

Eric Slauter  
H-190: An Environmental History of the Book  
3–8 August, 2025, Chicago, Illinois

1) *Were the pre-course reading assignments useful? Are there any readings that you would like to see added or removed in future years?*

1. Yes.
2. Yes, however, we didn't really talk through the texts. At times, I wish it was less reading with more purposeful discussion.
3. Yes, I found them helpful, though I do wish we had more time to speak about them more in-depth. They provided great scaffolding for approaching the themes of the week, so more engagement with the particular text would have been great.
4. Yes, they were. Reading enriched the experience, but I will say, it was helpful too, that so much of the reading was optional or according to your own interests. It helped me personalize the course to my own research needs and made it feel all the more worthwhile.
5. {no response}
6. The pre-course reading assignments were useful although I wish there was one which more explicitly interrogated the role of racism and globalization in the context of print and book history.
7. The pre-course reading assignments were very useful. It was apparent that the instructor took time and care in preparing the readings. Their importance and take aways were underscored in each lesson, even if we did not have time to discuss them concretely.
8. Yes, the two books that were recommended were great. I appreciate the not-overwhelming assignments.
9. The pre-course reading assignments were very useful. I was able to read both of the books, but was not able to get to any of the additional readings that appeared on the Canvas site. If those could have been mentioned in the pre-reading list earlier, that would have been helpful.
10. Pre-course reading was optional but useful for focusing discussions in class. Much of the reading material I will continue to consult. Other recommendations would be for students to check out online exhibition material from the Walters art museum: "if books could kill" and "paws in manuscripts"
11. {no response}
12. The pre-course reading assignments were very useful in introducing the topics that were discussed in the course. There are some materials that could be switched out over time — some that will be more relevant than others going forward — but I thought that the reading assignments were timely and excellent.
13. I enjoyed the pre-course readings but felt that there could be more. Being a nascent field this will no doubt change.
14. Both of our required readings were profoundly important in preparing me to alter the way that I think about the environmental implications and impacts of "books."

2) *What are your thoughts on the course workbook and/or other teaching materials distributed during class? Was the content appropriate and useful? Will it continue to be useful for you after the course?*

1. Really helpful.
2. Yes! and Yes!
3. I thought the material was appropriate and helpful. I would have wanted a singular place where information was aggregated, I did miss some things that were in email form.
4. The Canvas page for the course was a great resource, and I'm excited that the course, readings, PDFs, links, &c., all remain available to me as a student after the course.
5. The reading list will undoubtedly be useful for me in my own scholarship and teaching. I'm thrilled our course instructor took the time to prepare this list for us and while I wish I could've/would've read in tandem with taking the course, I'm glad to have the option to return to this material at a later date.
6. The content was useful and appropriate.
7. All of the course material was useful for the course and will remain useful after the course. I am sure the lessons I learned in the class will continue to live in my thoughts, work, and teaching for years to come.
8. N/A, though we did have a number of optional readings that I will retain for future use.
9. {no response}
10. Yes, the canvas site is useful and full of additional reading.
11. I think the materials used during class were useful and appropriate. Our area of study can be pretty broad, so it was helpful to look at different materials and how they might fit into the ideas that we are tossing around. Also, the materials we used before and during class being accessible (depending on the item) online after the course is very helpful. Sometimes I can forget the exact wording or concept that was discussed, especially once the course has ended, so I am excited to be able to refer back to the readings and PowerPoints that were discussed.
12. Since the topic of the course had to do with the environment and the book, we did not have a workbook or extra course materials. The demonstrations in the conservation lab were a highlight of the course — very useful— and I can see the demos and discussions being useful for me in the future.
13. Not very much was distributed. I doubt I will refer to it again. Several items were mentioned as being available through the course Canvas account, but these things are mostly for future reference as they were not required during the course.
14. Yes, the detailed syllabus was welcome and helpful.

3) *Which aspects of the course were most intriguing and relevant for you as an individual? Did you walk away with any new insights, ideas, or project plans?*

1. Hands on material handling.
2. Recreating iron gall ink, the practical knowledge from various practitioners.
3. The visits to the conservation lab were excellent and well timed with our discussions. Yes, I have many ideas bubbling up.

