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Conservation Workflow through a DEI Lens: Before, During, and After Treatment

Authors: Consuela Metzger and Kim Norman, Discussion Group Co-Chairs

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American Institute for Conservation

727 15th Street NW, Suite 500

Washington, DC 20005

info@culturalheritage.org www.culturalheritage.org

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Library and Archives Conservation Discussion Group 2023

Library and Archives Conservation Workflow through a DEI Lens: Before, During, and After Treatment

INTRODUCTION

The Library and Archives Discussion Group (LACDG) co-chairs held a virtual session of short presentations and a panel discussion during the 2023 AIC-LACDG on Tuesday, June 6, 2023. This session occurred after the AIC 51st Annual Meeting 2023 as an interactive Zoom meeting, discussing how library and archives conservation best practices for documentation are not neutral. LACDG co-chairs asked presenting colleagues to consider and discuss conservation workflow issues using a DEI lens, broadly in the context of the mission of our work and from a day-to-day conservation workflow level. Participants were asked to consider the voice of conservators in institutional, grant, exhibition, or digitization priorities, understanding that these are sensitive issues requiring a well-constructed discussion space for colleagues to share their ideas and speak freely.

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS

EPHRANETTE BROWN

LET'S START IN THE MIDDLE: CRAFTING A PROTOCOL FOR TREATING SENSITIVE MATERIALS

Ephranette Brown presented on behalf of Emory Libraries Conservation, discussing their department conversations about treating sensitive or difficult material. The presentation explored past treatments of sensitive materials, highlighting the outcomes of treatments without a laboratory policy or protocol and the ideas generated from those engagements. The process of developing a protocol for treating sensitive materials was explored, including comparing library policies and examining the benefits of crafting a flexible treatment protocol. Brown began by recounting three occurrences

when staff encountered sensitive materials and how those occurrences were handled or resolved.

1. A pregnant conservation technician was tasked with identifying damage within Health Science journals containing graphic medical imagery that triggered a nausea response. This project was passed to another laboratory employee to identify and flag damage. The affected staff member was then able to go directly to those pages without being exposed to the imagery more than necessary.
2. A conservator was tasked with stabilizing and repairing photographs that depicted lynching. This staff member compartmentalized their discomfort and accelerated the workflow to handle the photographs as quickly as possible.
3. A conservator was tasked with washing a pair of Klan robes. They completed the washing with discomfort, later creating a presentation around treating difficult materials in the workplace and igniting the discussion to have a policy or protocol within the laboratory.

Once these examples were given, Brown discussed her efforts to find examples inside and outside of Emory Libraries, illustrating how occurrences of treating sensitive materials were addressed. Those examples included a Duke Libraries zine for student employees who process special collections. This zine outlines self-care when encountering upsetting material, empowering the individual to speak up and alert a supervisor of any discomfort or distress.

As another example, Rose Library at Emory University has a training document that contains an entire section on *emotional care*. The language acknowledges that interacting with difficult or harmful materials is an unfortunate part of the job and suggests coping strategies.

The final example was the Homosaurus international LGBTQ+ linked data vocabulary. Emory Libraries Cataloging staff are currently exploring the best ways to use this controlled vocabulary to represent LGBTQ+ topics

Summaries of discussion groups at the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC's 51st Annual Meeting, May 16–20, 2023

more equitably. This includes applying language originating from relevant communities and increasing the visibility of library materials by using terms that will help people identify relevant materials more easily.

By learning from past occurrences and referring to established examples of policies surrounding the treatment of difficult materials, Brown stated that the Emory Libraries Conservation Lab recognized that an *empathy-based approach* is best. She further explained how this approach might be realized.

1. Create a statement that acknowledges how treatment of sensitive material may be difficult. Allow staff to decide how the material affects them and emphasize that not everyone will have the same response. Remain open minded about what might be difficult for others.
2. Being aware of any pre-established trigger warnings and adequately notify those who will be involved with the project. Adjust the workflows as necessary. For example, work in pairs. Divide the treatment schedule for multiple people to complete the necessary tasks. Allow for flexibility. Ask if affected staff members would like to proceed with item treatment or not.
3. Provide any needed resources for support. At Emory, contact the Faculty Staff Assistance Program (FSAP) and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) for student employees.

