Curating Collective Collections--Shared Print and the Book as Artifact

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Recommended Citation
Garabedian, Mike and Kieft, Bob (2018) "Curating Collective Collections--Shared Print and the Book as Artifact," Against the Grain: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 38.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7296

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Curating Collective Collections — Shared Print and the Book as Artifact

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Editor’s Note: In my November column, I featured a guest piece by Andrew Stauffer, which took up a thread of concern many bring to the discussion of shared print collections, that of the physicality of the volumes being shared and the circumstances under which a given volume can be said to be identical to another. Curating Collective Collections has pursued this thread since my November 2014 column, “What Exactly Are We Retaining When We Retain That Book,” following up that article in February 2015 with “Silviculture in the Stacks; or, Lessons from Another Conservation Movement” by Jacob Nadal, in which Jake uses a forest conservation metaphor to help librarians frame the issues. As promised in November, here is a piece by Mike Garabedian, a colleague from my Southern California days, that takes up the argument for considering the physicality of books from an angle different from Andy’s — that is, the proximity of the volume to its as-published state and the role that state plays in teaching. In this column, Mike makes his case and in a succeeding column will describe a condition survey he conducted to gather evidence in the stacks about the condition of volumes as he defines it here. — BK

The Problem of Condition

Despite a fair amount of ink spilled and pixels illuminated about the virtues of shared print networks in our post-print age, writers have paid little attention to the potential artifactual value of the copies retained, or what it might mean to deaccession duplicates based on criteria other than condition. Indeed, beyond suggesting that a simple “yes/no” condition validation is a desirable step in inter-collection analysis, no writers have argued that condition should be any kind of criterion when we consider which copies we should retain and which we should deselect to create shared print collections. This elision is problematic. It’s probably not controversial to suggest that, because one of the goals of shared print is to allow consortia to deaccession, so the retained copies should be in good shape. If coffee stain-free text blocks and unhighlighted pages are too much to hold in common, the retained copies should be the most artifactually valuable and complete copies we can identify, where poor conditions might mean they would have to be conserved before circulating again. For this reason, many libraries that participate in shared print collections have developed procedures for rejecting copies in really bad shape, and indeed, this is what practitioners who work in general collections think of when they consider condition. But it’s as important to ensure the copies we select for sharing are the most artifactually valuable and complete copies we can identify, where a “best copy” means a duplicate title whose physical form is closest to the book in its original state. So, for example, given three copies of a mutually held title where one copy has been rebound in library buckram, one is still in its original publisher’s binding, and one is still in its original publisher’s binding with its original dust-jacket, the best copy would be copy #3. Artifactual speaking, then, it is important to note that not all duplicates are the same.

We librarians who work in general collections are not used to thinking about books like this. Traditionally, the physical or artifactual value of books is something to which our Special Collections colleagues attend. As former University of Pennsylvania Curator of Research Services Daniel Traister has written, “the root of the sense of the difference between general and special collections” has to do with preservation versus access: Whereas in circulating collections access and the intellectual content of books is emphasized, in special collections preservation and artifactual value take precedence. And indeed, to the extent we consider condition in general collections, it’s not to preserve the objects in which intellectual content is embedded but simply to ensure these objects last longer, even if this means destroying parts of the originals (e.g., rebinding books in buckram boards), or using surrogates (e.g., microfilm or digital facsimiles). In the preservation/access binary practitioners like Traister have posited, then, we general collections librarians come down firmly on the side of access: For us a book’s intellectual content (sometimes called intrinsic value) trumps its format or artifactual value, which is why there’s such a thing as library binding in the first place.

