



Volume 63 | Issue 2

Article 7

12-1-2020

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Amanda C.R. (2020) "An Appeal for the Physical Book," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 63: Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.2218>

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An Appeal for the Physical Book



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ABSTRACT

Librarians are confronting a shift in media that is changing the structure and the collections of libraries as well as the meaning of librarianship itself. The heart of this essay suggests that the physical book may be considered an enduring communication vessel. If the goal of the library is to offer access to the cultural record, then physical books as a social record embodying “bookness” hold a place within the library institution as a material expression of the intimate and enduring relationship between human and book.

Dear, human books,
With kindly voices, winning looks!
Enchant me with your spells of art,
And draw me homeward to your heart....

“Oxford Nights” by Lionel Pigot Johnson (1867-1902)

It is the physicality of the book itself, the power of presence, rather than the presence of pages marked by movable type, that renders the medium of book such a powerful artifactual object (Richards, 2011). Donna Stein suggests that, “volumes possess a mysterious power to summon images and feelings that transcend literary content” (Stein, 1989, p. 44). At the heart of this essay is the suggestion that the book as object may be considered an enduring physical communication vessel that was embedded with meaning long before the first printing press. I will advocate for the enduring value of the physical book, what English poet and playwright Sir William Davenant (c.1606–1668) called the “monuments of vanished minds” (Jackson, 2001, p. 33).

The arc of this article will cover what at times may appear to be disparate themes knit together. At the fore we will consider the physical book in the setting of upheaval, and will explore the power of the book as an object. From there we shall turn our gaze to the library in transition before circling back to the book as object viz the digital experience. We shall explore the contours of book as vessel before turning to a consideration of the false and the real. It shall be, then, an exploratory journey into the human-book bond, the saving and sharing of story and memory. The powerful physical impact of both book and library or space will unfold. The article intentionally meanders, allowing the reader to muse on these issues discussed without haste.

Reality as consciousness-related is perceived by each individual in a unique way (Ratzinger, 2007). Whereas librarians of the late-twentieth century may have feared that libraries (like cemeteries) had an alarmingly rising inventory (Shera, 1973, p. 91), now, in the twenty-first century the problem has largely reversed for libraries with rapid digitization. Libraries are now increasingly foregrounding electronic journal databases, e-books, and digital repositories (Elsevier, 2017). In many cases the stacks are being cleared and then cleared away (Rossman & Weintraub, 2003; see Figure 1). We should seek to recognize the relationship between material person and material book – the human-book bond – and the value of preserving this relationship.

Reports of mass weeding projects, bookless libraries, and vacuous learning commons demonstrate that librarians are eradicating library stacks at an alarming speed (Blumenthal, 2005; Moore, 2015). These emerging trends display a trajectory of change that is largely accepted as “inevitable” and “positive.” This essay posits that we, as an increasingly digitally-minded consumer public, have lost sight of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and that, librarians are themselves driving and being driven by a faddish desire for change, that while substantiated by data, may be antithetical to that which supports our fragile humanity.

I am not unaware of the realities of financial pressures within the academic library, rather, I assert that as library leaders, we shape the various futures of our field. The perceived need for a digital shift in academic library collections may be deemed in response to a perceived crisis, but perhaps the authentic crisis can be discerned by looking into the profession itself. If change is occurring within the library profession, at what point might this change be considered to have reached a crisis point? Is change being driven by internal or external causes (Bond, 2018; Serven, 2018)? We might think of this shift as two paradigms: the physical library and the digital library. They currently exist together, but the contours and contents of physical libraries are morphing as digital materials increasingly become the norm in academic collection development.