Brown ended her presentation by stating that this is just the beginning for the Emory Libraries Conservation staff, who will collaborate and consider the following when they have a formal protocol in place:

1. In a deadline-driven field, how do we make space for getting the work done without inflicting trauma?
2. How do we responsibly manage project deadlines and workflows while maintaining a professional and collaborative environment of addressing difficulties?

Finally, Brown expressed the importance of staying open and approachable to staff and students. Remain engaged with everyone who treats sensitive or difficult collection material. Pay especially close attention to how staff members are feeling during this work.

Ephranette Brown, Head of Library Conservation, presented on behalf of Emory Libraries Conservation staff—Emory University

ELIZABETH RYAN, AISHA WAHAB, ANN MYERS
PARALLELS: CATALOGERS + CONSERVATORS +
ANTI-RACIST WORK

Elizabeth Ryan, Aisha Wahab, and Ann Myers presented on behalf of the Stanford Libraries Conservation Services Department and the Department of Special Collections and

University Archives. The presentation described guidelines developed by the Anti-Racist Description Discussion Group at Stanford Libraries and ideas generated from those engagements. Libraries and archives are institutions with diverse expertise and knowledge, providing unique opportunities for learning, collaboration, and parallel work with colleagues outside of our conservation units. At Stanford University, the Anti-Racist Description Discussion Group—a university-wide grassroots effort of catalogers and other library and non library staff—works to develop antiracist descriptive practices. Their work inspired and continues to inspire the conservation department to learn and develop parallel initiatives and possible collaborative efforts between catalogers and conservators.

The Anti-Racist Description Discussion Group at Stanford Libraries has developed a best practice guide that includes guidelines for putting content warnings in catalog records or archival finding aids when the material described includes content that may be harmful. Discussions with conservators have brought up ideas of flagging initial conservation requests in addition to a verbal heads-up. Due to the intensive level at which conservators often engage with content, potentially harmful material might be discovered during treatment. Conservators can request that materials in question be reviewed by catalogers to determine the inclusion of an appropriate catalog warning.

The similar work of both rare book catalogers and conservators in their recording of detailed codex and material descriptions provides opportunities for collaboration in antiracist descriptive practices. Conservators can develop parallel work: evaluating used language in our field, initiating discussion and change, and eliminating harmful language in our descriptive practices.

Additionally, catalogers and conservators can share preferred terminology and resources with one another. Although catalogers must follow prescriptive rules for writing catalog records, alternative controlled vocabularies, as well as liberal use of notes field, provide opportunities for preferred terminology and additional context. Conservators can offer terminology for notes fields, particularly with materials where existing controlled vocabularies are lacking, such as in the case of Islamicate materials. In the same manner, catalogers may have subject specialist codicology expertise whose knowledge could be helpful for filling in conservation gaps and moving terminology in a more antiracist direction in conservation documentation practices.

Both catalog descriptions and conservation treatments are informed by their historical and cultural contexts. Such contexts can influence the level of detail in a catalog record or specific choices made in conservation work. Institutional considerations such as the circumstances of acquisition and intended use also inform decision making. Recognizing our own cultural context as individuals is also important in both

cataloging and conservation. This can affect our interpretation of objects from other cultures and how much expertise we bring to that interpretation.

In conservation, visual aspects of books and documents can be altered in treatment, and the conservators' cultural and aesthetic biases influence treatment expectations and outcomes. Recent conservation work on Islamicate materials at Stanford Libraries provides an example of how historical, cultural, and institutional contexts inform treatment. Our conservation department's research about these structures, related cultural practices, and curatorial consultations have informed treatment decisions about opening angles, repair materials, and sewing structures, among others. We have shared the resources we have consulted about descriptive terminology for Islamicate structures with our rare book catalogers, providing them with additional aids for physical description in corresponding catalog records.

Libraries and archives are amazing institutions with so much expertise and knowledge that we can learn from and share with. It is our hope that these ideas might inspire our colleagues to find opportunities for similar work or collaboration with library colleagues.

Elizabeth Ryan and Aisha Wahab represent the Stanford Libraries Conservation Services Department, and Ann Myers represents the Department of Special Collections and University Archives at Stanford University in California.

DISCUSSION

After both presentations, the session moderators took questions from the attendees and monitored comments from the virtual chat box. These questions, as well as the responses by the presenters, are paraphrased next.

