

PAPER WEIGHT

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The book reigns unfettered as the cultural object per excellence. Next to being carriers of information and symbols of social prestige, books embody concepts of enlightenment, emancipation, and self-discovery. As an object, it is akin to a sacred object. Yet unlike the relics from many religions, books are anything but scarce. Even as they pile up and gather dust, their cultural status makes it impossible to dispose of them as any other object. As experts on compartmentalisation, we have found creative ways to “ditch” those books we no longer want. Through the secular ritual of book donation we are not “getting rid” of them, we are just “passing them around”. This paper stems from a research in progress with Giulia Moriconi on Little Free Libraries. Based on our framework of book donation as a ritual of disposal, I focus on book donation programmes.

Keywords: book charities; book disposal; book donation; book totems; cultural value



A few years ago, a client walking through a large store in Santiago, Chile, noticed something out of place. Alongside male shoes *lay* books more specifically, parts of them. The books had been torn in halves and covered in varnish. Just as bricks, boxes, or textiles, they were used as simple decorative objects. In 2012, a pedestrian passing by the Meermanno museum in the Hague, the Netherlands,

noticed a large sculpture on the facade of the museum. The work by Alicia Martin was made out of books which were torn apart and glued together.

The first episode caused a stir after the concerned client sent a picture of the shoe display to a local newspaper. How could books be treated in this way? The second episode counted on widespread approval in regular and social media, with people

reacting enthusiastically to those sculptures made of books. A starker contrast to similar incidents is difficult to imagine. Both the shoe display and the museum sculpture used books as a primary material to create new, aesthetically pleasing objects. But are these cases indeed so similar?

Compare these reactions to the infamous pulping of 240k books by Manchester's Central Library. In 2012, various public figures, amongst them poet laureate Ann Carol Duffy, started a campaign to halt the pulping of tens of thousands of books resulting from the library's weeding process. A local councilor claimed that only 'duplicated, outdated or otherwise obsolete' books were withdrawn while the library's team 'ensured that the depth and breadth of the general reference collection was good across all subject areas'.¹ Nevertheless, there was a public uproar no doubt fuelled in part by the unfamiliarity with the endeavours of librarianship. For the public eye, this was a case of book destruction, which is inherently incompatible with the guardian role of a library.

Based on the reactions, the disposal of books by the library and the shoe display share more with each other than the sculpture at the museum. A fundamental element that can explain the outcry is our cultural anxiety of book destruction.

Even though Martin also destroyed books in order to make sculptures, her intention was seen as honourable to books. In contrast, the shoe display was perceived as an affront. Both cases

effectively made aesthetic use of the cultural value of books as objects, yet only the shoe display was perceived as vulgar, perhaps due to its location and its ulterior motive (to sell shoes). In one case, the books were used as ploys to attract customers, while in the other the destroyed books were presented inside a museum, a place which, similarly to a library, is a "temple" of culture.

Worth and value

As a cultural object that has accompanied mankind for thousands of years, the book is charged with many powerful meanings that stem from its double nature. Not only is it a physical object made of paper or parchment, it is also a medium for immaterial content.² The cases mentioned above exemplify the tension between two levels of materiality. On the one hand, a much beloved artefact which signifies knowledge. On the other, the dead weight of an obsolete object which has been discarded and, therefore, lost its original intended use.³

Thus, it can be said that a book has two types of values, a perceived value of "the book" as a general concept, and a specific one linked to a particular copy. This ambivalence between the general and the specific is not necessarily contradictory, nor is it specific to material objects. For example, there is a difference in the perception and acceptance between the general idea of human rights and *particular* kinds of human rights in *specific contexts*. However, for books, unlike for human rights, there seems to be a large disconnection between these two types of values. In other words, the

book as concept trumps the particular copy.

The value of the book-as-concept is profoundly related to its role throughout history as a highly reliable medium for knowledge and information transfer. Despite its young age (around 1,500 years as a codex versus oral communication) and its inherent frailty, it has served as the foundation for the so-called religions of the book. Further, its physicality is strongly linked with presumed notions of authority, accuracy, and veracity.⁴ All these qualities have cemented its status as a vessel for knowledge, an asset to which we owe our development and survival as a species.⁵

