Dying Well in the Anthropocene: On the End of Archivists

Samantha R. Winn

ABSTRACT

Humanities scholars argue that the Anthropocene forces humanity to confront its death as a species. For memory workers, the specter of biological annihilation is accompanied by a more immediate existential crisis: if there will be no one to remember what was, then what will have been the purpose of memory work? This essay reviews emerging literature on archivy’s affective and structural adaptations to climate change alongside speculative futures of memory work in climate fiction. The article argues for Anthropocene archivists to adopt a palliative practice based on transdisciplinary principles of radical care, intentional degrowth, anticipatory grief, and maintenance theory.
INTRODUCTION

“The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead. The sooner we confront this problem, and the sooner we realize there’s nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the hard work of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality.”

The Anthropocene represents a geological epoch in which humanity observably alters Earth’s ecological systems and geological strata on a global scale, with unintended consequences for the biodiversity and longevity of its various inhabitants. While the term was first proposed in 2000 by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer to describe environmental phenomena, many disciplines beyond the physical sciences have pursued a critical interpretation of the Anthropocene and its potential consequences. Memory scholars have adopted the Anthropocene as a lens through which to examine the future of memory, culture, and narrative expression. This analysis coincides with emerging archival literature on affect and archives, as well as explorations of the evolving archival profession. Drawing upon the critical work of memory studies, archival scholars should similarly theorize the affective, epistemological, and practical significance of the Anthropocene upon memory work and memory workers.

6 To anticipate the theoretical and affective consequences of the Anthropocene upon archives, archivists can look to Cold War discussions in the humanities, such as Jacques Derrida,
Western archivy operates from implicit and explicit assumptions of futurity, which become precarious in light of the temporal and scalar distortions which scholars of memory studies have theorized as a critical existential challenge of the Anthropocene. The Society of American Archivist’s (SAA) Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology predicates a record’s worth on its potential for future use. SAA’s Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics reiterates that “archivists thus preserve materials for the benefit of the future more than for the concerns of the past.” Similarly, the Association of Canadian Archivist’s (ACA) Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct identifies no higher goal than to “[make] records available and [protect] them for future use.” The interests of future users shape core practices of appraisal, preservation, description, and access.

However, increasingly dire models of climate risk undermine any casual assurance of posterity and stasis. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 2009 article, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” represents a significant text for the study of memory in the Anthropocene. Chakrabarty argues that the Anthropocene threatens our assumptions of


“a certain continuity of human experiences,” forcing individuals to contend with the threat of global disaster and mortality. For memory workers, the existential uncertainties of the Anthropocene should prompt a crisis of purpose: if there will be no one to remember what was, what will have been the purpose of memory work? What purpose can archives possibly serve under the threat of species annihilation? What will archival obliteration mean for the caretakers of archives?

REFLECTIONS ON THE WORK OF ANTICIPATORY MOURNING

Memory scholars have identified such questions, which position grief in the “future perfect tense,” as a method of anticipatory mourning. Citing the work of literature and trauma scholar Paul Saint-Amour, Bond, De Bruyn, and Rapson understand this affective process as a fundamental element of the Anthropocene experience, theorizing that “the fear of civilisational collapse forces us to analyse anxious anticipations of future annihilation as well as memories of past and ongoing calamities.” The practice of anticipatory bereavement is also a core function of end-of-life care, which seeks not only to prepare a patient to face death, but to relieve her suffering and sustain her dignity to create the best possible living conditions in the time that remains.


Scranton proposes that humanity must “learn how to die not as individuals, but as a civilization.” Similarly, I argue that archivy is entering its own transitional age, in which archive workers must contend with the ideological, systemic, and material consequences of climate change on archives and the archival profession. This essay will employ Scranton’s provocation as a critical lens through which to imagine the future of the profession and discipline of archives.

Archivists may understand the Anthropocene as a progressive condition which will unavoidably and irreversibly change archival work. By intentionally contemplating the “death” of archives as we know them, we create opportunities to evaluate the present dysfunction(s) of institutional archives, develop adaptation strategies to mediate the more immediate and violent consequences of climate change, and imagine what new practices might emerge from the fertile substrate we leave behind. Craps articulates mourning itself as a potentially transformative act, acknowledging humanity’s finitude without making excuses for destructive behavior or nihilism.

