

Q&A with Victor Betts: Rare Book School edition



Victor Betts is a 2015-2016 Scholar in his final year of the MLIS program at San Jose State University. He holds an MA in Education from California State University, San Bernardino and completed his undergraduate studies in Asian Literature and Language and Sociology at the University of California, Riverside. While completing his MLIS program, Victor currently works as a library specialist at the African American Research Library & Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale, FL. Along with fellow Scholars Marisa Mé (<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%C3%A9ndez-Brady>) and Hoan-Vu Do, Victor was the recipient of a 2017 NEH-GBHI Scholarship (<https://rarebookschool.org/admissions-awards/scholarships/neh-gbhi/>) from the Rare Book School (<https://rarebookschool.org/>) and enrolled in a course there this past summer. Here, he shares his experiences being on-site in Charlottesville, VA and learning more about the rare book world.

What is your current job and how did you become interested in the rare book world?

I just recently became a Library Specialist at the African American Research Library & Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale, FL, but I'm also in my last year of the MLIS program at San Jose State! Archival studies and management was an area I was drawn to when I decided to pursue my MLIS. My background is in academic affairs and student affairs at public universities, so archival research was something I was exposed to working with faculty and graduate students. I find research in general exciting, so I'm open to various library settings, but I quickly realized that cultural records and materials from communities of color and other marginalized populations are lacking. Before RBS, I didn't have a whole lot of exposure to rare books, so I wanted to take this opportunity to gain a better understanding of the history of bookbinding in the West, along with principal techniques and materials.

How did you learn about the Rare Book School and its NEH-GBHI Scholarships?

Funny story. A friend of mine, who is a faculty researcher, e-mailed me about this scholarship when she stumbled upon it while looking to researcher scholarships at RBS. She knew about my background in diversity and inclusion work and that I was a LIS student, so she thought I would be a great candidate. The following day I received an email from the Spectrum list-serve about the same exact scholarship! The universe was telling me to get on it!

Could you tell us about the course you took this summer at the Rare Book School, and what it was like?

I took Introduction to the History of Bookbinding with Karen Limper-Herz who is the Lead Curator for Incunabula and Sixteenth Century Printed Books at the British Library. The course was amazing and I learned a lot from both the instructor and my fellow classmates. The set-up for the course was your traditional slideshow lecture with lots of physical materials and demonstrations. The topic matter was so

intriguing; the class went by so fast! The classes start early in the morning and go all the way to 5pm with two small breaks and lunch. Depending on what courses you enroll in, you may go on a field trip to DC to a national museum or the Library of Congress.

Was there anything that surprised you about the course you took, or your experience overall?

I was nervous about attending RBS in Charlottesville, VA for several reasons. The University of Virginia was the very site of the white nationalist rally that occurred a year prior and it was the university built by Thomas Jefferson where remnants of plantation life are very much part of the current campus culture. Also, I had no prior knowledge or actual experience working with rare books and was the only graduate student in the course. It was intimidating at first because my classmates were experienced archivists, conservators, librarians, curators, or booksellers. Once the course got started, I realized I was grasping the information and content pretty well by pulling from my prior knowledge of art history and my coursework on archives and preservation. I also explored the campus and its history outside of class and intentionally sought out information about slave narratives and their experiences. My classmates were also great people once we got work with one another and each class bonds together since you go through this experience as a group.

What advice would you give to Spectrum Scholars looking to apply for this opportunity?

Sincerely think about what you want to get out of this course and convey that in your application. Don't be nervous or worried if you don't have prior knowledge or experience in a particular course because everyone's there to learn new things. There are introductory and advanced courses, so be sure to read course descriptions and any prerequisites. You'll need letters of recommendation, so give your letter writers ample notice. When you get there, go with the flow and enjoy the experience. The amazing staff work really hard to make things flow seamlessly for the students and faculty.

How has your experience as a Spectrum Scholar influenced your life thus far (personally, professionally, etc.)?

Being a Spectrum Scholar provides a sense of support and community in a field that was not designed by people who looked like me or may not always value diverse perspectives or the inclusion of marginalized histories and cultures. As someone who is making a career transition, I often experience "imposter syndrome" around other LIS professionals, so belonging to a community like Spectrum gives me a sense of hope and encouragement that I can do this. I still have lots to learn and I sometimes don't know how to contribute in big, splashy ways, but I try to make sure to make meaningful connections with other folks of color or any other marginalized groups in the LIS field when I meet them in person. I also just enjoy working with historically underrepresented communities through the work at my library and am eager to see what new adventures await as a newly minted MLIS professional.

Applications are being accepted through November 1, 2018 for the 2018 round of RBS Scholarships. Apply here (<https://rarebookschool.org/admissions-awards/scholarships/>).

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