Conventions Project and Indigenous publishing also emphasize approaches driven by the needs of specific communities, while pieces on the long life of the Whitman Archive highlight the enduring challenges of sustainability and institutional support. Taken together, these essays demonstrate the field’s willingness to engage with difficult questions about its own practices.

Spring 2026 | Volume 27, Number 1

The diversity of approaches and topics sometimes comes at the expense of coherence. Readers seeking a vision of one singular future of digital scholarly editing will find instead a set of loosely connected perspectives. This is intentional, however. The editors ask readers to consider multiple potential futures that could compete or co-exist. In addition, while many essays gesture toward practical implementation, the collection overall remains more conceptual than procedural. The day-to-day realities of project management, funding constraints, and institutional barriers are mentioned, but meeting these challenges is not the focus of the collection. The introduction notes that digital projects are often “expensive to produce” yet fragile and difficult to sustain (xxiii). This tension might have been more fully developed across the volume by attending even more to issues of labor.

In addition to paperback, hardback, and ebook formats, the collection is also available online as an open access edition at manifold.umn.edu. The Manifold edition includes four response essays that provide a fitting coda to the collection, collectively synthesizing and sharpening its central concerns. Each respondent takes up a different facet of the volume—whether questions of power, description, disciplinary boundaries, or institutional precarity—but all underscore the extent to which digital scholarly editing is entangled with broader social, political, and infrastructural conditions. Of these, Michelle Caswell’s contribution is especially powerful in its clarity and urgency. By outlining questions for project teams to ask about power, positionality, and community, Caswell challenges the field to move beyond making abstract commitments to ethical stewardship and toward actually practicing a politics of care. Through projects featured in the collection, like the Digital Transgender Archive and the Colored Conventions Project, Caswell illustrates how such a politics can be operationalized: performing honest power analysis, interrogating the project team’s positionality with respect to the digital project’s subjects and users, and shaping project goals and methods to meet the needs of specific communities.

Futures of Digital Scholarly Editing is an important and timely contribution to the field. It will be particularly valuable to scholars and practitioners working in both textual scholarship and digital collections, especially to those interested in the ethical and political dimensions of such work. Different essays would be well-suited to different graduate courses in literary studies, public humanities, and library and archival practice. The collection succeeds not by offering definitive answers but by opening a space for critical reflection. It invites readers to reconsider what editing is and whom it serves, emphasizing that digital scholarly editing is not simply a technical endeavor, but is also a form of world-building work. — *Chelcie Juliet Rowell, Harvard Library* (CC BY [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>])

The Manuscript Society

Est. 1948

**A COMMUNITY FOR
COLLECTORS, SCHOLARS &
ENTHUSIASTS**

The Manuscript Society is an international organization of individuals and institutions devoted to the collection, preservation, use and enjoyment of autographs and manuscripts.

- Exclusive behind-the-scenes access to major libraries, archives and private collections
- Education through lectures, events and resources
- Subscription to a quarterly journal and members-only information online



**JOIN TODAY!
ALL COLLECTORS --
AMATEURS AND
PROFESSIONALS -- ARE
WELCOME!**



LEARN MORE

www.manuscript.org



ORGANIZE, ACCESS, MANAGE, AND TRACK YOUR VALUABLE RESOURCES

The journey to organizing and increasing the visibility of your special collections and archives isn't a straight line. Wherever you are in the process, Atlas Systems can help move you forward.

**With Atlas, it's as easy
as one, two, three.**

STEP 01 Identify where you are now

STEP 02 Target where you want to go

STEP 03 Work with Atlas toward your goals



With ArchivesSpace and Aeon, we can help you create your own continuum to reach your special collections and archives management goals.

LET'S START THE CONVERSATION.
SALES@ATLAS-SYS.COM

