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Approaches to Comics Stewardship: Making the Case for Academic Library Special Collections

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Brian Flota and Kate Morris

Why Comics? Why Us?

The work that inspired the idea for this book began for us in 2015 when Brian donated his own and his father's comic book collection of approximately 10,000 comic books to special collections at James Madison University.[1] That initial donation marked the beginning of our journey into comic collecting, and over the intervening years, our approach to the acquisition, description, as well as access and use of comic books in special collections has evolved in many ways. That evolution and our work to seek out new knowledge and skills around comic book collection stewardship served as inspiration for this book.

As a special collections librarian and archivist who was new to the stewardship of large comics collections when we received that first large donation, I found that my best resources were my colleagues at other institutions who were generous with their time and advice, as well as those with subject expertise in comics and comic art. I began seeking information from archivists and librarians at institutions with large comic collections, and relied heavily on

Brian's subject expertise. I immediately found that there was a wide diversity of practice when it came to everything from physical storage to cataloging and description, to user requesting and access. Some institutions described their comics through an inventory of titles and issues within a finding aid, while others cataloged each comic individually as monographs.[2] Decisions around descriptive practice impact user discovery and are highly dependent on resources, namely the time and expertise of metadata practitioners, and we approached description with those resources in mind and focused initially on creating an inventory of issues.

As our comics collection grew and we began purchasing individual issues, we narrowed our collecting scope and began building a collection of Black comics.[3] We were awarded three small university grants (2017, 2018, 2022) that provided collection development funds to support acquisition and outreach efforts around Black comics. This shift in collecting necessitated a different approach to description, and we began working with metadata experts at our institution to accurately and appropriately describe the materials in the collection.[4] We moved from that initial inventory to MARC serial records for comics titles and, more recently, single-issue, monographic-style catalog records with robust metadata. Our collection of comics has since been used in numerous classes for one-shot library instruction sessions, as part of final projects in classes in multiple academic departments, as part of special collections exhibits and featured speaker series presentations, and in several pieces of scholarship. It is with our journey to build a comics collection in mind that we hope this book can provide guidance and support for those who begin collecting comics at their institutions as well as to those who may be seeking to shift their approach to comics stewardship.

–Kate Morris

The Landscape of Comic Books, Special Collections, and Academic Libraries

As comic book properties continue their reign over popular culture, there has been continued growth in the academic field of Comics Studies. As a result, graphic novels and comic trade paperbacks have begun to populate the shelves of many academic libraries. Single issue collections of "floppy" comic books, however, tend to find their home in special collections libraries because their flimsy construction, highly acidic paper, and, occasionally, the scarcity of certain specific issues warrants special storage and handling. Furthermore, after decades of neglecting comic books because of the perception of them as "lowbrow" cultural objects, with a few major exceptions, academic libraries only recently began to seriously collect them. Given the challenges of time, cost, and space associated with collecting, cataloging, and preserving these pieces of comics history, thoughtful consideration must go into any decision to begin such a collection or to sustain existing collections.

Comic Books, Special Collections, and the Academic Library aims to be the first collection of essays about comic books in libraries geared toward the academic library and special collections in particular. Each section is framed in the form of a question, such as "Why Should Your Institution Collect Comics?" and "How Do You Engage in Library Instruction with Your Comics Collection?" Challenges specific to comic book collections in academic libraries are addressed, such as finding space and funds to build a collection, making diverse and inclusive collections, leading innovative library instruction sessions with comics, and working with undergraduate and graduate students on comics research. Authors offer best practices for developing, cultivating, growing, cataloging, and making use of comic book collections from academic librarians who have been trailblazers in this arena.

Special collections units within academic libraries have historically built their reputations on the backs of pre-print manuscripts (such as books of hours), incunabula, valuable books such as William Shakespeare's "First Folio" (1623) and the "Double Elephant Folio" of John James Audobon's *The Birds of America* (1827-38), limited edition fine press books, and archival manuscript collections. To this day, many job advertisements for special collections librarians prefer or require literacy in Latin. It is against this airy backdrop, one that has had more than a century to develop its own specific cataloging and metadata vernacular (see, for example, Fredson Bowers' "signature" 1949 tome *Principles of Bibliographical Description*), that comics fight for space.