In this age of pandemic and the rapid reduction of library budgets, many directors face the difficult decision of privileging the funding of digital and streaming material over that of physical books, and yet in the event that my budget, for example, is suspended it is the physical materials that the library will retain. Copyright lawyer and librarian Kyle Courtney argues against libraries pivoting solely to e-books at this time in order to purportedly better support online learning. Open Educational Resources (OER) may offer some relief, but e-books, since they are licensed, cause purchasing libraries to forsake rights to that content when they enter into those licensing agreements, rights they automatically retain when purchasing a print book (Courtney, 2020). For this and many reasons, I will suggest that libraries, now more than ever – even during a pandemic – should invest in the collection and retention of physical books.

Symbolic Shift

The concept of crisis is intrinsically “now,” at this present time; it is both pressing and immediate. Occurrences long past are no longer considered “crises” and are viewed in hindsight; the aftermath has already happened. Physical books serve as an antidote to crisis. The form and physicality of a book does not lend itself to a recognizable crisis pattern, because as static it transcends the now; it is stable, enabling reader engagement in that stability. It offers a stance of sanity in an “insane world,” fraught with the endless panic of breaking news (Carr, 2010).¹ The physical book, as a medium and form of cultural capital, is both a contemporary and an historical vessel of communication, one that has proven its durability over the centuries, whereas I cannot now access files on floppy disks from the past. As library historian Charles Osburn has demonstrated, the book is a social transcript that is not merely a record of things past, but a foundation for building the present and future (Osburn, 2008).

What is the so-called spell of the book (Eisenstein, 1980)? And does it help or hinder the development of what makes human beings more human? This discussion is entwined with both the consideration of the tangible realities of human nature as well as the material of the physical book, as the two may be viewed as interdependent. Some claim that the library’s most important function is found in the capacity of books to expand the human spirit (Shera, 1973, p. 99).²

Librarianship, however, has been presented to the public as a “science” (Lugya, 2014). By the twentieth century librarians were adopting social science methods to determine what to collect, how to analyze their user communities, and how to assess the information needs of those patron groups.³ Do we gather enough information, however, regarding how our actions might change our futures (Small & Vorgan, 2009)? How do readers use the information they acquire? Where there was formerly a reliance on the power of the printed word in physical format, there is an emergent boundless digital environment of information unfettered by physical publication (but not unfettered by cost). The digital divide further separates user community groups, even while librarians beat a hasty (dare I say eager) retreat from the reference desk. At present the scholarly landscape in library studies favors research that is anchored in social science traditions, focused on data sets, statistics, analyses, and arguments supported by quantifiable results. My contribution to the field of library

1 During COVID-19, for example, we have witnessed an onslaught of seemingly endless bad news pumped through every imaginable news source.

2 If the physical book has become a necessary interlocutor with our humanity, to what degree does reducing the number of books constitute a crisis for society?

3 Thanks to Robin Phillips for drawing my attention to Mai’s 2013 article, and who cogently wrote that a “social science methodology leads to a denial of the inescapably philosophical considerations that must go into the library.” Private correspondence 17 October 2019.

studies in this article is intended to add the voice of the humanities to the rich discourse regarding the contemporary state and direction of academic libraries.

Transhumanism & the Author

In “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault asserts that, “We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity” (Foucault, 1969, p. 314). Foucault essentially – prophetically – describes the anonymous social media comment strings in our current authorial context. This discourse and “unfolding” is to some extent directed, since the reader is obliged to view the document through the eyes of the “non author,” i.e., there is always an author, even if unknown. It is a proliferation of often seemingly anonymous information that conjures considerations of perceived power and authorial attribution – consider the recent rash of fake news. In this era of false news the reading public appears less capable than our forbearers in discerning truth in text (Sullivan, 2018). A preponderance of “information” in no way guarantees wisdom, as humanists insist; and if it is not wisdom that libraries seek to enable, what is it that we seek?

