

Editors' Note

Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene: An Introduction

Eira Tansey and Robert D. Montoya

If the Anthropocene can loosely be defined as an epochal age in which humans have made lasting marks in the geological record, stratigraphy, and other earth systems, then we might consider that the very growth of libraries and archives is a phenomenon of the Anthropocene. The mass transformation of material substances has enabled the recording and sharing of knowledge—from plants and animal skins for early forms of writing, to rare earth minerals and fossil fuels that enabled computerization of knowledge. Additionally, if we are to recognize Ulrich Beck's notion that the "second modernity" is a harbinger of a new social order and a redefined society—a temporal moment when processes such as "globalization, individuation, gender revolution, underemployment and global risks" are beginning to undermine the modern notions of "progress and accountability...and [the] exploitation of nature"—libraries and archives will be an essential element in our collective process of collecting, interpreting, and redefining our current cultural moment.¹

Considerable debate currently exists in various disciplines, and especially within geology (the traditional keepers of the longest spans of chronological periodization) of when to date the beginning of the Anthropocene. Does it date to the advent of global colonialism and exploration? Does it date to the advent of the steam engine? Does it date to July 16, 1945, when the first nuclear bomb was detonated over New Mexico as the Trinity Test?

¹ Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 2.

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There is an emerging and persuasive argument that amid the various proposals for the Anthropocene's earliest boundary, the mid-point of the 20th century kicked off "the Great Acceleration," a period of unprecedented technological and societal growth. 75% of all historic anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions have taken place in just three generations.² And even this growth has not been evenly distributed across generations. According to McNeill and Engelke, "[Between] 1995-2015, the total tonnage of global carbon emissions from the energy sector nearly equaled that of all human history prior to 1995."³

The contradictions of this time period are prevalent: humans live longer while plants and animals face greater extinction levels. Technology has made it easier to obliterate the Earth than to preserve it. Knowledge is easier to attain than ever before, but it faces marginalization and irrelevance in a world organized for profit.

The contradictions of the Anthropocene (and sped up by the Great Acceleration) have given rise to critiques of the very idea of the Anthropocene (the Capitalocene)⁴ and its erasure of indigenous knowledge and experiences.⁵ Some are calling for an altogether new conception of humans' relationship with the earth and nonhuman systems around us (the Chthulucene).⁶ Whatever your "-cene," Ellis points out that the common thread through many of these is the idea of our time as a crisis and turning point.⁷

The contributions to this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* explore the theory and practice of librarians and archivists within this context. The major themes that emerged from the pieces in this issue concern materiality, the anxiety and grief of the future, and the role of local communities. Unsurprisingly, these are the same themes that come up in larger political and cultural discussions around responding to the environmental transformations around us: how have material resources shaped our world and the objects we use? Does our future consist of climate chaos, or will it be the fulcrum on which humans reintegrate into a healthier relationship with our non-human kin? And how do local communities provide a foundation on which to weather a global problem?

² John Robert McNeill and Peter Engelke. *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

³ McNeill and Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*, 78.

⁴ Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 594–630.

⁵ Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2017): 761–780, <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1539>.

⁶ Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159–165.

⁷ Erle C. Ellis, *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 143.

THE MATERIALITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE OF LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

Identifying one of the major gaps in archives scholarship, Dani Stuchel's "Material Provocations in the Archives" opens by reminding us that the field has focused so much on records as evidence of human activity that it has neglected to consider the material base of records themselves. By considering the presence of vegetal and other nonhuman agents in archives (e.g., mold, dust, etc.), we can appreciate how these non-anthropocentric actors shape the archival record as much as humans do. The maintenance of archival records as pristine objects is often at odds with the natural process of decay that would otherwise consume archival objects. The actions of nonhuman agents (e.g., mold outbreaks, cellulose breakdown) that frequently result in decay are problematized as enemies of archival principles of preservation, raising important questions of how archival theory and practice may reinforce the dialectic between people and nature. Further, these archival activities push against and force us to redefine essential human categories in practice, in much the same way our global environment is forcing us to reevaluate our fundamental understanding of the traditional bifurcation between the human and the natural world. Stuchel concludes, "Material decay is a bodily change in an archives which triggers a loss of memory and identity for humans. Archival things are the transitional or memorial objects through which we mediate our grief about and connection to the past, but they are also entities of a certain kind, dying a certain kind of death within our perceptions."⁸ In Stuchel's work we get a sense that solace, if not a solution for the degradation and decay around us, can be found within the entropic space of curatorial order—mourning loss, but simultaneously looking forward toward new ontological imaginings.

Librarians and archivists have long had historically complicated relationships with technology. Too often our fields are prone to tech utopianism without a comprehensive analysis of the physical costs of technology. In their syllabus "Troubled Worlds: A Course Syllabus about Information Work and the Anthropocene," Suzanne Black, Nathan Cunningham, Kristin N. Dew, Megan Finn, Josephine Hoy, Kevin McCraney, Colin Morgan, and Daniela K. Rosner have created a speculative pedagogical framework for educating information workers about the "environmental dimensions of information technology, where the murky ethical waters of sourcing, circulation, maintenance, consumerism, and disposal bump up against experiments in community accountability, collective inquiry, and speculation."⁹ Each module contains a short meditation on a particular topic (e.g.,

⁸ Dani Stuchel, "Material Provocations in the Archives," in "Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene," eds. Eira Tansey and Rob Montoya. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 20.