The book as totem

The value of the book as a cultural object, beyond that of a codex for reading, knows many examples in book history. In a study, David Cressy illustrates how the Bible was used as a talisman in seventeenth century England and New England.⁶ Older accounts from the New World confirm these phenomena; for example, Thomas Hariot, in his 1588 account of Virginia, tells how the Algonquian peoples sought to touch, embrace, and kiss the Bible.⁷ Further south in New Spain, in his 1650 will, Martín Cerón Alvarado, the cacique of Tepetenchí (Xochimilco), mentions fifteen large books and ten small books which ‘were valuable when I bought them and which must be valuable for mass’.⁸

Although the value perceived by Cerón Alvarado is on a different level than the talismanic experience in Hariot’s account, both

cases refer specifically to religious books. Because of their subject and context, it is not difficult to extend the notion of religious and spiritual books as totems. Yet my concern here is situated a few centuries later, where the book-as-concept is also a totem, but in the realm of the secular sacred.⁹

The term secular sacred might seem contradictory as the definer *secular* assumes the opposite, or absence of any religious, magical, or spiritual element.¹⁰ Additionally, the general Western perception towards magic or religion is of something primitive that pertains to the *other* (who coincidentally happens to be outside of the Western realm, either physically or intellectually). Yet religious theorists like Ronald Grimes have pointed out the subsistence of magical thinking in the supposedly secularised West. See for example the belief that a certain product will *somehow* transform somebody, where this *somehow* need not to be specific, nor explained; it just is.¹¹

The definition of the sacred and, by extent, of religion is cause for a lengthy and fascinating scholarly discussion which supersedes the scope of this paper.¹² Let us focus instead on the attributes of the sacred which can concern an object. Emile Durkheim positions the sacred as something absolute and apart which is hierarchically above (the profane).¹³ Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff highlight “unquestionability” as one of the essential qualities of the sacred.¹⁴ Following this, a sacred object could be defined as one which is unquestionably absolute and stands apart from other things.

By virtue of their status as vessels for knowledge and therefore their relevance to society, books stand apart from other objects. Regardless of their content, they have an unquestionable potency as a communication medium. Much so that their own presence is regarded as an indicator of refinement, culture, and extensive knowledge of the possessor.¹⁵ By their own performative potential, books are both sacred objects and consecrated agents of knowledge.

The problems with totems

Sacred objects stand apart from profane ones due to their unquestionable qualities, yet they remain material things that can erode or be damaged. An old or broken chair might be thrown away or recycled without much thought. In contrast, a scroll of the Torah that has been damaged might not be “useful” any more for reading. However, the damage has not cancelled its status as sacred. Since it cannot be merely thrown away, texts and other sacred objects in the Jewish tradition are stored in specifically designated areas in a synagogue (genizahs), while awaiting cemetery burial.

Akin procedures can be found around the world, rituals for the respectful disposal of dual material/sacred objects. These rituals usually centre around specific objects and demand a set of previously

agreed performative actions from a community. But what if the object is not one, but many and ubiquitous? What if their disposal is not related to them being damaged, but to them no longer being wanted?

In our consumption-oriented society, books are plenty. They are to be found on almost every setting, both in private and public spaces, and, as any other mass-produced item, they tend to accumulate and gather dust. As immaterial objects they might occupy a special place in our hearts, but as material objects they also occupy a physical space; room which could be used otherwise.

That book your mother gave you last Christmas because it is a best seller highly regarded on the

TV show she watches, is next to the latest novel of a cemented literary star your in-laws gave you because “you like to read”. On top of it lies a book with witty quotes about the age group you belong to, a gift from your last birthday. On a shelf, books from university stand as a proof that you did study. If you need space, you might get rid of some of these. If you have enough space, you might delay this action until your estate executors have to deal with them after your death.

But how, oh how to get rid of them? In all truth, that novel was awful and you couldn’t go beyond 20 pages. Or that How To guide for a 2001

‘What to do with all the books of dear uncle Pablo who just passed away, or that How To guide for a 2001 software?’

software, which is obsolete in 2018. What to do with all the books of dear uncle Pablo who just passed away? It is clear you do not want them, but they cannot be thrown to the garbage, not even to the paper recycling container. After all, they are books, they must be useful to somebody. Besides, only barbarians would desecrate these totems of knowledge. Enter book donation.

Throwing away without guilt

Book donation is a clever way of outsourcing the possible destruction of sacred objects. Just like buying a packaged chicken breast in a box with a green label absolves us from the horrors of large-scale farms and slaughterhouses, donation prevents us from acknowledging the fate of some books. That Adobe Photoshop 1999 manual is going straight to the bin, but we do not want to be the ones throwing it away.