4. I found the visiting scholars to be especially helpful, and always interesting. From Dipesh Chakrabarty's talk on the great acceleration in the wake of climate history change to Joshua Calhoun's sharing pictures of book slices in petri dishes growing text-fed mold, each thinker helped me widen my understanding of what environmental book history could be.
5. The time we spent with guest scholars and the time we spent among ourselves describing our current research interests (especially — as we were able — describing our interest over examples from Chicago's special collections) were where I learned the most about how to ask unique questions about environmental book histories and expand my scope of interests.
6. The conservation lab visits were very generative and will be valuable for future work. The guest lecturers were similarly generative and provided valuable insights for projects.
7. The guest lectures and site visits. Ann and Melina in conservation were AMAZING! The hands-on activities were also very informative.
8. I appreciated being introduced to a holistic conception of the environmental history of the book. I am inspired to try new projects at my institution.
9. Absolutely came away with new insights — not only from the instructor and invited guest speakers, but also from my classmates. Hearing their insights on the final day of class was definitely a highlight of the week. It was really fascinating to hear how so many of my classmates were able to explore their own area of research using the materials at the library and how they made connections/associations that they will be able to take back to continue their research.
10. I liked how this course focused more on high level discussion instead of just object-based lectures. Looking at rare books is always enjoyable. But there is an attention span and absorption limit to just looking. Having a chance to have open discussion encouraged new ideas and a level of comradery and familiarity that was refreshing for an RBS course.
11. I really enjoyed our conversations with Michael Stamm, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Josh Calhoun. Their insights into the materiality of the book and media, as well as the environmental aspect especially in terms of climate change was really fascinating to me.
12. This class was exceptional in my opinion. I have a high interest in the topic and this was a crash course in the environment and the book. I had no expectations and was open to the experience and was able to identify an area of inquiry during our course time. I also feel fortunate to have had a good mix of classmates who really expanded my understanding of the subject. As an information professional, I don't usually have enough time to visit other surrounding institutions and sit with parts of their collection, so this was an overall great experience.
13. I was most intrigued by the topic of the course coming from an institution which is very much associated with environmentalism. I took away a good summary of changes in book production from the letterpress period.
14. The course was inspirational, really. RBS H-190 takes ideas (especially ideas about books and the environment) seriously, and everyone involved in the course (and no one more than the instructor, ES), facilitated and encouraged the free flow of ideas throughout the week.

4) *Did the instructors help you to acquire all the skills and information promised in the course description? Did you learn what you had hoped to learn?*

1. Yes.
2. Yes and Yes.
3. Yes, ES and Angela were so generous with their knowledge and intentional with the way they engaged everyone's questions and insights.
4. Yes, I think so. {private response}
5. ES was an excellent guide through this unwieldy field and I appreciate that rather than act as an expert, he fashioned the course precisely to demonstrate to us the profound endlessness and "edgelessness" (as he put it) of this growing field. That there is no single method or approach to environmental book history was one of the most important lessons of the week.
6. Yes. The inclusion of various guest lecturers was a necessary and useful addition to the course and helped fill in the gaps, allowing me to learn what I hoped to learn.
7. I learned what I hoped to learn and more. All students of the book should take this course. It puts the book as an object within a target constellation of environmental and planetary concerns, and also decenters humans as primary users and interlocutors of the book.
8. {private response}
9. Yes.
10. Yes.
11. Yes.
12. Yes, I learned more than what I had hoped.
13. I had really hoped to discuss more about the book in the digital age and environmental factors effecting born digital materials as well as the environmental impact of AI but these things were only briefly alluded to.
14. Yes, emphatically.

5) *How do you plan to use the skills and knowledge acquired during your time here?*

1. Yes.
2. I will apply the lessons to my writing.
3. I can see direct applications in my collection development and teaching.
4. I have the seeds of an essay, as well as new direction and discipline for my dissertation.
5. I hope to go back to the objects I regularly work with and ask some of the specific questions we asked of objects during the course this week. I'm sure these will lead my research in new directions.
6. I will incorporate these skills within both my education and my professional development, particularly my knowledge of material print culture and theory.
7. For current and future research projects, as well as in undergraduate and graduate teaching.
8. I will use them in introducing students in a variety of disciplines to special collections, and in making connections with faculty who may not have previously considered our collections as a rich educational opportunity for students in their subject area. Also excited to apply things learned from the conservation team in

hands on experiences for students and in casting a closer eye on our collections for potentially harmful materials and potentially unique and exciting ones!

9. I am going to put the insights gained from this course toward my collection development plan. It has made me think very differently about all the questions around collecting books: the how, the why, and most importantly, for what purpose?
10. I plan to use our discussions and the methodology /perspective of environmental book history directly in my thesis writing. I gained useful direct citations and reasons from this course that will inform my own work.
11. I am excited to apply this knowledge into my work to further my education.
12. I would like to further think about and plan how I would use some of this knowledge in my current environment, and how I can use some of the ideas in my archival instruction.
13. Having prepared vellum for writing was an exercise that I plan to describe in more detail during my classes and tour displays. I will be giving a presentation to staff in my institution about what I learned during this course.
14. Research for a book project, as well as the development of undergraduate and graduate courses.

