2014

Curating Collective Collections: What Exactly Are We Retaining When We Retain That Book?

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Recommended Citation

Kieft, Bob (2014) "Curating Collective Collections: What Exactly Are We Retaining When We Retain That Book?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 26: Iss. 5, Article 53.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6887>

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Curating Collective Collections — What Exactly Are We Retaining When We Retain That Book? Part One.

Column Editor: **Bob Kieft** (College Librarian, Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA 90041) <kieft@oxy.edu>

I'd like to take up in this installment of CCC a theme that circulates as an unresolved issue through shared print discussions of monographs. The theme involves a set of questions raised by the physicality of the books in the stacks and the consequences of that physicality for shared print agreements.

Since they are physical, books have a life expectancy that depends on their "gene pool," that is, the materials of which they are made, and on the environment in which they live as well as their encounters in that environment with living creatures, creatures that are predominantly, but not exclusively, human. As physical objects, the paper books are made of, the glue or sewing that holds their pages together, and the casing that packages the pages affects their life expectancy as surely as do the conditions in the stacks where they are housed and sit undisturbed, in many cases, for decades. Whether books become the dietary preference of vermin and whether they are treated well by the people who handle and read them — gnawed by the family dog? spilled or rained on? run over by the car? left to bake on a windowsill? crushed onto a copier? highlighted or underlined with ineradicable inks? — add or subtract years of life.

As physical objects, books also carry cultural-historical evidence of the purposes for which people designed and made them, the technologies and arts used to create them, and the markets or audiences for which they were produced and in which they were distributed. Not least, individual copies of books bear, according to **Professor Andrew Stauffer, University of Virginia**, "traces" of their purchasers' and readers' interactions with them (<http://www.booktraces.org/>). We object to seeing in library books the shocking pinks and yellows of undergraduate highlighting, for they make books unreadable. You can bet your last *First Folio*, however, that if **Einstein** had used yellow highlighter on a paragraph or written "horsepucky" in the margin of his copy of **Newton's Principia** you would not only sit up and pay attention but you would whisk the book away to the safety of Special Collections faster than the speed of light. But even readers less grand than **Einstein** leave marginalia, inscriptions, bookplates, doodles, insertions, and so on in their books, and these traces can serve the attentive scholar as clues to the lives, cultures, and institutions in which a book was used.

As physical objects, then, books that are the "same" may manifest a number of variations. Since academic libraries exist, among other reasons, to preserve the cultural record, shared print agreements for general, circulating collections of monographs must consider the conundrum of the value of copy variation

in their retention programs, for some of the differences among copies make a difference to average readers and scholars alike. Beyond the question, then, of how many copies from zero to N a partnership should retain, the partnership has to decide how they will define a copy and which differences among them warrant retention of a particular copy. In effect, they have to ask on behalf of their readers about the extent to which any given physical or digitized copy is able to represent and be used as a given "book" in a shared print or digital library.

The special collections community exists in part to preserve the many differences that printed books can have; they assume that books are worth continuing to use as cultural objects, and they wince at knowing that libraries in their everyday practices of adding books to the collection compromise, even destroy or at least imperil, some of that artifactual value by marking them with stamps and labels, taking dust jackets off, replacing covers with library buckram, and, worst of all, lending them to readers. To what extent, though, can or should shared print agreements treat circulating collection books as artifacts, respecting their physical integrity, establishing their suitability for archiving, and preserving them collaboratively as distinct or distinctive objects?

Shared print agreements raise a number of questions for readers on a campus. Among the first questions anyone, particularly faculty, asks when their home library discusses entering a shared print agreement is "How do we know that we can rely on another library's keeping the book they say they will keep?" The

Memorandum of Understanding that parties to a shared print agreement typically sign answers that question with specified retention and agreement review periods, exit requirements, guidelines for housing materials, etc. These terms, however, oriented as they are to a time-frame and to conditions that enable partner libraries to retain a measure of local control, exhibit a pragmatism that may not reassure those who regard the books now in the stacks as needing to exist in perpetuity. No library has made or can make such a promise, but the potential for managing down a local collection in favor of a collective collection challenges the familiar view of the library as the one place in all of society that will maintain the village memory through its books. We know that libraries employ varying protocols with respect to damaged books, and, even though a shared print agreement may explain procedures for checking regional or national holdings counts in making a replace/withdraw determination, readers may well wonder whether that retained copy will indeed be there in 30 years (that maybe we should not care too much it will not be a story for another day).

The second question they ask, and it follows closely on the heels of the first, is "How can we know that the copy being retained by the partnership is in good enough condition to serve future readers?" That's a harder one to assure today's readers on because we know that some of our books have brittle paper, loose text blocks, damaged hinges, badly glued bindings, markings, and coffee stains. The slow fires that swept the library world in the 1980s continue to smolder, and readers continue to endanger books, especially as more and more of them travel from library to library in resource-sharing bags, boxes, pouches, and envelopes that are hurled about by express courier services.