Like with so many of our actions, there is a certain degree of cognitive dissonance between what we do and what we would like to think we do. Many of those books which we are donating are effectively paper for the recycling container, yet they are shaped like books, our dear secular sacred totems. Donating them, whatever their condition and subject matter, is not solely a dignified farewell but an act which takes place under certain conditions.

Retaking the theme of the sacred, the act of donating books could be described as a ritual. According to Moore and Myerhoff, rituals endow individuals, organisations, values,

and views with legitimacy, whether in the religious realm or in secular life.¹⁶ This particular ritual does not take place in front of a large crowd, which could be ascribed to our modern-day individualisation. Nevertheless, it has a performative element which confirms certain beliefs. Where knowledge is considered as a higher good and books are its vessels, donating them allows us to get rid of them, while at the same time reaffirms certain perceived values and beliefs.

The asserted belief through donation could be framed as a view where everybody can achieve knowledge (and perhaps emancipation) through reading. "Someone might need this book" is not necessarily a lie, but without curation, the right book might not find its reader. Further, this belief overlooks social, economic, and neurological conditions which can determine whether a person reads or not.

Naturally, the donor is not fully aware of these mechanisms. Perhaps they realise donations are plainly an act of book disposal. But by disguising the motif with an idea of sharing books (naturally good) they reaffirm certain political and social structure, whether consciously or not. Not everybody can just grab a book and learn, enjoy, or improve themselves. Although ubiquitous for those who can afford it, the activity of reading requires skills, time, and money (to buy books). Donation focuses on the last aspect despite the price of books having decreased in the last century, except for specialist and academic ones. The resources which could be named as more of an obstacle towards reading

would be time and the skills to read (for some).¹⁷

Considering book donation as a secular ritual should not imply every instance of this act as if it consists of a script. Although rituals mirror existing views, serve to reorganise, and help to (re)create them, their meanings are multi-layered.¹⁸ By performing the ritual, a book donor is building an image of the self, and thus each of them will endow the act with their own particular sense.¹⁹

Book charities: our secular shamans

Analysing such a complex ritual and its motivations by direct observation can be problematic, yet there are organisations which experience book donation on a regular basis. While people can donate objects to different outlets, there are specific charities and non-profits that collect books. For this analysis I will focus on two types of organisations: a charity that has second-hand bookshops, and non-profits which collect books for prisoners.

The charity collects books through its second-hand shops. The donations they receive are very diverse, from one or a couple, up to several boxes at once. The charity does not list specific books which they will not accept. In general they try to make most of what they have received. For example, by separating books that could be sold in a specific shop from those that could be useful for one of their partners in other countries. Nevertheless they must throw out many books.

There are several book donation programmes for prisoners in the US, from general literature and non-fiction to those who cater for specific groups like LGBT+ prisoners. Because of the needs of the prisoners and the prisons' own restrictions, most programmes have lists with the type of books they need and those which they cannot use.²⁰ Nevertheless, they accept all the ones that people bring to them, which can range from one to many boxes. The books they cannot use are passed on to second-hand bookshops or other organisations, though many books will eventually end up in the recycling container.

Although the specifics of these organisations differ, they share the idealistic motive of extending the useful cycle of books. The fact that they are run by volunteers who give up their time attests to this. Both specifically seek books for 'their clientele' by weeding the donations they receive. This process of mining for the 'little seams of goodness' is quite time-consuming.²¹ According to the volunteers I spoke to, a large proportion of books are of no use at all, ranging from 90% to 50% of "useless" books, depending on the programme and the donation. This can owe to the books being in a very bad physical condition, being heavily highlighted, or because there are many copies of the same book, or even because of the subject matter being of no general interest.

Several volunteers working in organised book donation shared their experiences with me. These confirm the uneasiness we have when throwing away books and how book donation allows us to get rid of them "at

peace". According to them, many people are extremely attached to their books, sometimes because they belonged to their relatives, and thus imagine that somebody must want a 1960s Medical Encyclopaedia.²² Although they are grateful for the donations, separating the good from the bad takes time from the volunteers who eventually must be the ones throwing certain books away.

In a few cases, when people donate books in person and some are rejected, the donors feel resentful. This reaction can be a result of them knowing that their books are not that good, mixed with the feeling that their kind gesture of donation is not appreciated.²³ To avoid these confrontations which could affect the amount of donations, volunteers admit to never rejecting books in person, nor throwing them away in front of the donors. The play that is performed by the ritual could be summarised as: we cannot get rid of these totems ourselves, thus we share them with others even if most of those others would not be served by what we are getting rid of. This contradiction arises from the tension of sacred disposal and building our own self.