⁹ Megan Finn, Daniela K. Rosner, Suzanne Black, Nathan Cunningham, Kristin N. Dew, Josephine Hoy, Kevin McCraney, and Colin Morgan, "Troubled Worlds: A Course Syllabus about Information Work and the Anthropocene," in "Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene,"

“Materializing Internet Energy Consumption”) with suggested readings and discussion prompts. The inclusion of a pedagogical tool into this issue emphasizes the extent to which praxis, engagement, and intervention is part-and-parcel of anthropocentric thinking-as-action. Pulling from multiple disciplines, theories, and methodological dispositions, we get a firm sense that anthropocentric pedagogy, like any suite of solutions for global catastrophe, must necessarily involve multiple voices and diverse engagements.

THE LOCAL IN LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

Diving right into the varied definitions of the Anthropocene, Nora Almeida and Jen Hoyer’s “The Living Archive in the Anthropocene” examine the assumptions of Anthropocene theorizing, asking, “What does it mean if Anthropocene narratives are largely inaccessible to people who are most likely to be affected by, displaced by, erased by climate change?”¹⁰ They go on to explore how archives, and particularly community archives, can exist as living archives: “responsive, collaborative, and generative community space[s] that counters existing systems of power and oppression, including the power encoded in professionalism.”¹¹ Importantly, this article serves as a reminder of the political, economic, and cultural roots of, not only archives, but also the entangled arrangements of risk that we mediate as part of existing in the Anthropocene. The remainder of the essay explores the work of the Interference Archive in New York, a radically non-hierarchical volunteer-run open stacks archive, and the embodiment of a living archive manifesto. The Interference Archive and its surrounding practices can be seen as a metaphor for humanity’s current and inevitable displacements of the most vulnerable in our society due to changing climates, and advocates for and embraces, radical interventions to ameliorate these processes.

Continuing the theme of local communities, Amy Brunvand’s “Re-Localizing the Library: Considerations for the Anthropocene” critiques the tendency of libraries to collect homogenous materials and to use outsourced services, which marginalize local collections and place-based knowledge that is essential to library service. Brunvand explores the economic and cultural forces that have pushed libraries to an “information monoculture.” There are differences between public libraries and academic libraries on this issue: public libraries are already more likely to hold local collections and have local services because of their constituencies, whereas “higher education is built around a

eds. Eira Tansey and Rob Montoya, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 1.

¹⁰ Nora Almeida and Jen Hoyer, “The Living Archive in the Anthropocene,” in “Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene,” eds. Eira Tansey and Rob Montoya, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 10.

¹¹ Almeida and Hoyer, “The Living Archive in the Anthropocene,” 18.

globalized knowledge system with faculty hired from a diaspora of academics who seldom live or teach in the same places where they grew up” and “where students are taught to scorn the actual places in which they live and the people they live among in favor of joining a ‘global community.’”¹² There is a sense that the solutions for the global can be found in the local, and that embracing this philosophy institutionally across library environments will upend and push against the grain of multiple systemic failures. Brunvand’s narrative echoes and celebrates the numerous greening and environmental initiatives we see cropping up across the country in public library spaces and sees these activities as a core part of a broader solution and approach to Anthropocene concerns. Brunvand concludes that re-localizing library collections and services by emphasizing place attachment is critical to both maintaining the relevance of libraries and strengthening community resilience.

THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

Erik Radio’s “Documents for the Nonhuman” explores the anthropocentric assumptions of documents and information systems themselves, and what documentation for a nonhuman future might entail. He pushes our ontological expectations and posits the nonhuman as a way to reimagine our relationship to the traditional philosophical bifurcation between human and natural objects indicative of Western thought. Radio invokes a broad array of theoretical foundations including Alfred Whitehead’s process-related thinking, Walter D. Mignolo’s postcolonial approaches, and Arturo Escobar’s emphasis on relational and pluriversal ontologies, among others, to support this reorientation. The essay situates the document as a “materially inscriptive event” that centers anthropocentric (human) concerns.¹³ The Anthropocene represents an “annihilative event,” suggesting that documents of today may not retain their meaning, or ability to be interpreted in the future, particularly by nonhuman entities. Radio concludes that “to prepare documents for the post-Anthropocene requires humans to consider themselves as part of the nonhuman network in which they are already enmeshed.”¹⁴ Radio’s call for how this is to be accomplished is to abandon the dominant library and archive models of classifying information, and to recognize the importance and function of informational absence.

¹² Amy Brunvand, “Re-Localizing the Library: Considerations for the Anthropocene,” in “Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene,” eds. Eira Tansey and Rob Montoya, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 12.