If crisis is a catalyst that leads to the end of one conceptual phase and initiates another, then we can understand the contemporary library as in transition. This is similar to the term “transhumanism,” which sees humans as increasingly “enhanced” and moving toward a singularity, at which point the human would be dependent on and integrated with technology in order to function in a society reliant on such an interweaving of human and non-human (Clark, 2010). Such a paradigm includes a possibility, therefore, of shifting further into a posthuman state – and in parallel, a postlibrary state – wherein the individual has lost to technology those traits that made a human being essentially human, such as compassion, will, emotion, indecisiveness, spontaneity, and quirkiness. So, too, the library appears to be embarking on a move from library to translibrary to postlibrary, losing along the way its very soul, that of the physical book (Rose-Wiles, 2013).

Essence and Physicality Perceived

The prefix “post” indicates that something has ended. If the interstitial human stage is understood by the term “transhuman,” we may then similarly speak of translibrary, i.e., a library in transition between the physical and the digital (Daniel & Woody, 2013). Transhumanism – as a springboard to considering this – seeks to improve upon nature. Technology then presents itself as an answer to natural “imperfection:” aging, suffering, and dying. But whereas the transhuman may seek to avoid death, the library seems to teeter on perceived obsolescence (Serling, 1961; Herrera, 2013). William Gass wrote for *Harper’s Magazine* in 1999: “Words on a screen have visual qualities, to be sure, and these darkly limn their shape, but they have no materiality,

they are only shadows, and when the light shifts they'll be gone. Off the screen they do not exist as words. They do not wait to be re-seen, reread; they only wait to be remade, relit ..." (Gass, 1999, p. 46). The physical book, like the physical person, is at essence different from its digital or technically-enhanced counterpart, and as such they are not equally interchangeable (Norman & Furnes, 2016).

While our everyday habits, physical environments, library spaces, and participation in change are often slow enough to remain disguised, it is worthwhile to retain a memory of the distinction between that which enables our humanity and that which reduces it. Tampering with the fabric of our humanity – and our libraries – we risk damaging and destroying the very essence of humaneness and its physical record (Robinson, 2013, p. 19). In an effort to improve material substance we may be losing sight of that which is not material, our ontological depths. The perplexing problem is in knowing *when* the line has been crossed. When bare library walls refract sound bounced through a bookless space, we must pause to recognize what is missing – that which humanizes us is absent.⁴

Considering the book through the prism of time, space, and materiality presents a microcosm through which we may view recorded human experience. Much of what humans consciously experience is framed within the myopic borders of place and time. In the digital age, with e-books, blogs, and ephemeral words shimmering on a screen, the physical book becomes a balm. These objects offer to tell us something about ourselves; they are the tangible physical clues we leave ourselves in the mystery of unfolding time. They are reflections of society, our social transcripts; not escaping their own book-related inquisitiveness, they challenge us to consider them as books, and then ourselves as viewers and readers. What is this object that I hold, and who am I who reads it? Even more, who has held and read this book before me? They tease out that which is essential in a seemingly mundane world; they call us to query, to question positive change versus needless crisis, embedded as it is in rupture and change.

Consider the blue-lit face of someone staring into a device held in their hand, perhaps scrolling through Instagram or Facebook: Through a digital screen a person is projected out of the present and into a hoped-for and manicured future or past, that which is presented is past, and the comments and likes one hopes for, are future. The carefully cast, cropped, and color-enhanced selfies we post on the internet project our imagined selves into a fleeting, liminal present and false reality. In a rebuttal to transhumanism, being truly huma – with all its glorious flaws – is the point, not the limitation. As physical beings, we exist physically and crave physicality (Duffer, 2018; Austin & Taylor, 2008). As technology nudges the viewer and user into an increasing

⁴ See, for example, the ALA Library Building Awards, which appear to promote that which is novel: <http://www.ala.org/llama/awards/aiaalibrary>. There are no dead museums, only repositories of achievement waiting to be explored.

over-valuing of perfection (think here of the glossy Apple commercials that celebrate the perfection of production in various products), printmakers, for example, take the important role of calling into question these normalized, homogenized structures (Emerson, 2014, p. 123).