A third question, one that has come to the fore from such scholars as **Stauffer**, is whether copies that offer evidence of reader interaction don't require special attention in shared print consortia where libraries divest of copies in favor of those digitized or held elsewhere. All three of these questions, especially the second and third, challenge the efficiency of the workflows undergirding shared print agreements and the assumption, to some extent implicit in those agreements, that a copy is a copy is a copy. It's easy enough to say that we want to respect and preserve differences among copies and we want the retained copies to be in a condition suitable for use, but when it comes to establishing the condition of those tens or hundreds of thousands of retained copies we pause at the sobering realizations, first, that some of the copies we have agreed to retain are probably AWOL and, second, that it will cost us a lot of time and money to verify their existence and condition for our partners.

Under these circumstances, it's tempting to take a "you pay your money and you take your chances" approach. Yes, we librarians say, some of the copies a given library has agreed to retain may not exist, some may be in bad enough shape they may not be worth keeping anyway, and some may have fascinating marginalia. But, we go on to say, unverified retention commitments give us a start, and we can count on enough other groups' or individual libraries' retaining copies that a copy somewhere will be on the shelf or in the high-density bin in better shape than ours. As for the marginalia, well ..., yes, interesting, but since we don't have time to verify that the book is even on the shelf we don't have time to examine all retained books or potential withdrawals for traces of reader interaction and then judge whether those traces are important enough to warrant retention of the book and record metadata about those traces so that scholars can benefit.

The copy-variation conundrum presents itself, then, as a series of choices. A shared print partnership must, in the first place, define the similarities that make two books copies of each other; in the second, it must decide

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which differences or conditions that distinguish copies and potentially make those differences worth knowing about will be acknowledged in a retention plan. These differences fall, as suggested above, into two groups that distinguish physical and, for lack of a better term, “intellectual” conditions. The former encompasses the several measures of a book’s life expectancy or its deviation from its physical condition as-published; the latter encompasses the cultural and historical attributes of the book and especially **Stauffer’s** traces of reader interaction.

In my next column I will look at practices in place with respect to addressing the issues of physical condition in the Maine Shared Collections Cooperative and ReCAP. I will also look at projects underway in California and Iowa to verify these two conditions of monographs in shared print partnerships against the background of general collection condition surveys performed in recent decades by preservationists. Since the condition I am calling “intellectual” has become a topic for discussion in scholarly societies as well as library groups, I will pay particular attention to the work **Stauffer** is doing and that of a task force of the **Modern Language Association** and partners to review the **MLA’s** 1995 “Statement on the Significance of Primary Records” (http://www.mla.org/pdf/spr_print.pdf) in light of trends in publishing, scholarship, and reading practices and the incentives that libraries have to work toward collective management of print collections. 🐼

Rumors
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doubly awesome **Cindy Human** and the **Midwest Library Service** crew!

Looking forward to seeing all of you in **Charleston** very soon. Was talking to the dapper **Adam Chesler** the other day. His lovely wife **Marla** who frequently comes to Charleston with him is at a wedding in Ohio. Meanwhile, **Adam** is on cat-sitting duty!

BTW, did y’all see the picture of **Narda** and **Peter Tafuri** in front of **John Riley’s** rare bookshop, **Gabriel’s Books**. What a smiling couple! <http://www.against-the-grain.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Narda-2014-007.jpg>

Next time you are in the vicinity, a tip. Just out in the **Post and Courier**, the Charleston daily paper this morning! One of my favorite popular crime fiction authors — the awesome **Elmore Leonard’s** material is coming to the **University of South Carolina** and is on display through this month. There are handwritten notebooks, screenplays from **Leonard’s** 40 novels and 60-year career. Isn’t it wonderful that libraries preserve these types of materials? Worth a visit!

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Quite a few of you have signed up for the **Charleston Seminar: Being Earnest with our Collections** which will be from 12:15-3:00 PM on Saturday, November 8. This will be a luncheon and is taking the place of the Rump Session. **Michael Arthur** who has put this together and **Anthony Watkinson** will be moderating. We will be exploring new ways of thinking about libraries and users and the distribution of information. We plan to share results through the various **Charleston Conference publications**. Stay tuned.

Every good idea that happens in Charleston happens from a group or one of y’all! This year besides the Seminar above, we have the **UNC-Chapel Hill Data Curation Workshop**. Also, **Erin Gallagher** and **Ashley Leonard** will be experimenting with polling **Charleston Conference** attendees about various issues in **An End of Conference Poll-a-palooza** that will be held on Saturday from 11:45 to 12:15 right before the Seminar luncheon. Results will be reported via Twitter et al! <http://2014charlestonconference.sched.org/event/b95af991118f2bc3d7709122ee19f64a#.VD8AjUuTxFw> 🐼