Content and Artifact

This makes sense: For most readers at most college and research libraries most of the time, an approach to the preservation and storage of books that safeguards access to their intellectual content, not their artifactual integrity, is sufficient. But not always. And in a post-print age that produces increasingly digital texts at the same time many colleges insist their undergraduates conduct original research with primary documents, perhaps increasingly it’s not. Twenty years ago, well before the digital revolution but at a time when the business of microfilming brittle books was booming and “the systematic transference of printed and manuscript texts of all periods to electronic form” was in its beginning, the Modern Language Association called for prudence and provided one rationale as to why it might be worthwhile to expend the resources to identify those book-copies closest to their original state:

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and research. The advantages of the new forms in which old texts can now be made available must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the new forms cannot fully substitute for the actual physical objects in which those earlier texts were embodied at particular times in the past. ...Texts are inevitably affected by the physical means of their transmission; the physical features of the artifacts conveying texts therefore play an integral role in the attempt to comprehend those texts. For this reason, the concept of a textual source must involve attention to the presentation of a text, not simply to the text as a disembodied group of words.6

Just six years later, in their 2001 report The Evidence in Hand, the Council on Library and Information Resources’ Task Force on the Artifact in Library Collections reasoned similarly, noting “a number of critical research functions will continue to depend on access to the original”; and fairly insisting “that scholars work with librarians to identify and define categories of materials and locate the finest and best-preserved specimens” especially of “categories of printed materials that exist in abundance and do not have high market or exhibition value” — e.g., many of the mutually-held twentieth century books in our general collections.7

I want to suggest that libraries can and should acknowledge the importance of original artifacts, recognize the value of the books in their general collections beyond their intellectual content, and develop thoughtful and rational preservation-centered strategies for the large-scale withdrawal of books likely to obtain in the wake of a shared print agreement. To this end, adopting an artifact-focused view of preservation allied more closely with special, not general collections is desirable. For if one of the goals of shared print is to allow participating libraries to deaccession duplicate copies in order to free up space, then in a real sense when we deaccess we’re creating scarcity where none existed before. In other words, whether shared copies will exist in a storage facility or not, in essence any shared print collection will constitute a new kind of special collection whose originals will have to be all things to future researchers, including researchers interested in books as primary documents and artifacts — again, a constituency that no longer comprises only advanced scholars in the humanities.

In short, leaving aside the well-known economic and space-saving advantages participant libraries are likely to gain upon entering into a shared print agreement, there is yet another, unaddressed potential benefit to shared print: the opportunity “to make more widely understood” the artifactual value of our duplicate holdings by isolating and retaining only the most artifactually complete, “finest and best-preserved” copies of a mutually held title. In so doing we might define a new proposition for printed books in general collections that continues to value intellectual content at the same time it recognizes the special importance of these traditionally-formatted texts as physical artifacts and primary sources.

Indeed, in many cases, candidates for shared print deserve source texts. Judicious deselecting would allow practitioners to do the important work of attending to the artifactual value of these materials, connecting researchers to the contexts in which these books were produced via the physical objects in which they are embedded — an important quality seasoned researchers know well but which is also wholly consistent with the emphasis on information literacy and original research that an increasing number of four-year colleges are insisting upon. Finally, future cooperative collection development within a sharing network could allow us to fill in gaps in our current, general collections with inexpensive, primary resources which student researchers will be able to think about, understand, and value in ways previously associated only with special collections books. By leveraging new, shared print networks to sift little or unused books to locations off-campus, we’ll have made sure we have done right by preserving original records and supporting research and knowledge production while only sacrificing immediate access to our patrons.

Into the Woods

In the February 2015 installment of this column, Jacob Nadal brought a forestry metaphor to bear upon the curation of shared print collections, suggesting, as he has written elsewhere, that “in thinking about collection management … [it is] informative to look to frameworks used in sustainable forestry and environmental stewardship.” Among other things, sustainable forestry involves cutting down trees in the same way that collection management involves weeding and deselecting. But Nadal also cautions us to take care — “as useful as these frameworks can be … using them also invites in some metaphors that have to be handled with care in the literary realm.” Book copies — even duplicate, mutually-held titles — are not as alike as most trees; in deselecting two-thirds of fifteen Giant Sequoias, for example, we would probably want to make sure that the General Sherman and General Grant would be among the five we didn’t cut down. Fortunately for forest rangers, there are signs in front of the Grant and Sherman trees. Our most artifactually-complete holdings have no such signs. I hope to show in my next column that identifying these items is neither unworkable nor prohibitively expensive, particularly if one employs under-graduate student workers out in the forests of our stacks. 🌳