When the first comic books began appearing in the 1930s in the US, they cost ten cents and were printed on some of the cheapest quality paper (newsprint) available. Unlike the rare books mentioned above, which were geared towards those with the highest possible levels of education (be they members of the aristocracy, the clergy, or the university), comics, at least initially, were aimed at younger and less traditionally literate audiences. The mismatch between the content of traditionally held special collections materials and comic books couldn't be greater. To complicate things further, while the special collections library world and the rare book collecting world generally share the same lingo for the books they are buying and selling, comic book collectors and librarians often appear to be speaking two completely different languages. As if this weren't enough, the all-encompassing term *comics* can include comic strips, single-issue comic books, graphic novels and trade paperback reprints, digital or web comics, minicomics, original comic art, and certain fanzines, just to name a few variations, all of which have their own specific bibliographic elements and affiliated collector and practitioner communities. And this is but one reason why there is a need for a volume such as the one you are currently reading.

One of the main reasons we proposed *Comic Books, Special Collections, and the Academic Library* was because of the relative lack of "best practices" literature or scholarship regarding the acquisition, preservation, storage, and cataloging of comics, particularly single-issue (or floppy) comics, within the special collections units of academic library collections.

The foundational work in this regard is the series of books and articles published by Randall W. Scott, the former Michigan State University librarian who established that school's early and important comic book, popular culture, and comic arts collection

in the early 1970s. His books, especially *A Subject Index to Comic Books and Related Material* (1975) and *Comics Librarianship: A Handbook* (1990), were essential to getting this conversation started. Given the fraught relationship between librarians and comic books historically,[5] the series of books that appeared between 2009 and 2018, focusing on incorporating comic books into library collections, was unexpected and welcomed. Noteworthy titles include *Graphic Novels: Beyond the Basics* (2009, edited by Martha Cornog and Timothy Perper), *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives: Essays on Readers, Research, History and Cataloging* (2010, edited by Robert G. Weiner), Bryan D. Fagan and Jody Condit Fagan's *Comic Book Collections for Libraries* (2011), and Matthew Z. Wood's *Comic Book Collections and Programming: A Practical Guide for Librarians* (2018). Most of these books provide a basic overview of comics, participate in canon formation, and focus on graphic novels and trade paperback reprints. Most of the pieces in them focus on public library collections. Wood's book even goes so far as to discourage libraries from accepting donations of single-issue comic books.[6]

There have been a handful of noteworthy scholarly essays about comic books in libraries as well. Allen Ellis and Doug Highsmith's "About Face: Comic Books in Library Literature" (2000, *Serials Review*) provides an excellent overview of how librarians have engaged with comic books since they became a force within popular culture in the 1930s, though little of it focuses on academic libraries. The best contributions to the literature have largely been in the field of metadata and cataloging, advocating several different approaches. D.S. Serchay's "Comic Book Collectors: The Serial Librarians of the Home" (1998, *Serials Review*), Gary W. Markham's "Cataloging the Publications of Dark Horse Comics: One Publisher in an Academic Catalog" (2006, *Journal of Academic Librarianship*), and the oft-cited 2016 essay by Anne Culbertson and Pamela Jackson, "Comics and the Modern Library Catalog: New Rules for Breaking the Rules" (*The Serials Librarian*), foreshadow and provide the building blocks for several of the chapters in this very collection.

The collection *Comics and Critical Librarianship: Reframing the Narrative in Academic Libraries* (2019), edited by Olivia Piepmeier and Stephanie Grimm, really opened up the conversation about these topics and provided the greatest single book-length inspiration for this book. Its inspiration can be found all over *Comic Books, Special Collections, and the Academic Library*. In fact, several contributors to that collection appear in (or have co-edited) this one. And while it does the best job to date addressing many of the concerns found in this book, it is ultimately focused on academic librarians using their comics collections to specifically address social justice issues, not necessarily the "nuts and bolts" of academic comic book collecting.

Organization of the Book

When we conceived the book and subsequently disseminated the call for papers, we based its organization around four key questions related to comic books, special collections, and the academic library: 1) Why should your institution collect comics?; 2) Your library collects or wants to collect comics. Now what?; 3) How do you engage in library

instruction and outreach with your comics collection?; and, 4) How can comics be used as primary and secondary source material by students and faculty? After reading dozens of proposals, we were lucky to gather twenty sterling pitches to include in this book. Though many of the chapters address more than one of the questions we were hoping to have answered, we ultimately settled upon this sequence, which we feel best answers the questions in our organizational schema.