6) *Who might benefit the most from taking this RBS course?*

1. Book people but also curators and artists working with artists' books.
2. Students and those actively interested in making substantive ecological changes to their collection / conservation practices.
3. Everyone!
4. I think all types, but it would seem to especially favor those interested in the physical or material work of preserving books — so curators, conservationists, librarians, &c.
5. {no response}
6. Students within graduate programs and those within LIS fields. Although booksellers and designers would also likely benefit.
7. Anyone interested in the book, the environment, or just learning good history.
8. {no response}
9. This class definitely skewed more academic but in getting to know my classmates, it has been a fascinating range of professions and disciplines.
10. Conservators, academics, and stakeholders in constructing special collections spaces.
11. It's such a broad course that intersects lots of disciplines that I feel like I shouldn't narrow it down. I think anyone who works with books or has an interest in them can learn from looking at their environmental histories.
12. Anyone who is doing research in the (social) sciences/humanities or working in the cultural heritage sector in any way might benefit from taking an RBS course.
13. There were a large number of PhD candidates in this class who were examining the subject in terms of their own research interests. I do not think that curators and book dealers would find this course content useful as they will know much of it already.
14. Book historians of all stripes.

7) *If applicable, what were the most original, powerful, or otherwise noteworthy educational moments in the course? Were there any "aha!" moments you'd like to share?*

1. {no response}
2. The use of conservation to answer questions was really amazing.
3. The Walden intro really helped set the tone.
4. The original, powerful, and noteworthy presenters! It was a privilege to get to ask these scholars questions, and to be in conversation with living and vital expertise. I am struck, overall, by the creativity fostered by the types of questions bibliophiles ask to write an environmental history of the book.
5. We loosely talked about what a "field guide" to an environmental history of the book might contain, but I feel like I walked away with my own set of keywords that will continue to guide my thinking in this field: cost, resource nationalism, inherent vice, preserving cultures, perishable cultures are just some of the terms I'm now thinking with and through in relation to my scholarship.
6. {no response}
7. {no response}
8. The time spent in the conservation lab was my favorite. I was thrilled to learn more about how they assess and treat books, and the tools they use to learn more about objects. Although I am not a conservator, I left with ideas for looking at books in my collection in new ways.
9. Visiting the underground cold storage facility in the Manseuto Library was revelatory. Really every aspect of it led to new questions — including how the books are stored by size, how the robotic cranes retrieve the books. I also enjoyed the discussion that considered WHY we are storing the books that we do and the energy required to store books — not to mention how much longer (given climate change) we will be able or will even want to do so.
10. {no response}
11. {no response}
12. I really loved the notion of decentering the human, in terms of biodiversity, when we think about rare book history.
13. Dipesh Chakrabarty gave a nice lecture with insights into the broader applications of environmentalism in human terms but he was a bit difficult to hear and understand at times.
14. The frequent introduction of archival materials into the classroom, especially early on in the week, proved stimulating.

8) *Are there any other ways in which the course could have been improved?*

1. {no response}
2. I think we largely assumed there was one way to think about the environment or nature during the course, and I'd like to see more of an investment in black/feminist/indigenous perspectives of "doing" environmental book history (this might require inviting less book historians, and more "ecocritical" scholars). The time at the Newberry could have been more fruitful.
3. {no response}
4. I really liked it, and aside from what I put in brackets above, nothing.

5. I was extremely thankful for the 3 “exploration sessions” built into the course and I think we could have even benefitted from one more (in place of a more standard field trip or guest talk—for instance, the tour of Mansueto Library was absolutely terrific and really contributed to our overall class discussions, but I think in future could have been shortened to 45 minutes or less. Similarly, I found the more targeted sessions with the conservators on ink making and “agents of destruction” to be more stimulating than the more general opening session with them. Shortening these might put back other time in the schedule to spend with books and talking amongst one another.)
6. More intentional attention could have been given to the role of colonization and race within environmental histories of the book.
7. More attention to breaks/session time limits.
8. {private response}
9. {no response}
10. {no response}
11. I would've liked to learn more about ink used in making books, as well as the physical side effects that books and bookmaking have on humans. I think having Ian Dooley talk to the class about ink next semester would be fascinating. It was amazing to hear their research and expertise on the topic, and it offered more of an insight than other discussions on ink.
12. I struggled not having access to water when I needed it, and standing for long periods of time was tough, but generally the course was really good.
13. {private response}
14. None, truly.