Chela Metzger: Would someone like to discuss their ideas or experience with content warnings in their catalog? What does it entail? How is that working for you? How do you avoid mistakes, if we want to use that word?

Ann Myers: I can say a little bit about the content warnings in Stanford's catalog, which is a recent practice for us at Stanford. So we're still kind of feeling things out, but it's a very collaborative practice. Folks will bring material to our discussion group, and if there is consensus in the group that it warrants a content warning, we will consult with the curators who acquired the material.

There is not always agreement on whether there should be a content warning or not. Sometimes we strike a compromise and may not label something as a content warning because that carries a certain weight. We will put a note field in the record that describes what the content is—that someone might be triggered by it or find it objectionable. It is clear, particularly if an item does not present itself obviously as

something that might be problematic. We want to make sure that the context is given somewhere in the catalog record and that users are informed. By the same token, we give at least verbal heads-up to the conservation staff as we pass material along to them—for example, if the work has a large racial epithet written across three pages or something.

We also have a feedback function in our catalog so that folks can submit feedback if they feel that something should have a content warning or, on the other hand, to ask why something has a content warning. We've not yet received any feedback, but I think one thing that's important in doing this work is to recognize and acknowledge that we will make mistakes. We need to be prepared to respond to those mistakes with humility and to be willing to work to correct them.

We are at-the-ready for feedback, and our guidelines are not fixed. These are living documents that will continue to be revised as we refine our practices and as standards shift.

Elise Calvi: I'm at Indiana University, and just yesterday, a bunch of Indiana librarians were meeting and talking about this subject. One of the people there is a cataloger who does public services and works the front line. She talked about how a lot of the supplied titles and terminology describing their archival collections, field recordings, and all sorts of ethnographic materials were done a long time ago. So whenever she can, she'll take the opportunity to talk to patrons (during their reference interaction, while they are looking at catalog records, or reviewing the materials) to just say that they would like to know how the material strikes them, if a person from the culture is being represented, and which terminology they would prefer that we use.

The previous speaker talked about collaboration and engaging patrons. In conservation, I think that we can't always do that because we're a few steps removed. The more that we can work with our frontline people to do those sorts of things, the better it is for everyone down the line.

Marieka Kaye: I'm at the University of Michigan, and something that concerns me is that some terms are hard to replace. I've been hearing that they are not words that we should use anymore, like recto and verso. That is a very Eurocentric way of looking at things. I think about this all the time. What can I say instead of those terms as new publications come out and still use them everywhere? I'm wondering if anyone has started thinking about any alternatives for that.

Chela Metzger: That's a great, great question, and I think it is one that will take collaboration across the so-called rare book world to move that into new directions.

Elizabeth Ryan: Yeah, we've struggled with that. In literature describing East Asian materials, we have seen the terms *upper* and *lower board* used instead of recto and verso. So we tried

to make that an option in our treatment documentation. I appreciate the dilemma, yes.

Marieka Kaye: I've been thinking about it all the time ever since she brought that up. It's a very good thing to think about, but I still haven't found a thing that everyone in the whole profession would have to agree on. It's impossible.

Aisha Wahab: Yeah, when we were trying to figure this out during our terminology project at Stanford, we flagged a lot of problematic terms, but we were really struggling with what our alternatives would be and tried to come up with suggestions. There were debates among us. What do we agree upon, and do we need consensus within the profession?

It is a little different from cataloging. We don't have the Library of Congress to determine what our language should be. So we have flexibility, but it's important for one conservator to understand the language that another conservator is using. You kind of want some type of agreement, so I think our next step, maybe, is to start putting out suggestions, I guess. I don't know exactly how it gets done without a Library of Congress-type system to make that final call on what's being used. Until then, we still have terms like *recto*, and our department isn't sure what to do, either.

Some of the thoughts in our department were that we'll finally decide on terminology when we come up with new documentation forms. We haven't gotten to that point yet.

Michelle Smith: Thanks, everybody, for these great talks. It's also nice to see so many former colleagues. But my question is for Ephranette. Thanks for the awesome talk, and I'll try to make this coherent. I was thinking about what you were saying about trying to figure out how to help staff be able to become comfortable with what they're working on to get the work done. Maybe they're not comfortable but find someone who is, or extend the timelines to help and that sort of thing.

