

Composing With

Pleasures of (Re)composing) the Text

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As part of the preparation for rebacking the book in Figure 1, I am lifting the paper from the boards with a micro spatula. Once I have cleaned and relined the spine and prepared the book cloth, the sides of the cloth will slip under the paper I have lifted and will be set with adhesive. The title will then be trimmed and squared and applied to the new cloth-covered spine.



Fig. 1. Preparing a new spine for a book.
Photo credit: Jessica Ebert.

I work at a bench with a scalpel, needles, 18 and 25 weight thread, tweezers, awls, scissors, pencils, adhesives, dividers. I use a board shear, a guillotine, finishing presses, and rulers that measure to 1/16th of an inch. Oh, yes, and Mohawk cover weight and text weight papers, book cloth, and handmade kozo fiber tissues from Japan, China, and Korea, including kizukishi, usomino, and hosho.

After teaching 30 years in the Department of English at the University of Cincinnati where I retired as Professor Emerita, I have taken to working with my hands. Instead of composing and recomposing online or paper text, I am helping to recompose books. Two mornings a week, I volunteer in The Preservation Lab, a collaboration between the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County and the University of Cincinnati Libraries; it is housed in the university's Langsam Library. Professionals working in the lab include a preservation librarian, a conservator, and five technicians. Several student workers and volunteers assist with the work, all of us trained by the professional staff.

Most of the tasks done by the professionals require extensive and specialized training and are beyond my skill level. One part of their work is to stabilize print artifacts or objects that are rare or unique, and they do this with both chemical and/or mechanical treatments. In service of that stabilization, they create, for example, custom boxes and enclosures in which a first edition, perhaps from the 16th century, can be kept from harm; they clean and repair old maps, drawings, and prints, sometimes restoring visual integrity in the process

of chemically removing a stain; and toward the success of this work, they maintain currency in their field with ongoing professional development and innovation. At the same time they make individual items available to patrons, they also focus on collections as a whole, protecting them from environmental harm and conducting disaster mitigation as is required. In short, their tasks are preservation and conservation.

My job is considerably simpler: to repair books, not part of a rare book collection, that have suffered injury, and prepare them for return to the shelves and to readers. University library books and public library books, especially those that are heavily used, suffer from daily wear and tear, some ordinary, some extraordinary. Pulling a book from a shelf by its head cap will damage its spine; leaning books at an angle on a shelf will interfere with their structure; schlepping books around in a backpack or using them to prop up the foot of a couch (a horror) will all contribute to the deterioration of the textblock, the spine, and/or the boards of a book.

So how to name the pleasures of working with these texts? The joys of a new lexicon for one: words or phrases like “nipping,” “rounding,” “stab binding,” “chain stitch,” “turn-ins,” “reback” represent concepts and techniques that I have learned to apply in the repair of a book, in the recomposing of a text. I know the importance of “squaring” a piece of paper, of finding the “grain” of the paper, of measuring even to $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ of an inch.

And more significantly, I’ve learned (and continue to learn) how to give a battered or injured book new life. A children’s book that might have been tossed because of its broken spine and wobbly covers can return to the children’s section of the public library after 45 minutes of my work. With cooked wheat paste and Japanese paper, I repair tears in new books and old, often first removing the scotch tape that a well-meaning but ill-advised patron has applied to a rip. Sometimes I will re-sew a signature whose thread has deteriorated over time or bind new music scores so that they can be used repeatedly without damage.

This work is both simple and complex, both straightforward and messy. And mistakes are easy to make, forgetting, for example, the old saw of “measure twice and cut once.” We work on repairs from the inside of a book out, and if those inner repairs, such as hinging in a leaf, are not done precisely, the overall repair can be compromised. And sometimes a book is, well, wacky to start with . . . the original binding was cheaply done, or the textblock and the boards are not perfectly in sync. The repairs can then get a bit weird. Not unlike copyediting or proofreading in some ways, in the process of eliminating one error, I do not unwittingly want to create others. Neither, ahem, do I want to slash a finger with a scalpel, or catch it in the board shear.

And the greatest pleasure? None of this is to deny the delight of reading electronically. But as I work at repairing books made from paper and board

and thread and adhesive, I think of the many talents that contributed to the creation of the text as a cultural and material object. With a music score, I think of course of the music's composer . . . and before that, of people who printed the sheet, who marketed the score, who first played the music, and who will, when the score is returned to the music library, newly bound, continue to play the music. I think of the people who, throughout the life of the score, have enjoyed listening to a soloist's or orchestra's interpretation of the notes.

Not unlike Andrea Lunsford's notion that as we write, we compose not just a text but also a self, I find that as I recompose a text, I am growing as a person, learning new skills and becoming part of a bigger world. A book in the hands of a reader will in however small (or big) ways affect the life of that reader as she gives life to the text through her own subjectivities. W.B. Yeats reminds us that without the dancer there is no dance; and for many of us, without a reader, there is no text. It gives me no small pleasure to think that I may have helped to repair—to recompose—a book that will give a reader, somewhere, someday, her own particular pleasures of that text.