Exploring how the computerized interface manipulates user experience sheds light on the now-everyday experience of navigating the smartphone, which, for all its apparent and marketed simplicity has transformed users into complacent followers of the applications presented to them. It has not led to more creative engagers, but merely better shoppers (Emerson, 2014, p. 32-33). As McLuhan warned us more than half a century ago, the medium is the message, not simply a bearer of messages (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). The physical book is a persistent and complex communication experience; its role in shaping humanity is active, not passive despite the appearance of fixity. The book is more than a communication of information; it is a conveyer, too, of lived experience, of a more transcendent knowledge. The material, color, and experience of a book-as-performance goes beyond content, beyond words or information – here the powerful object of the book communicates the message in addition to its words (Schwartzburg, 2004). Our consciousness is changing. It is not simply the message of a communication that contains meaning, but how it is transmitted that shapes how a person receives and processes it (Wolf, 2018). It is the medium of shared information that alters the way we think and that modifies the content and the structure of thinking itself. The digital book changes the reception and interpretation of that content.

A chosen media functions as something consequential to content, for communication is shaped explicitly by the form it takes. David Paton remarks on what “we have come to expect ... every time we reboot our PCs and laptops, each time we switch our cell phones back on. In today’s sophisticated software environment, an ability to remember every detail of data at the nanosecond before a power failure, and its ability to return that information without loss has become more than simply an advantage, it has become critical” (Paton, 2007, p. 3). Here we glimpse Paton’s personal perception of crisis. While in some facets of everyday life the digital may have become requisite, it need not be so for all aspects of human development. In particular the physical book offers a counter experience to the speed and data-driven glow of technology. Gary Frost reminds us in regard to the electronic and our expectations that, “Only eye legible books on materials such as paper, as compared with those transmitted by code on computer media, have proven their capacity to survive centuries and even millennia” (Frost, 2010, p. 29). While malleable, changeable, and destructible, the physical book still offers stability.

In our putatively transhuman digital age, our individual approach to the world is shifting – and our perception of it as well. While Marshall McLuhan referred often to the television as a powerful media form, his theories strike at the heart

of communication structures that can be applied to the library today and to the technologies of tomorrow. Is there a printed-book-induced over-reliance on authority – views imprimatured by some – that will be expelled by technology? With the increasing ubiquity of the internet, the Renaissance ideal of one-point perspective – wherein “I” am the source of the gaze upon the world – has been reversed; the “I” is no longer the source of viewing a vanishing point, but has itself become that point. What emerges is a multiplicity of terminals. Have we lost our footing, now ostensibly “freed” from the linear worldview once personified by a regulatory alphabet?

The act of reading a book – unlike that of scrolling on a digital device – “comes very close to the idea of a performance, of an aesthetic experience – by the writer and the reader/audience – expanded across time and space” (Maffei & Picciau, 2006, p. 20). There is a connection between author, frozen in time, and the ever-new reader, live and moment-based in the action of turning pages. We can think of the physical book as inanimate, suspended within time. Audrey Niffenegger, famous for her *Time Traveler's Wife*, observes, “books transcend time and space. To make a book is to address people you’ve never met, some of them not born yet” (Niffenegger, 2007, p. 13). This is a future transcendence that must be safeguarded by those who have choices in exercising power, i.e., librarians and library deans and directors. Niffenegger responds to issues related to digitization:

I am not opposed to the existence of e-books; I know lots of people are wildly enthusiastic about them. But I have spent my life working with books as an art form and I am devoted to physical books.... Will they [digital books] be readable one hundred years from now? Or will thousands of books simply vanish as platforms and programs change? (Niffenegger, 2011).⁵

Ironically – and thereby making the point – this quote is no longer available on her webpage.

If we no longer concern ourselves with form and materiality, then we are left without vessels, whether those be books or bodies. The library institution should remain concerned with what a book is – an object that functions in the human ritual of reading as a connection to the real, not merely, as David Paton suggests, with how it performs (Paton, 2007, p. 3).⁶ Our humanity should not be reduced to an economy of scale. Physical books can demand a high order of concentration, each book insisting on intimate handling, patience and focused attention, a portal

5 Using the Internet Archive Wayback Machine is often helpful in such cases of lost histories: <https://archive.org/web/>.