¹³ Erik Radio, “Documents for the Nonhuman,” in “Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene,” eds. Eira Tansey and Rob Montoya, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 4.

¹⁴ Radio, “Documents for the Nonhuman,” 13.

The profound uncertainty of the Anthropocene has given way to a significant affective turn concerning the future. Samantha Winn's "Dying Well in the Anthropocene: On the End of Archivists" considers the meaning of archival work in a time of mass extinction and anticipatory grief. Archivists should incorporate a palliative outlook in order to responsibly usher in a new posture to the work of archives, which is structured upon assumptions of implicit societal stability that are quickly eroding. Winn ties this call to both ethical and practical needs: "The Anthropocene represents a progressive and possibly terminal illness for the contemporary discipline of archives. Archival workers have both an ethical imperative and a functional exigency to develop practices which do not require infinite exploitable resources."¹⁵

The Anthropocene has invited many new scholars and intellectuals into its universe, but it has also folded in other long-established voices. One of those voices is philosopher Bruno Latour, who forged his early work studying how scientists conduct their work. Sean Leahy reviews Latour's book *Facing Gaia*, which is a compilation of a series of lectures that Latour delivered in 2013 on the role of Gaia in Anthropocene thinking. Latour's influence is felt even among the essays in this issue, as Almeida and Hoyer, and Radio's contributions cite his work, especially insofar as we see the intersections of multiple disciplines, approaches, and foundations for how we think about the problematics of the Anthropocene, as well as potential imaginative solutions to find our way out of its embeddedness in current modes of political, cultural, and economic order. Leahy notes the extent to which Latour's notion of Gaia—processual, distributed, and ever-performative—can change the way we see library practices potentially intervening or reframing issues surrounding the Anthropocene and climate change.

Wendy Highby, Katherine Shull, and Emory Jay Trask explore the work of science fiction author Connie Willis in a review of her recent story, "I Met a Traveler in an Antique Land," and a subsequent interview with Willis about the writing of this story. The story explores the transformation of a tech blogger by the existence of a last refuge (Ozymandias Books) for endangered books in a weather-ravaged New York City. In the interview, Willis expresses her concern about the material fragility of the research and writing process, and the symbolic importance of storytelling and books, especially in light of the broken promises of tech utopianism.

¹⁵ Samantha R. Winn, "Dying Well in the Anthropocene: On the End of Archivists," in "Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene," eds. Eira Tansey and Rob Montoya, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 12.

CONCLUSION

The seed of this issue began at the Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene colloquium at New York University, held in May 2017.¹⁶ Over two days, librarians, archivists, historians, and memory and information workers of all kinds gathered to share papers, discuss ideas, and consider our responsibilities and responses to the Anthropocene. For those of us working in major institutions, a common feeling was a sense of relief of finally finding a group of people for whom this topic was also all-consuming, as many of us have tremendous difficulties mainstreaming these conversations at our home institutions. The conversation was profoundly enriched by participants doing memory and information work outside of the strictures of mainstream institutions, who showed us ways of radically rethinking praxis and relationships that challenge traditional norms of library and archives hierarchy and knowledge organization. In the years since the colloquium, conversations about the role of libraries and archives in climate change, natural disasters, and ecosystem diversity have grown, but it is clear that there is still significant work to go in translating those conversations to a more well-developed body of theory and practice. The publication of this journal issue is an effort to contribute to that transition.

Our hope is that this special issue provides some pathways and argumentative mechanisms that can help drive discourse surrounding libraries, archives, and the Anthropocene forward. If anything, the May 2017 colloquium and the articles included here, convey a sense that this dialogue must be interdisciplinary, interprofessional, and engage with multiple modes of analysis and deconstruction. It is clear that libraries and archives have an epistemic role to play in better understanding the effects of the Anthropocene. On the one hand, we have to reevaluate and resituate our professional practices to attend to the pressing demands of a new social and environmental order. This much is true: we should and must act to preserve and sustain the cultural heritage that is so valuable to future-humanity's understanding of itself, just as we always have, but we must do so with a new sense of haste and immediacy. On the other, our role is also to situate Anthropocene concerns to and for the individuals, communities, and societies that must equally grasp the material and intellectual impacts of global risk and change. Our role as memory institutions has always been performative, affective, and hermeneutic, and acknowledging the gravity of this position is essential to the sustainability of our profession going forward. It should also be a source of great empowerment tempered by a strong sense of responsibility to the underrepresented, vulnerable, and those most affected by global social forces. This is, indeed, a tall order, but one that libraries and archives have always been situated to confront. We stand in

¹⁶ See: Litwin Books, "Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene: A Colloquium," (New York University, May 13–14, 2017): <https://litwinbooks.com/laac2017colloq.php>, and University of Massachusetts Amherst Special Collections and University Archives, *Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene Collection, May 13–14, 2017*: <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/collection/mums1010>.

solidarity with the work being done in all corners of the globe, by everyone, to redistribute the influence of humanity in productive and constructive ways.

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