The first and longest Part, "Why Should Your Institution Collect Comics?" contains seven chapters. The book officially opens with Yuki Hibben, Andrea Kohashi, and Cindy Jackson discussing how the highly regarded comic arts collection at Virginia Commonwealth University has evolved over time to become more inclusive and reflective of the needs of the diverse student body of their campus. Next, Kelli Hansen points out, by using data from WorldCat and finding aids, the relative scarcity of even the most widely circulated comic books (such as the 1991 Marvel comic book *X-Men* #1) in academic special collections libraries. In chapter three, Thomas Gebhart describes the challenges of collecting digital comics as well as how a critical librarianship approach can maximize an academic library's potential to be a more inclusive site for collection development and preservation. This is followed by a discussion of minicomics by Paul Hanna. In this chapter, he argues that there are advantages to having examples of these typically "inaccessible," non-circulating smaller comics in a circulating collection.

The section continues with Jennifer Bowers (whose work on this topic was the recipient of a 2021 Will Eisner Graphic Novel Growth Grant), Katherine Crowe, and Peggy Keeran's account of how they developed a collection of graphic novels created by Indigenous and First Nations comics creators to empower those communities and provide a corrective to hundreds of years of oppressive and destructive representations of these populations by white settler colonists. Next, Jessica Nickrand and Nick Borger talk about a large, recent comics to donation to the University of Minnesota and two important runs included in it, *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98 (Marvel Comics, May-July 1971) and *Green Lantern* #85 & #86 (DC Comics, August-November 1971), and examine their attempts to address substance use disorder against the backdrop of the Comics Code Authority and the Nixon administration's then-recently launched "War on Drugs." Lastly, the section concludes with Daniel Wee's chapter about the "Golden Age" of Australian comics and why Australian academic libraries should start taking them more seriously.

Part 2 presents some answers to the question "Your Library Collects or Wants to Collect Comics. Now What?" The section begins with Michael C. Weisenberg talking about how he uses examples from the University of South Carolina's large comic book collection in special collections instruction sessions. This is followed by Paul Buschmann and Beatrijs Goegebuer, who describe how the acquisition of a large donation of French and Belgian comics revitalized the newly refurbished Arts and Philosophy Faculty Library at Ghent University. Next, Jordan Jancosek discusses a project to bring order to a large set of comic donations made to Brown University over the course of a couple of decades. Non-MARC metadata for comic strips is the central focus of the following chapter by Annamarie C. Klose and Wendy Pflug. The two provide an overview of the

myriad challenges that go into the effective description of comic strips. Closing out the section is Elsa Loftis and Jon Holt speaking about the well-known Dark Horse Comics collection housed at their place of work, Portland State University, and how manga titles from the collection are used in classes on Japanese culture at the university.

The next section, Part 3, "How Do You Engage in Library Instruction and Outreach with Your Comics Collection?" opens with Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto's description of a massive project to document, catalog, and promote the vast collection of "Golden Age" Mexican comic books held at the National Newspaper Library of Mexico (under the supervision of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). Appearing in the book for the second time is Wendy Pflug, who provides three approaches to cataloging or visually displaying one's comic book collection to the public. Next up is Randi Beem and Marc Bess, who discuss how a donation of "Silver Age" comic books has been used in exhibits and in library instruction sessions. Part 3 concludes with Elizabeth Call and Rebekah Walker describing the steps they took to create a virtual exhibition at the Rochester Institute of Technology focusing on a collection of comic strip art by two relatively obscure Rochester-area cartoonists who were active during the first half of the 20th century.

Part 4, which concludes the book, is framed around the question "How Can Comics Be Used as Primary and Secondary Source Material by Students and Faculty?" Starting things off is a chapter by Matthew Murray and Mara L. Thacker who talk about why academic libraries rarely collect comics produced through crowdfunding campaigns. Next is a speculative piece by Meagan May who speaks about how archival collections, such as the LGBTQ Archive at the University of North Texas, can be complemented with graphic novels in library instruction sessions to make the materials more accessible to students. The book's penultimate chapter finds Matthew Wills examining original Chinese comics known as lianhuanhua to better understand how comics were used as propaganda during the late years of Mao Zedong's rule. Henry Handley, Stephanie Shreffler, and Jillian Ewalt close things out with a discussion of how comic books produced by the Catholic Church held at the University of Dayton are used in library instruction sessions so that students will gain a greater understanding of how the Church used popular culture in its catechetical outreach in the mid-20th century.