6 In his essay, “Navigating the bookscape: Artists’ books and the digital interface,” Paton states that “a book should be grounded in replacing the identity of what a book is with what it does and that we should ask how a book performs its particular actions rather than what a book is.”

through which the mind flows, and that the hand holds without ever truly leaving the present moment and space. This is remarkably unlike the experience of the digital device, which renders the user a zombie of diverted attention (Taylor & Francis Group, 2018). This is no mere spectacle; with e-readers and a post-post-modern gadget-filled lifestyle, we now exist “in a state of distraction” (Vidler, 2002, p. 80). We are presented with the challenge of preserving the physical human record; “the transcript of the culture must be preserved,” writes Jesse Shera, and not just preserved as a record but as an object. “We cannot ignore the lessons of history” (Shera, 1973, p. 90), for history, as the British art historian, Sir Kenneth Clark, has suggested, is ourselves.

Books at their best should move beyond proprietary designations of copyright and control. As one type of manifestation of creativity, the physical book inspires the viewer to question authorship and the role of the reader. The architecture of composition has been envisioned, and our approach to understanding the power of the physical book requires a mental shift – a recognition that physical objects may carry a conceptual weight in their very physicality (Ackerman & Goldsmith, 2011).

Digital Versus the Real

I would like to suggest that contemporary physical books, within the long lineage of physical books, inhabit “bookness,” a formal – that of form – real existence as a physical object (Hayles, 2002, pp. 29–39).⁷ It may be bound to the concept of story whether explicit or implicit; text need not be present for the telling of story to occur. “The book itself tells the story” (Wallace, 2011, p. 143), its provenance, its personal history, the making of it, and the wear over the years. In short, the book as object, speaks to us.

Why then does Elizabeth Eisenstein intimate that we are “trapped” within a matrix of print culture and its affiliated linear thinking? And why, moreover, would this be perceived as overtly negative? Western culture has developed in parallel to perceptions of linear patterns of time, space, and visualized information, i.e., written language. McLuhan in the *Medium is the Massage* (a title bearing the fortuitous typo), suggests that the Western alphabet lends itself to a linear mode of thinking as it views and conceptualizes exterior and interior worlds (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). Modern culture is transfixed by ideas of seeing and viewing – we see, believe to know, judge, and then share our opinions founded or unfounded on education, fact, or reality. We increasingly eschew text for image; we scroll and scan rather than read for edification or to contemplate (Rosenwald, 2014).

⁷ In her 2002 study, Hayles suggests that contemporary physical books are a bridge between the digital book and the traditional codex.

There is, Barbara Cinelli states, a “space-time continuum along which the book is organized,” but more importantly there is a “relationship between the parts and their totality” (Cinelli, 2006, p. 26). Neither this continuum nor associated relationships need be linear. Concepts of time and space are not easily expressed, but the physical book as a type of ritual object allows the user to enter into this continuum without necessarily becoming aware of it. The viewer is engaged in one moment with the totality of the whole object; even when attentive only to one part, awareness expands beyond discrete units. This is one kernel of the auratic materiality of the physical book – it is both material in sensory experience, yet also exudes an aura palpable to the viewer as a memory vessel.

While not referring to physical books but rather to art and the reproduction of art, Walter Benjamin in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” writes that “one might subsume the eliminated element in the term ‘aura’ and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 226). It is precisely this “aura” that is retained in the physical book. Regardless of the mode of production this is, then, the sense of the power as perceived in the physical book; defying time, it waits to be opened and rediscovered over passing ages.