For myself, and maybe for others, sometimes the thing that makes me the most uncomfortable is not knowing how the material is going to get used and presented to other people, especially if it was sent to me with no context and no acknowledgment of the kind of content that was there. Maybe if the content's brought up, there's not really much concern. Taking more time with the object isn't going to make me feel differently about that. I guess it can depend on where you work, and if there's trust with your colleagues, that they kind of know what the deal is.

I would love to hear you talk more about it. Have you had experiences like that at Emory, or what is that relationship like? Maybe a back-and-forth with catalogers and curators?

Ephranette Brown: That's a great point. I will say I can only speak for myself. I will not speak for my team members. I

can only say for myself that this may not be healthy. I tend to disassociate. I do tend to look at things as the item itself, instead of the content, only because I feel like that is my coping mechanism and has been safer for me.

So I don't ask the question of what is happening once it leaves my bench. I can see how that is a great pathway to deal with anything difficult or sensitive. If I'm understanding your question or your point, putting everything all in context so that you're able to engage with it differently. Yes, that is my answer, and I do try to empower my team members to dialogue personally with the curator or the archivists so they can provide that context. That is important. If they prefer to do that through me instead, they can.

Sometimes it's not for me to decide, but I think you can get into the weeds of the collecting areas and larger administrative bodies when a couple of steps are removed from things like donor relations, collecting policies, and things of that nature. That's not to say that there isn't room for collaboration with those departments to provide context.

Ann Myers: If I could piggyback there, a lot of what you said in your talk really resonated with me and what we're trying to do in our department as well. I think that is why we have this question that comes up in our description group. Our curatorial team has been very supportive in encouraging us whenever we ask questions like "Why did we acquire this item?"

Speaking for myself, I had a collection of artists' books that I had to catalog, and I found it physically nauseating to engage with them. It helped to distance part of myself emotionally from them, which came from understanding the context of why we had acquired them and what this artist was trying to say through the work. So okay, I find the images objectionable, but I can understand the artistic intent behind them yet develop my personal practice for getting through the material and doing the work while also taking care of myself mentally.

Elizabeth Ryan: Knowing more about the context of materials is so helpful. Our conservation department presented examples of our work in Stanford Libraries' online exhibit platform, and a curator provided context for one of the collection items we chose to include, the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, a document about travel from the Jim Crow era. We collaborated with this curator, who gave some nice context for it, describing how it fits into our collections and how it's used in teaching and research. So I think it really complemented the treatment presentation to have this contextual part of the material explained.

Aisha Wahab: I think, similarly to Anne reaching out to get context about what she is working on, I think sometimes, as conservators, we are a little hesitant to have that kind of voice to question what we're working on or at least to be able to get

more information on it. I think we're still kind of coming out of this idea of staying neutral with our work, and we're slowly moving in a different direction.

One treatment came in that I was quite uncomfortable working on, and I was hesitant. I didn't know whether I should bring it up, but I finally did. I wanted a little more context, and once I did get more context, it really did help me do the treatment and feel comfortable with what I was working on and spending time on.

I think there was that initial hesitation—that I'm like a doctor. I don't care what this patient has done. I just must fix it. I think we are a little different than doctors, and we have the time to ask about the context of the treatments that we're working on. I think it's okay to do so.

Laura McCann: Thank you. And thanks to everyone who presented it. At NYU, we have a lot of collections that can be really challenging, and engaging with the curators who are bringing them in has been very helpful. Over the years, we've managed in Preservation to be a little bit more involved in not necessarily the decision making but being present at the table. So I attend the processing priority meetings. That's done yearly and gives us a sense of what's coming through, and then I'm able to talk to everybody in the department about it. We try to get somebody at that table to know what's coming from Acquisitions. In our area of rare books, while there is some challenging material, it's a little slower collection, and we tend to just be told immediately what to expect.

My question to the group is that we had a couple of discussions, particularly around erotica and porn, and one of the big discussion points that came up—when we brought archivists, curators, conservators, and preservationists together—was this idea of being able to *opt out*. Some people feel like we can have this policy. You can say “I don't want to work on this” or “I want to work on it like this.” Within the power dynamics of organizations, do people here really, truly feel that we can shepherd that? Some people may feel more comfortable. Some people may feel less so. What was sometimes happening was with very challenging content, supervisors tended to just step in and say “I'll do this.” What does that mean for them? Do they end up taking on this larger burden?