9) *Do you feel that you got your money's worth? How likely are you to recommend this course to others? On a 1-10 scale, 1 would indicate that you disagree that you got your money's worth, 5 would indicate a neutral response, and 10 would indicate that you agree that you got your money's worth.*

1. 10
2. 10
3. 10
4. 9
5. 10
6. 8
7. 10
8. 9
9. 10
10. 10
11. 10
12. 10
13. 4
14. 10. This is by far the best “course” that I have attended. I feel as though I have attended three supremely engaging and exciting academic conferences within the space of a single week. {private response}

10) *If your course made any (virtual) field trips outside of the classroom or had guest speakers, do you feel that they enhanced the course experience?*

1. Yes.
2. {no response}
3. Yes, I think the visit's were great accompaniment's to the course.
4. Yes, yes! Not even virtual — the trips to the Newberry Library, the conversation lab at Mansueto Library, going to the Smart Museum's photography lab, and more. These were fantastic experiences that enriched my sense, too, of the Chicago area's place in book history.
5. Yes! And I love the idea that the course attracts different guests each time it's taught.
6. Field trips and guest speakers deeply enhanced the course experience.
7. Very much so. Please continue this practice.
8. Yes! My favorites were those who it felt had prepared to speak to our class specifically, e.g. Michael Stamm, Kelly Wisecup, the conservation team, and the Newberry exhibit staff. {private response}
9. Very much so. It was wonderful to take advantage of the many different collections and museums affiliated with the Chicago campus.
10. Absolutely! It was so helpful to have the opportunity to leave the classroom and engage material/experts outside of library and think with material that was more broad than just books. Visiting speakers were very informative and interesting experts who were lively additions to our thinking and discussions
11. Yes! Every guest speaker had a different point of view and/or approached the topic differently. It was interesting to see the different angles one could take and how to intertwine them into a cohesive lens for me to do my own research.
12. The field trips were many, but I am glad that we were able to squeeze them in (though some days it felt like too much). The guest speakers were relevant and spoke to the topic of the course — they were an additional highlight of the course.
13. The field trips did enhance the course, however preparations for the offsite Newberry Library lecture and tour could have been better coordinated with transport. I was not to thrilled to visit the Mansueto book stacks and the Egyptian papyrus curator really did not discuss much about papyrus trade, origins,,environmentalism or non-religious texts. While it was interesting to see many cuneiform tablets, we did not examine the museum displays which were far more interesting in covering the same topics.
14. Yes, wonderfully so.

11) *Do you have any additional thoughts or advice for anyone considering taking this course in a future year?*

1. {no response}
2. {no response}
3. {no response}
4. I would advise picking a course in something that you are interested, but not expert, in — it's a delight! And I suppose my core advice would simply be to do it. I found it really intellectually restorative to be with the book object again, in the archive, and in the pages of a text.

5. {no response}
6. {no response}
7. Take it!
8. {no response}
9. {no response}
10. Take advantage of research room time!
11. 1) You should do the readings. 2) If you exit the course feeling like there is no way you could learn all about this topic, then you definitely did learn something. If you know what you don't know, then you've gained some knowledge.
12. Be mindful that this course takes place in the reading room, so you should bring a water bottle and store it to have access to water. Also, there is standing for long periods of time.
13. Think about what you would like to get out of this course and push strongly for discussing it. Do not assume your topics will be covered in any great depth.
14. Expect much, and expect to have your expectations met.

*12) If you had to sum up your RBS experience with a single sentence, phrase, or haiku, what would you say?*

1. Illuminating. Provocative. Forward-thinking.
2. Everything has tradeoffs.
3. Just wonderful!
4. An environmental history of the book has no edges, and is the world on a (binding, bound, flax-printed) thread.
5. My microbiome is happy.
6. What's a mob to a king? What's a king to a god? What's a god to a man? What's a god to a microbe?
7. {no response}
8. A rhizomatic system of ideas, concepts, and values compromise the environmental history of books — vast, interconnected, organic, and kind of overwhelming in scale!
9. 10 out of 10 — would recommend to a friend!
10. What does it mean to think about books from an ecological point of view?
11. My brain is numb with knowledge, and my body is numb with experience.
12. RBS provides an exceptional learning, training, and professional development experience for researchers and cultural heritage professionals.
13. Buyer beware.
14. Books matter, as much or more as ever before.