One might say a digital book is not a book; it is something else, it is tethered to computer. It may be read, used, enjoyed, and referenced, and yet it is not a book of pages bound together; it does not imbue stationary comfort, unchanging stability, and slowly processed knowledge transferred. This crisis of consciousness is a human issue, bound to our ability to communicate linguistically, limited or expanded by the packaging of the information, which then impacts meaning itself. It is humanized (or dehumanized) multisensory multimedia. A book smells, feels, and sounds in ways that differ from its digital analogue; it is tactile, rather than a simulation.

Barbara Cinelli draws attention to the book’s “importance as a book/ritual, understood here in terms of its metamorphic capacity.” This capacity is the ability “to contain references to a time which bypasses the categories ... [that have] been conditioned by external stimuli including the vestiges of memory and the forestalling signs of a future presentation” (Cinelli, 2006, p. 26). Every opening of a book is itself a literary ritual; memory is set in motion as new and ancient myths, and that which is both personal and universal is evoked. These are the signs of presentation, a performance repeated numerous times – this is the anti-change and the quelling of crisis. In this moment of COVID-19, scholars have written on the power of the physical object in coping with crisis and loss. Professor Kari Nixon writes of her knitting a physical representation of coronavirus deaths, noting that, “we are not algorithms. We contain multitudes, and a record of uncontrollable grief seems the only response” (Nixon, 2020), and thus emphasizes the human need for the physical in processing loss and in recording emotion.

ReShift: The Book Returns

The myriad books found in a library function as physical, dynamic communication objects and unique social transcripts. Recent “interest in the book is based not on mere nostalgia but on recognition of the symbolic role of the book as a cultural artifact,” writes Betty Bright. “Today we are surrounded by books devoted to examining the book’s history and cultural significance” (Bright, 2005, p. 263). The symbolic role of the physical book as “cultural artifact” remains to be better appreciated. “The lines of research could lead in many directions,” Robert Darnton asserts, “but they all should issue ultimately in a larger understanding of how printing has shaped man’s attempts to make sense of the human condition” (Darnton, 1982, p. 80). Making sense of the human condition is the ultimate charge of the library as institution. It is a heady order, and it is here that we find our present crisis of identity.

If the book waits for its viewer, it requires a location in which to wait. It is the library and archive, “librarians and book collectors [who] are custodians of the transcript, the ‘keepers of the Word’ ...” writes Jesse Shera referencing Archibald MacLeish. Shera defines “the library as ‘the memory of society,’ the social cortex” (Shera, 1973, p. 91). In short, library stacks both preserve and promote; they are the capsules of humanity, its cerebral cortex, of the ever-shifting social body. Without these repositories of stored knowledge, we risk the loss of the tangible form of our social memory.

Collection development librarians are summoned to cast their gaze on contemporary publications and think forward to the patron yet to come. Whereas a circulating library collection both preserves the social and intellectual memory of the past and adapts to user needs, an archive or special collection and its contents wait for the researcher to come (Sharp & Thompson, 2010; Bachelard, 1969, p. 141).⁸ There is a psychology particular to an archive, one evocatively considered by Gaston Bachelard. Archives excel, he muses, “by allowing the imagination to wander through the crypts of memory, [so that] without realizing it, we recapture the bemused life of the tiniest burrow in the house, in the almost animal shelter of dreams” (Bachelard, 1969, p. 141). The viewer of a special collections book can wander the paths of the mind while journeying with the creator of the book; it is a discovery both of object and of self, set at once within time (my time, the time of the archive) and outside of time (for example, the creation of the object may have been centuries prior). The archive is thus protected from various degenerations.

⁸ Libraries that conform to a business model of delivering materials “just-in-time,” or just before they are needed, attempt to minimize the expense of keeping those materials in advance or after they are “needed,” which to a degree disregards serendipity. Archival collections, however, anticipate unforeseen “in-case” needs, and may prioritize retaining materials indefinitely.