Although affective disengagement may seem attractive in the near-term, analysis from within and beyond the field suggests that significant changes are in store for archivy. If archivists hope to remain relevant to the future of memory work and maintain agency in shaping our own future, we must conduct an earnest self-assessment of our skills. As Verne Harris declared in his 2002 essay “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa,” archives represent a limited perspective and scope of cultural memory. While the functional competencies of archivists have expanded to cover many flavors of recorded history, the profession itself occupies a relatively narrow domain of memory work. Anthropocene theorists like Chakrabarty distinguish even further between

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17 Scranton, “Learning How to Die.”
written records (the common domain of archivy), recorded history, and “deep history.”

If the demands of future memory work diverge from the competencies of archivists, it is incumbent upon archivists to adapt or die; memory work will continue regardless.

POSITIONING CONTEMPORARY ARCHIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

In pursuing dialogue with other memory workers and scholars of memory studies, archivists can respond to Chakrabarty’s call to “rise above their disciplinary prejudices... [and face] a crisis of many dimensions.” This dialogue is complicated by competing understandings of archival principles. SAA describes archival competencies in four spheres: to assess, collect and organize, preserve, and provide access to records of enduring value. The SAA Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology defines a record most broadly as “data or information that has been fixed on some medium; that has content, context, and structure; and that is used as an extension of human memory or to demonstrate accountability.” Archivists use the term “archives” to represent either a distinct corpus of records, an institution which takes custody of such corpora, or as a metonymy for the building in which such functions take place. In contrast, artists and humanities frequently speak of “the archive” as a conceptual container for broad

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23 To this note, I question whether our allegiance to the traditions of diplomatics and historic manuscripts have hindered archival workers from gaining skills and competencies that are more directly relevant to the stewardship of cultural memory.


27 While the application of vernacular terms such as “fonds” are useful for debating the concept among archivists, I am interested here in describing the concept more plainly.
expanses of natural history and cultural memory.\textsuperscript{28} Non-archival, or extra-disciplinary, literature on memory tends to rely upon Derrida’s \textit{Archive Fever}; while valuable in many critical applications, Derrida’s metaphorical “archive” overlooks the influence of archival labor on the preservation and interpretation of recorded memory.\textsuperscript{29}

As Michelle Caswell, Eira Tansey, Stacie Williams, Verne Harris and other archival scholars have argued, the act of depersonalizing “the archive” negatively affects the well-being of archival workers and causes extra-disciplinary scholars to misconstrue (and perhaps misunderstand) the autonomy and authenticity of records.\textsuperscript{30} Inspired by Derrida’s notion of “sedimented archives,” humanities scholars have habitually theorized “the archive” into any anthropogenic or natural accretion, regardless of medium, temporal scale, institutional context, or purpose.\textsuperscript{31} In contrast, a majority of archival theorists maintain that archives are fundamentally shaped by human intervention and desire, not only at the point of inscription but throughout the life of each record and data point. Thus, the authenticity or meaning of a record cannot be separated from the context of its creation, collection, preservation, interpretation, and destruction. Rather than representing “an archive,” which implies the intervention of archival labor, anthropogenic and natural accretions can be understood more accurately as data from which future agents may derive meaning.\textsuperscript{32}

To comment upon an archival metaphor commonly employed by humanities scholars, ice cores and rock strata certainly represent important evidence of human activity but can only become “archival” in the context of intentional human preservation, stewardship, and interpretation. Furthermore, a facility for long-term storage is not necessarily archival in purpose. Biorepositories employ traditional archival principles to preserve biological data for future distribution and use, but tissue samples and frozen seeds are not traditionally employed as “extensions of the human memory,” which SAA’s \textit{Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology} identifies as a core function of a record.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever,” 19; Examples of this phenomenon can be found in Craps, “Climate Change,” 479-492 and Bond, De Bruyn, and Rapson, “Planetary Memory,” 859.
To the degree that extra-disciplinary theorists wish to understand the stewardship of recorded memory over time, they would do well to recognize these foundational concepts of archivy.

