Michelle Light has been appointed as the new Associate University Librarian for Special Collections and Director of the Beinecke Library, effective October 1, 2021. The appointment was announced today by Barbara Rockenbach, Stephen F. Gates ’68 University Librarian.

Light comes to Yale University Library from current service as the director of special collections at the Library of Congress. “Michelle brings great experience to build a more unified vision for Yale Library special collections and the Beinecke Library and to sustain and strengthen collections, access, user experience, and a work environment that attracts and retains the best staff,” Rockenbach said.

Yale University Library has built special collections over the centuries that represent an extraordinary range of human experience and knowledge. In the past 60 years, with the generous support of the Beinecke family and others, the library has developed its special collections both in areas of historical strength and in representations of communities and perspectives previously overlooked or excluded. Light will accelerate efforts to make the collections more accessible and more inclusive.

Yale Library currently has seven special collections units. Beinecke Library, Lewis Walpole Library, and Manuscripts and Archives are multi-disciplinary with a broad range of collecting areas, while the others—Arts, Divinity, Medical Historical, and Music—support specific disciplines. As associate university librarian for special collections, Light will develop and implement an administrative reorganization of special collections staff and structures, including an initial focus on integrating Beinecke and Manuscripts and Archives collections and operations, as well as strengthening the connections across all Yale Library special collections and deepening collaboration with the other cultural heritage institutions at Yale.
Light is a skilled and compassionate leader, Rockenbach said, with a devotion to core values of openness and accessibility and a dedication to library staff and their professional development. Light has tremendous enthusiasm for both academic and public engagement and deep expertise working with both physical materials and in the digital arena. She and her senior leadership team will lead staff in six areas of strategic focus: access services, operations and university archives; collections, research and education; community engagement; infrastructure and technology; preservation and conservation services; and technical services.

“I am excited by this unparalleled opportunity to reimagine Yale Library’s special collections, where staff collaborate to connect students, faculty, and the public with Yale’s rare and unique holdings,” Light said. “I am committed to enhancing discovery and access to the library’s special collections, stewarding its holdings wisely, sparking innovation to support teaching and research, increasing community outreach and engagement, and supporting Yale’s commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion. “

Light’s enthusiasm for both academic and public engagement, and her deep experience working with both physical and digital collections, make her the right leader for the library’s work in special collections, Rockenbach said. Light holds a B.A. in history from the University of Oregon, an M.S. in information (archives and records management) from the University of Michigan, and an M.A. in history (late Roman and medieval European) from the University of Michigan. Prior to the Library of Congress, she served as director of special collections at the libraries of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the University of California, Irvine, and head of special collections technical services at the University of Washington. Her appointment marks a return to Yale, where she began her professional career as a project archivist with the Archives 300 project at the University’s tercentennial.

“Yale’s special collections are a vast resource for research and teaching, for creating and sharing knowledge to share with the community and the world,” David W. Blight, Sterling Professor of History and of African American Studies, and a member of the search committee. “The work, now underway, of the Yale and Slavery Working Group, reminds me of how particularly powerful it is to work across the various collections – Beinecke, Manuscripts and Archives, medicine, and others – so I am delighted to know Michelle Light seeks to foster even more collaboration across the collections and more partnerships with the New Haven community. Yale’s library holdings will shine more brightly and be used as one coordinated treasure house of limitless knowledge.”

The search committee, chaired by Rockenbach, included, in addition to Blight: Mary Caldera, Crystal Feimster, Susan Gibbons, Marty Kurth, and David Skelly.

"Growing the collaboration among Yale’s libraries, museums, galleries, and other collection holdings is a priority," Gibbons, the vice provost for collections and scholarly connections and chief of staff to the president, said "so that we can better connect the collections with our mission of education and research. I was impressed by Michelle's ability to bring units together at the Library of Congress and look forward to her work as a key partner with other cultural heritage institutions on campus."

At the Library of Congress, the world’s largest library, Light’s work entailed leading a new directorate that brings together six organizational units with 260 staff members: Geography & Map Division; Manuscript Division; Music Division; Prints & Photographs Division; Rare Book & Special Collections Division; and the American Folklife Center, including the Veterans History Project.

Light’s term at Yale will follow on the work of Edwin C. (E. C.) Schroeder, who is retiring at the end of August 2021, after 10 years as director of the Beinecke Library, capstone to three decades of dedicated service to the University and Yale Library. “I am so grateful to E. C. Schroeder for all he has done to grow and sustain the Beinecke Library, to make it a more vibrant center for campus and a more vital resource for the public,” Rockenbach said.

“Yale Library has nearly unmatched special collections that we will continue to build and make broadly accessible long into the future,” Rockenbach said. "We have set high aspirations and Michelle has exactly the right combination of skills, background, and temperament to help us achieve these aspirations."

Looking ahead to October 1 and beyond, Light noted: “It is a tremendous honor to step into this role. I am thrilled to be returning to Yale, where my career began, and to New Haven. I am looking forward to begin working with my new colleagues.”

—by Mike Morand
Michelle Light appointed Assoc. University Librarian for Special Collections and Beinecke Library Director

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