Spatial Continuities

A strand of continuity within this consideration is the concept of space: the space of the library, the space of the physical book, the space found for reading, the space that a text occupies on a page, and as a social transcript, the space for things that are not digital. Another strand is that of materiality, and again, that of the physical book as an object within the library as itself a physical place. One goal of the library is to “maximize the social utility of the graphic records, and it is its special responsibility to operate in that complex association of record and human mind” (Shera, 1973, p. 94) – the mind of the perceiver and the mind of the writer as social voice, and then also the physical book as a record of lived experience. There is a power intrinsic to physical experience, an intimacy evoked by materiality. Our intellectual transcripts warrant retention in the repositories of social capital. Codices, as occupiers of place, must not be conceptually removed from space and time in favor of digital displacement that will “de-book” the book and remove it to a temporary, conceptual mode.

Librarian Michael Levine-Clark has argued for the promotion of, and value of, “the book as physical object” in collections that are otherwise becoming dominantly digital: “It is a reminder that libraries have always been about books, and will continue to be about books even when most of our collections become digital” (Levine-Clark, 2012). In 2012, the Penrose Library at the University of Denver spent “72% of a \$5.4 million materials budget on electronic resources.” Many libraries now hover between a 80-90% budgetary commitment to digital sources.⁹ To restore balance special collections funding was increased, and Levine-Clark advocated a shift toward a more explicit celebration of the physical.¹⁰

The codex as a tangible symbol rests on the entirety of the work, on both content and book structure, as a cohesive, symbiotic form. These remain conjoined just as great architecture is unified, not simply “shell” versus “interior.” There is a power in the physical book that supports and roots humans; the book is a communication tool as well as a physical manifestation of our humanity. Regarding the influence of print, Glenn O’Brien states that books are “good for collecting, for storing, for carrying, and, frankly, for collecting based on future returns” (Lauf & Phillpot, 1998, p. 140-141.) They are ideal cultural communicators that have proven their potential longevity while offering a humane delivery system.

9 See for example, the University of Missouri Libraries, “Approximately 80% of the collections budget is spent on continuing purchases (primarily journal subscriptions, but also databases and standing orders.)” <http://library.missouri.edu/collectionsreviewupdate/>.

10 For a further consideration of the broader context in which libraries operate inside the academy, and of the efforts of the broader community in recognizing the print record by establishing print retention programs that promote the need to value and retain printed books, see www.booktraces.org.

Alchemical Answers

For those concerned for the future of the material book, perhaps by appreciating physical books as an art form (not a luxury art form, but a universal one), we gain insight into the future of this essential medium of physical transmission and an intentionally handled mode of communication. “Books do not merely recount history; they make it” (Darnton, 1982, p. 81). In this making of history – or story – the producers of books hold a unique and singular role in offering an intimate vessel of communication. Marshall McLuhan has stated: “If you really are curious about the future, just study the present. Because what we ordinarily see in any present is really what appears in the rearview mirror. What we ordinarily think of as present is really the past” (McLuhan, 1967, p. 186.) If studying the present is viewing the past as a method of understanding the future, then the physical book, as a medium of material culture, reveals a future that includes a place for the physical book as a tangible object.

Consciously going against the grain of current thought, I have made several assertions and allusions here that libraries, special collections, and archives within higher education should continue ambitiously to collect physical books, and that these should be both accessible and actively promoted. Each volume encourages an overall appreciation of the material book as an enriching and humanizing physical object and vessel of lived experience. Printmaker Steve Miller has expressed this well, stating that books are “recognized as vessels of humanized content, touchstones of what we are as people” (Miller, 2008, p. 7). This physicality, it seems, is stabilizing in a society pressed by the anxieties of hurried change and pandemic. The tangible, physical presence of books – with covers and pages – has been such a defining trait of our human past that it is, I suggest, among the most important duties of the library to collect and preserve them. When his friend, Tyrranio, had come and arranged books in his home, Cicero joyfully exclaimed: “My house seems to have acquired a soul” (Cicero, 1912, p. 295). Cicero might ask: What do we lose when our books are gone? †

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Figure 1.

“Current Journals [of which there are none] Do Not Circulate.” Author photo. 9 June 2018, Pullman, Washington.