CONTEMPLATING EXISTENTIAL THREATS TO ARCHIVES

Archival scholars such as Gillis, Buckley, and Schmuland have examined depictions of archivists in literature to better understand how the public perceives the practices and principles of the archives profession. Similarly, we can envision archival potentialities by comparing the depiction of memory workers in climate fiction with analysis of climate-driven risks to contemporary archival practices. Arguing that it is impossible to fully imagine a future in which one will not exist, Squire, Klein, and Craps et al have identified climate fiction narratives as a venue by which modern humanity can envision and perhaps begin mourning its own future absence. In her 2017 essay “Fantastic Futures? Cli-Fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity,” Rebecca Evan defines climate fiction as a genre-defying narrative approach which describes the predicted and imagined consequences of climate change. Bond, De Bruyn, Rapson, and Squire argue that climate fiction represents a proxy by which humanity can anticipate and imagine itself in disastrous futures. Klein contends that climate fiction is particularly well-suited to imagining the


Anthropocene, as the presence of a future observer makes it possible to narrate the horror of species annihilation. While Evans, Crownshaw, and Trexler argue that dystopian literature primarily serves as a prophylactic device, Klein and Vermeulen view Anthropocene literature as a cathartic space to mourn an inevitable future.

Anthropogenic climate change offers many visions of archival destruction. One option is the loss of tangible heritage and archives to environmental disasters. Matthew Gordon-Clark’s “Paradise Lost? Pacific Island Archives Threatened by Climate Change,” Eira Tansey’s “Archival Adaptation to Climate Change,” and Mazurczyk et al.’s “American Archives and Climate Change: Risks and Adaptation,” illuminate immediate or near-future risks to archival materials from rising sea levels, global warming, and extreme weather events. While social scientists have not reached consensus on the relationship between climate change and armed conflict, climate risks add an additional burden to institutions which have historically been targeted for looting, destruction, and military seizure. Climate fiction imagines protracted and systemic environmental crises which overwhelm society’s ability to respond to acute and localized disasters. Recent surveys, which demonstrate that many archival sites face imminent threat from climate change, reinforce the realism of these speculative futures.

38 Klein, “Climate Change through the Lens,” 84.
Archival disaster response plans commonly recommend transferring materials to the custody of another institution, either temporarily or on a permanent basis. However, the Anthropocene’s threat of wide-scale destruction makes this an untenable strategy. Ben Goldman’s chapter “It’s Not Easy Being Green(e): Digital Preservation in the Age of Climate Change” further addresses the limitations of current digital preservation practices in a future with limited resources and elevated climate threats. Similarly, Edgardo Civallero and Sara Plaza’s 2016 essay on “Libraries, Sustainability and Degrowth” summarizes the impending exhaustion of the ecological and human resources upon which contemporary libraries and archives rely. Resource scarcity and its political consequences shape the archival imaginings of Emmi Itäranta’s Memory of Water and Rivers Solomon’s An Unkindness of Ghosts. Both authors depict futures in which global ecological crises have created a scarcity of resources under authoritarian regimes. Each story’s protagonist belongs to a lineage of custodians who create, preserve, and transmit counter-narratives through tangible media and intangible traditions.

Even if materials remain intact, climate risks may render them meaningless by the loss of discovery systems, custodians, or users. The danger of decontextualizing the historic record is a recurring theme of Walter Miller Jr’s Canticle For Leibowitz, Emily St. John Mandel’s Station Eleven, and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, in which protagonists experience the widespread destruction of institutions, infrastructure, and societal norms. For Miller, St. John Mandel, and McCarthy, the intensity and scale of their imagined disaster has unmoored humanity from its objects and systems of meaning, creating a persistent crisis of identity and purpose. Miller’s novel depicts the experiences of memory workers after a global nuclear catastrophe. Reflecting Fobazi Ettarh’s article on “vocational awe,” Miller imagines archivy as the work of cloistered monks who are martyred by anti-intellectual extremists, murdered for their material resources, and

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46 Goldman, “It’s Not Easy Being Green(e),” 280-284.
47 Civallero and Plaza, “Libraries, Sustainability and Degrowth.”
exploited by powerful institutions. Miller conceives the future of archives as violent, performative, and ultimately meaningless. The protagonists of Station Eleven lament a future in which their lives are neither remembered nor comprehended, rendering physical death all the more final. Louise Squire captures the dilemma of McCarthy’s The Road in her analysis of its lessons for the Anthropocene, speculating that McCarthy’s protagonists “face a world in which all non-human life is already over, the drawing close of their own deaths is amplified by the inescapability of humanity’s demise and the corresponding breakdown, or loss, of culture and its memories.”