And then the question, particularly with video and audio, when you rip a video, you're watching it in real time, and sometimes you don't know what's going to be on that, which can be very intense. It could also be a transgressive film, which we collect as well. If we outsourced that, maybe it's sort of a cop-out to ask somebody else to do that in our community. How do we handle this idea of opting out? We're still struggling with it. So I just want to bring it up in case anybody is further along than us. I don't know if there are any folks who are involved in video and audio preservation because it's that visual thing of real time.

Elizabeth Ryan: Before this meeting, I was talking with the person who works with audio and video preservation here at Stanford. He was really interested in this topic, but he also said when people decide they're going to engage with video material, they know they must be prepared for anything.

Chela Metzger: At UCLA, audiovisual is in the same big room as paper-based conservation, so we all discuss these topics of being able to opt out, which is an interesting approach. Can we say “I don't want to deal with this”? Can I hand it off to my colleagues? What if nobody wants to deal with it? Do we outsource? We've had those same discussions.

We have a lot of primary source AV material that deals with very sensitive medical issues, and people have encountered things in real time that are very complicated and difficult. It is hard, and I know our AV folks try to take care of each other through this. I think the empathetic kind of lab culture that has been so eloquently discussed here is very important. Outsourcing requires quality control. There absolutely is no way to avoid encountering things with quality control, and the real-time aspect of AV work is very tough. It may be interesting to have a conversation with the AIC Electronic Media group on this.

Ann Myers: Just another thought to throw in. I think, Laura, you alluded to this a little bit in your question about when it's a small shop and there's not a lot of people. You can't necessarily pass it off, and you can't necessarily say, well, I'm not going to do this. Then, it's not going to get done, and that's not always an option. I think in our organizations, maybe we can build in, as you said, options for stepping away from the work. To say “I'm not prepared to work on this right now, but I know it's waiting there. I can mentally prepare.”

From an organization's administration, it is important to have decision-making permission for setting a longer timeline, as Ephranette discussed in her presentation. As you mentioned about opting in or opting out, it makes a difference to have the mental space to make this decision. Opting out may make it easier to work on something, and then it doesn't feel like you're being forced to do it. You're making a choice on the logistics of how you make it happen, which is complicated. I think it's worthwhile to have those discussions and set those expectations.

Fletcher Durant: I'm just thinking here about the complicated history of maybe not so much conservation but the complicated history of collection care at my organization, at UF, and other organizations where I think people oftentimes avoid working or collecting certain material, traditionally African American materials or LGBTQ+ materials, from whatever the opposite of an ethic of care is.

It's a complicated topic, obviously, and I'm trying to work through it on the fly here but thinking about making sure

there's space for staff to step away from undertaking some work individually while also ensuring that those objects are still worked on eventually. Then, generosity of an ethic of care where we don't press people to work on the emotionally challenging materials isn't then co-opted to avoid working on whole subsets of materials based on bias or bigotry and just making sure that we're continuing to work on diverse materials, even if some staff members may have personal objections, and recognizing the gray area of that challenging space.

Laura McCann: Thanks, Fletcher. That's a good point, as our institutions are coming at this from different places. One more thing that I wanted to bring up within this context is that we are talking a lot about doing this in our emergency planning—like trauma-informed care. So this is part of it, especially when you are talking about particularly very violent or explicit imagery, whether it's print or not, is when you're coming at things from trauma-informed care, and you don't know what's on it. That's some of the challenge, but certainly they will be preserved.

Chela Metzger: I see a note from Brenda Bernier about her work in a Holocaust memorial museum and at NARA. I think the protocols that those kinds of organizations have set in place are good guidelines for all our workplaces. Thank you, Brenda, and I really appreciated all the engaged conversation here; there have been a lot of amazing thoughts here. We can continue all these discussions through the Book and Paper Group, through AIC, ALA, and SAA. One of the things that's been occurring to me is the beautiful structure and specificity of rare book cataloging and how it is quite different from a finding aid in archives. For example, UCLA has a large archive where any one box doesn't have an item-level description on it, and people can encounter Lord knows what.