There are many reasons to be optimistic about the state of comic book collections in academic library special collections. As the Comics Studies discipline continues to develop and blossom, more and more collections are beginning to emerge. More books, like this one, are being published, and more conferences centering around Comics Studies and Comics Librarianship are happening, such as the Comics Studies and Practices Symposium held at San Diego University in July 2022 and the Comics Studies Society's annual conference, now in its sixth year. But challenges remain. There is still a paucity of comic book collections in academic libraries. They are often initiated by a significant donation with little thought given by administrators to the future sustainability of the collection. Because of the time-consuming nature of cataloging comics, storing and preserving these often brittle artifacts, and a general lack of staffing to complete this

work, there is a risk of collections falling into a state of neglect.[7] The administrative will to encourage or demand Comics Librarians "do more with less" can lead to unsustainable workloads and burnout. The perils of censorship and book banning continue to emerge and might have an impact on collections as well as on the professional reputations of certain librarians with what may be unfairly perceived as controversial content. But rather than shy away from these risks, this is precisely the moment for Comics Librarians, Comics Studies scholars, and comic book lovers to rally around the preservation of material long deemed too lowbrow to preserve in our ivory-est of towers. It is our great hope that the thirty-two contributors to this book will ignite in the reader the inspiration to build, develop, refine, and diversify these collections so that comics history can be experienced by those who seek it out for their research, curiosity, or aesthetic pleasure.

–Brian Flota

Notes

1. Steven W. Holloway, Justina Kaiser, and Brian Flota, "Re-imagining (Black) Comic Book Cataloguing: Increasing Accessibility through Metadata at One University Library," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 13, no. 6 (2022): 884-885.
2. Chapter 14 of this book, Wendy Pflug's "Surveying Three Approaches for Cataloging Comic Book Collections," provides an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of using finding aids and MARC serial or monographic records to catalog comic book collections.
3. Black comics are those featuring Black comics creators (such as writers, artists, pencilers, inkers, colorists, letterers, and the like), Black fictional or non-fictional characters, or have Black publishers. For a more thorough description, see Steven W. Holloway, Justina Kaiser, and Brian Flota, "Re-imagining (Black) Comic Book Cataloguing: Increasing Accessibility through Metadata at One University Library," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 13, no. 6 (2022): 885.
4. Steven W. Holloway, Justina Kaiser, and Brian Flota, "Re-imagining (Black) Comic Book Cataloguing: Increasing Accessibility through Metadata at One University Library," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 13, no. 6 (2022): 884-85.
5. See Brian Flota, "Challenging 'Stereotypes and Fixity': African American Comic Books in the Academic Archive," in *Comics and Critical Librarianship: Reframing the Narrative in Academic Libraries*, ed. Olivia Piepmeier and Stephanie Grimm (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2019), 102-104.
6. Matthew Z. Wood, *Comic Book Collections and Programming: A Practical Guide for Librarians* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 33.
7. Chapter 10 of this book, Jordan Jancocek's "Processing Legacy Comic Book Collections in a Special Collections Library," demonstrates the amount of time and hard work that goes into revitalizing a neglected collection.

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Why Should Your Institution Collect Comics?

There are a variety of sensible reasons why special collections libraries or archives within a college or university might want to start collecting single-issue comics, graphic novels and trade paperback reprints, comic strips, digital comics, minicomics, or original comic art. Comics have immense and (some might say) underestimated entertainment, research, educational, and collector value. In the context of academic libraries, this value is magnified by a long-term ignorance and dismissal of the form as worthy of inclusion in academic library collections. Part 1 collects a series of seven chapters that provide compelling reasons for your special collection or archive to build a comic book collection. Whether it's to enhance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts on campus, to ensure a valuable part of print culture is not irrevocably erased, or to demonstrate how comics, along with other media and forms of expression, contributed to the social discourse of the cultures that produced them, the storage, cataloging, and preservation of comics in special collections, these essays argue, should be an essential part of many colleges and university's collection development policy.