**FACILITATING A PEACEFUL TRANSITION**

If archivy’s impending transformation can be understood as a kind of death, a palliative approach requires a plan to maintain its dignity, agency, and comfort in transition. Intensifying climate disasters and ecological crises can be understood as unpleasant symptoms of the Anthropocene condition; moreover, some scholars have warned that present practices of consumption, production, and resource management may advance the course of the illness. In his third thesis on the Anthropocene, Chakrabarty argues that the Anthropocene cannot be understood apart from capitalism and globalization—that is, the international and industrialized commodification of people, ecosystems, and natural resources. Christine Pawley, Jonathon Cope, Samuel Trosow, Karen Nicholson, and Nathaniel Enright use a similar critical lens to address systemic inequities and dysfunctions of archives in the Anthropocene. In their 2016 article, “Libraries,

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53 Center to Advance Palliative Care, “What Is Palliative Care?”; “WHO Definition of Palliative Care.”

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Sustainability and Degrowth,” Edgardo Civallero and Sara Plaza caution libraries to move away from practices which rely upon infinite resources for unchecked institutional expansion. Civallero and Plaza argue that planetary capitalism has caused widespread environmental degradation and labor abuses, exacerbated class divides, and created an impending exhaustion of Earth’s capacity to sustain human life. They call for libraries to adopt strategies of “degrowth” that constrain expansion, extractive production, and indiscriminate resource consumption. Intentional degrowth is presented as a means of mitigating a potentially sudden and violent decline.

A related ethos comes from maintenance theory, defined in an archival context by Hillel Arnold as an iterative and relational commitment to the long-term well-being of individuals, institutions, and systems. Arnold recommends a framing of maintenance work as an anecdote to the exploitation and depersonalization of archival labor and artificial resource scarcity imposed by “neoliberal austerity regimes.” Implicit to this analysis is an ethics of care for the people who work in, around, and with archives. Maintenance work and its affective responsibilities can also be applied to resource management, reflecting an inextricable relationship between archivy and the environment.

AN EMERGENT STRATEGY FOR ARCHIVES

The burden of archivists in the Anthropocene is not merely to adopt strategies of disaster risk-reduction and climate change adaptation, nor is it solely to mitigate resource extraction and limit the violence which cultural heritage work inflicts upon the Earth and its systems. 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. In this regard, the field should not rely upon credentialed practitioners at well-
resourced institutions which are deeply invested in neoliberalism and its cult of innovation.

From 2013-2014, the Nelson Mandela Foundation assembled a series of dialogues around paradigms and practices of memory work, elevating the expertise of memory workers from the Global South.\textsuperscript{62} The resulting outcome documents invite archivists to imagine themselves as part of a rich ecosystem in which memory workers work together across many disciplines, narratives, and generations towards a just and sustainable future.\textsuperscript{63} This model of formation reflects what adrienne maree brown calls “emergent strategy,” an iterative, messy, and deeply relational approach to conceiving and building communities of practice which are sustainable, interconnected, and adaptive.\textsuperscript{64}

\textbf{SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS}

As an archivist with many decades of potential service ahead of me, an awareness of climate change pervades every aspect of my work. In its affective and practical demands, this moment echoes other periods of significant transition for American archivy.\textsuperscript{65} Archivists of Leland’s era had to envision an entirely new field, and practitioners of the latter 20\textsuperscript{th} century experienced significant changes to that field’s identity, credentialing practices, and material expertise.\textsuperscript{66} Some of us employed today will still be managing archives in 2050, when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that the global community will face a dramatic and perhaps irreversible acceleration of climate-
driven disasters, poverty rates, food scarcity, and health crises. We will better understand the scope of change ahead of us as the existential demands of the Anthropocene emerge in the coming decades, but change is certain. As Octavia Butler reminds us, change is the only constant experienced by all living things. I hope, accordingly, that archivists will embrace this short-lived opportunity to grow towards a sustainable relationship with the broader ecosystem of memory work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