Cataloging everything as it comes in, but what about amending as it's viewed, amended by what our users see in the library? Do we have an avenue for them to walk up to the reading room staff and go "Whoa! Do you know what I just saw in here? Do you know what's in here?" Chances are, with a large archival collection, we simply don't know everything that's in it.

I want to keep bringing up the controlled vocabulary too, but the size of archival collections and the diversity of content and format in these collections is unruly, shall we say.

Ann Myers: I appreciate you bringing that up, and I'll add that I know at Stanford with those large collections, sometimes different formats get processed at different times. The papers might get processed initially, but then the AV format doesn't get processed until much later. There could be multiple iterations of the finding aid and the associated catalog

record, and I think our archivists all acknowledge that. No, we didn't see every object in those large collections, so we absolutely welcome feedback, whether it's a conservator who discovers something in a box, or a user and student in the reading room, or a researcher scholar. That's a good point, and even with the rare book records, I don't read every page of everything. We might miss something that somebody finds problematic.

Chela Metzger: I was thinking about Michelle Smith's earlier question about a feeling of discomfort in terms of not knowing how something is going to be used. For example, we've been lending out a lot of material recently to the American Academy for Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Museum. They have been doing various exhibits on African-American film history, Black film, and we have an important collection from a very early African-American film company, the Lincoln Film Company. Along with those archival materials, they wanted to exhibit a first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and it's a very important book in American history. It's a very important part of Civil War history.

I reached out to the curator and said, "Can you tell me what your didactics are going to be for this?" I just asked because I felt comfortable, but I didn't feel like it was my position to say "You can't have the book." If I was very uncomfortable with what they said about the book, I probably would have gone to the head of special collections and said, "Did you know what this is, what their didactics are?" I just think you should know, but I agree that my conservation education didn't necessarily prepare me for that level of concern, potentially for how something is going to get used. Of course, that's a very big-ticket item, and I felt it was important for me to ask that question. I don't always ask those questions, and I have not always felt I had a voice to ask those questions.

Aisha Wahab: I have a question for the group, if I may. Ephranette talked about emotional and mental well-being, and I'm curious if any other labs have some suggested guidelines for emotional and mental well-being, including when working with difficult collections. I'm curious if any conservation labs have also taken on something like that.

Chela Metzger: I'll just quickly say that we have it in our onboarding materials, but I wouldn't know if it's exactly a guideline. I'm glad to hear that Duke has done this for student colleagues' onboarding materials. We haven't had as many student colleagues recently, but we probably will have more in the future. We do have it officially in our departmental onboarding materials about the difficulties of working with some of this material, options for self-care, who to talk to on campus, resources for emotional issues that may come up, and things like that.

Ann Myers: So I can say that the best practices document that you mentioned does not have the weight of policy. These are guidelines put together by a grassroots group of staff members, so it has the weight of suggestion and, hopefully, inspiration. Within my cataloging unit, I have had these verbal conversations with staff members, and they have read that section of the best practices document which is like what Chela was mentioning, of acknowledging that you might come across material that you find difficult, encouraging self-care practices, and referring to the faculty and staff help center on campus, if needed. So that's there as a resource, but we have not gotten to the point of making this departmental policy or officially part of onboarding, yet I think that those would be important next steps.

Chela Metzger: One of the things that occurs to me here, for those of us in institutions, is that we have certain kinds of challenges and certain kinds of resources. If you encounter things in private practice that you find disturbing, I don't know what resources you have. I feel very fortunate in the resources I have on campus and with my colleagues on campus or even just colleagues around town to discuss these things with, and not everybody is in an institution that offers as much care, potentially. If you're in private practice, we haven't really provided these kinds of emotional resources through AIC, or at least I'm not aware of them.

Aisha Wahab: I think that was kind of what I was asking about, to see if a lab or something had already compiled some resources, any practices, or guidelines that maybe can be shared among other labs, through AIC, or the BPG Wiki.

Chela Metzger: We have had a great opportunity here to share ideas, and this can continue in a variety of ways. I look forward to all the creative ways we can support each other with these questions. Thanks to everybody for sharing and participating in this great discussion.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

CHELA METZGER

Head of Preservation & Conservation
UCLA Library
Los Angeles, CA
cmetzger@library.ucla.edu

KIM NORMAN

Director, Preservation and Digitization Services
Emory Libraries
Atlanta, GA
kim.norman@emory.edu