Knowledge, waste, and the sacred

As mentioned above, book donation is a multi-layered act. Besides its relation to

knowledge structures, the donation takes place in a production system where waste abounds. The volunteers interviewed acknowledged the issues of overabundance, if with different wording. For example, 'people need to make space', 'people want to get rid of books', or more directly by acknowledging that in capitalism, overall, productivity and efficiency are irrelevant, while waste is central.²⁴

Since studying the phenomenon of book donation, I became more aware of how we revere books as objects and the contradictions of their disposal. Many unwanted and useless books populate my own shelves, space that could be used better by those piled on the floor. Some have found a "place" in one of the Little Free Libraries in my city, especially those in less affluent areas (as the rich can better afford books). But those coding manuals from 2003, which I truly never used, and that religious self-help book my uncle-pastor gave me, ended up in the recycling container. Given the size of the coding manuals I had to rip them in half to throw them into the container. A couple was walking nearby and saw my barbarous act. They left out a gasp and looked at me harshly: I had desecrated civilisation.



¹ The Independent, 'Manchester Central Library: Fears that tens of thousands of books may have been pulped during £170m restoration of building | *The Independent*', <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/manchester-central-library-fears-that-tens-of-thousands-of-books-may-have-been-pulped-during-170m-10045558.html>> (2 February 2018).

²⁶ Moriconi & A. Reyes Elizondo, 'Thou Shalt Not Throw Me Away! Notions of Usefulness for Books', *Unnecessary, Unwanted and Uncalled-for: A Workshop on Uselessness*, Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), 28-30 March 2017. Unpublished paper.

³ I must pause for a second and explain the barbarity just committed. Describing a book as an obsolete object feels violent. Although many writers have complained about "useless books", linking what the codex represents to an adjective that signifies worthlessness is a taboo. Since a book contains knowledge it cannot be obsolete, it is expected to always be useful. As a book historian, I understand the mechanisms at play here, yet as member of a community imbued by its cultural codes, I am aware of the transgression.

⁴ A. van der Weel, *Changing Our Textual Minds: Towards a Digital Order of Knowledge*. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 90-103.

⁵ Moriconi & Reyes, 'Thou Shalt Not Throw Me Away!'.

⁶ D. Cressy, 'Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England', *The Journal of Library History*, 21 (1986), pp. 92-106.

⁷ T. Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1903).

⁸ English translation by the author based on the Spanish translations of the original Nahuatl texts. T. Rojas Rabiela, E.L. Rea López & C. Medina Lima, *Vidas y bienes olvidados: testamentos indígenas novohispanos*, vol. III (Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 1999), pp. 238-242.

⁹ S.F. Moore & B.G. Myerhoff, 'Introduction', in: S.F. Moore & B.G. Myerhoff (eds), *Secular Ritual* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), pp. 3-24.

¹⁰ Moriconi & Reyes, 'Thou Shalt Not Throw Me Away!'.

¹¹ R.L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), p. 47.

¹² See for example I. Strenski, 'Talal Asad's "Religion" Trouble and a Way Out', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 22:2-3 (2010), pp. 136-155. doi:10.1163/157006810X512338.

¹³ E. Durkheim, 'Ritual, Magic, and the Sacred', in R.L. Grimes (ed.), *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), pp. 188-193.

¹⁴ Moore & Myerhoff, Introduction, p. 3

¹⁵ G. Moriconi, 'These books aren't made for reading: Creating identity with ready-made libraries', *Yapp* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 53-56. <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/30001>.

¹⁶ Moore & Myerhoff, *Secular Ritual*.

¹⁷ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 399. CULTURAL ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION* (2013), <http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_399_en.pdf> (6 January 2017).

¹⁸ Moore & Myerhoff, *Secular Ritual*.

¹⁹ Moriconi & Reyes, 'Thou Shalt Not Throw Me Away!'.

²⁰ In many US prisons books cannot be sent by individuals and must come from publishers or booksellers, while the books must be new. Some of these programmes have registered as organisations that can send books to prisoners.

²¹ B. Ruhland (volunteer at *Prisoners Literature Project*) in discussion with the author, February 2018.

²² M. Cook (volunteer at *Prison Book Program*) in discussion with the author, February 2018.

²³ Ruhland in discussion with the author.

²⁴ The quotes originate from discussions between volunteers at the charity and book donation programmes and the author. Some interviews are not mentioned in the footnote nor bibliography as the interviewees wished to remain anonymous.