

Using Non-special Materials to Teach Special Collections

Nina Mamikunian
nmamikunian@ucsd.edu

Curator, Archive for New Poetry
Humanities Librarian

UCSD Library, situated on unceded territory of the Kumeyaay Nation

Background

The [Archive for New Poetry](#) in Special Collections & Archives at the UC San Diego Library

- Focused on post-1945 New American Poetry: experimental, New York School, Black Mountain College, San Francisco Renaissance, Language poets
- 35,000 books
- Over 1500 audio recordings
- 82 manuscript collections
- Majority of material is not digitized

Classes

- Close relationship with the Creative Writing Department
- Generally 2 to 3 in-person classes per quarter (pre-pandemic)
- Depending on the class, I try to show a range of material that highlights the creative process, not only in a poet's writing but also in the book production process

The Request

April 2021

Campus was still closed

A last minute request from the professor:

- A class called "Distributing Literature"
- "I don't know how remote, much less asynchronous visits could be done on Zoom."
- "I am teaching an interesting book, Amaranth Borsuk's "The Book" -- kind of a condensed version of book history. Next week they're reading a chapter about artist's books. It reminded me of one of our visits where you had pulled a number of "books as object" from the archive."

“The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.”

-John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

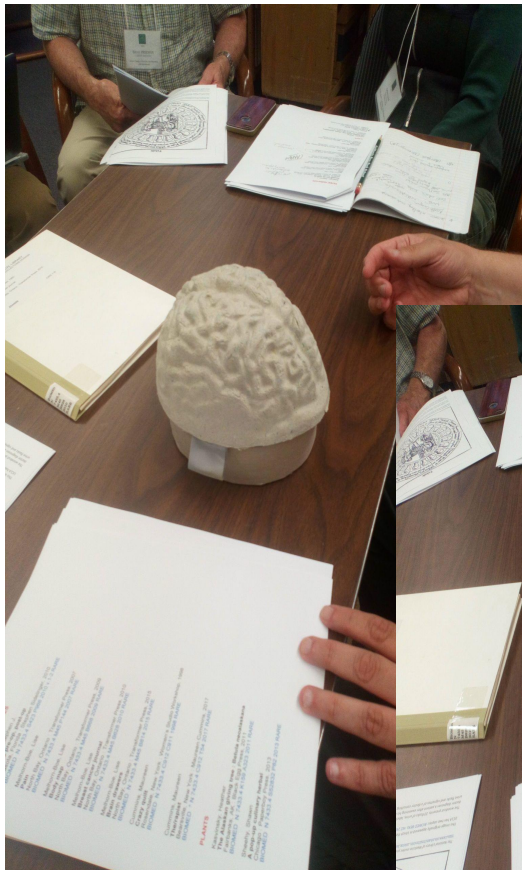
What do students know about books and what do they believe about books?

The Familiar and the Un/Defamiliar

We started class with [this presentation](#)

What was the same and what was different?





But how far can pictures take us?

In this new age of mechanical, Zoom reproduction, how could an asynchronous, virtual class visit capture the “aura” that artists’ books have?*

While putting together the class presentation, I felt frustrated.**

*With apologies to Walter Benjamin

**”No matter how impressive, inexpensive, or even free, digital repository access can be, digital surrogates do not substitute well compared to teaching undergraduates the history of books with actual materials.” - Germek

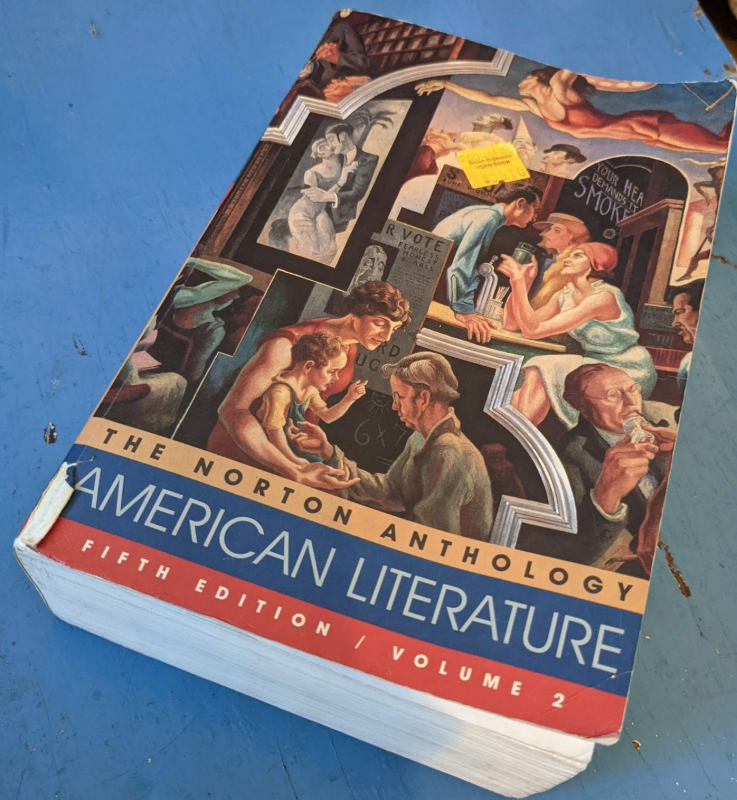
Librarian for Scale

For the second half of the class, I turned off my screen share and turned to my own shelves.

I showed:

- The unfamiliar: A typecase, pieces of cast metal type, linocuts
- The familiar: Norton anthology, notebooks (composition and others), letters, foldable maps, and playing cards





But even the familiar turned out to be unfamiliar

- In contrast to the composition notebook, another notebook I showed was from Japan and opened the opposite direction from what was expected
- The letters were an epistolary poetry project done by poet Mathias Svalina called the [Dream Delivery Service](#)
- The folding map was an issue of the poetry journal TAB
- The playing cards were the 10th anniversary issue of the online journal [The Diagram](#), with a short story on each card

DOS
214 S 24th A
HATTIESBURG

DREAM DELIVERY SERVICE
214 S 24th AVE
HATTIESBURG MS 39401

NINA MAMIKUNIAN

DOS
214 S 24th AVE
HATTIESBURG MS 39401

GULFPORT MS. 395
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And then back again

The unfamiliar turned back into the familiar (or at least approachable)

- None of these items were expensive, most of them I had purchased when I was a student (undergraduate and graduate)*
- The professor pulled out the same Dream Delivery Services letters from his own shelf when I showed mine!
- In contrast to Special Collections items, none of these items had any special housings and I did not use book cradles. They were on my bookshelf. This is an important point that we came back to at the end of class

*Modern special collections departments should not be held together solely by materials of high monetary value with notable provenance, but also by low-cost materials that hold the potential for student work. - Gemek

Agency and Access

- By showing myself handling these materials in “real time” and “real space” I was activating the material in a way that static pictures or digital reproductions did not convey.
- It showed how integral the user is to the book and that the book and the user are in relation to each other.
- Book history is all around us.

The Ensuing Conversation

- I asked students about the similarities and differences between what I pulled from my shelf and the pictures of artists' books that I showed.
- I used that conversation to talk about the security and preservation measures that we take in Special Collections. (Basically, why do we have so many rules.) How is that different from having my items on my shelf?
- By putting all of these objects in the context of book history, I asked what function each element (material, size, shape) played and why that choice had been made.
- Ultimately I asked students to think about the books and book-like objects on their own shelves and how they can use those as either departure points or inspirations for the books that they might want to make

Ultimately

- What do students know about books and what do they believe about books?
- What do students know about Special Collections and what do they believe about Special Collections?

Thank you!

Sources

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