

Article

Dying Well in the Anthropocene: On the End of Archivists

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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 archivists' 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.

Winn, Samantha R. "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* 2, no. 3 (2019).

ISSN: 2572-1364

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.”¹

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.² 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.³ 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,⁴ as well as explorations of the evolving archival profession.⁵ 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

¹ Roy Scranton, “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2013, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/>.

² A detailed review of the scientific debate as it relates to cultural heritage organizations may be found in Edgardo Civalero and Sara Plaza, “Libraries, Sustainability and Degrowth,” 2016, 20-29. See also Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197-222. <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>.

³ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” *Global Change Newsletter*, no. 41 (2000): 17-18.

⁴ Marika Cifor, “Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016), 10, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9261-5>; Marika Cifor and Anne J. Gilliland, “Affect and the Archive, Archives and Their Affects: An Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9263-3>; Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (2016): 23-43, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0mb9568h>.

⁵ Michelle Caswell, “Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Human Rights Archives: Lessons from Community-Based Archives,” *Archival Science* 14, nos. 3-4 (2014): 307-322, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/73f5s7sr>.

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.⁷ The Society of American Archivist's (SAA) *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* predicates a record's worth on its potential for future use.⁸ 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."⁹ 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."¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

Catherine Porter, and Philip Lewis, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 20-31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464756>.

⁷ Timothy Clark, "Scale," in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, ed. Tom Cohen (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 148-166, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/10539563.0001.001>. Clark argues that the Anthropocene must be conceptualized simultaneously at many temporal scales, from the hyperlocal and contemporary consequences of individual agency to a broad planetary history. See also Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 212-214.

⁸ "Archival value," *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, Society of American Archivists, accessed August 3, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/a/archival-value>.

⁹ Society of American Archivists, "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," last modified March 30, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

¹⁰ "Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct," Association of Canadian Archivists, last modified October 18, 2017, https://archivists.ca/sites/default/files/website_files/policy/aca_code_of_ethics_final_october_2017.pdf.

¹¹ Reflecting on ten years of Anthropocene debate and analysis among scientists, Steffen Will et al. emphasize the Anthropocene's threat upon "the material existence of society... and perhaps even the future existence of Homo sapiens," in "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (2011): 842-867, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2010.0327>. See also: International Panel on Climate Change, "Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty," Geneva, Switzerland: World Meteorological Organization, 2018. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

“a certain continuity of human experiences,” forcing individuals to contend with the threat of global disaster and mortality.¹² 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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ In his 2013 New York Times opinion essay “Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of Civilization,” Rob Scranton captures the affective experience of grieving for humanity as

¹² Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 197-198. Chakrabarty’s discussion of the Anthropocene’s affective challenges are echoed in Clark’s “Scale” and Richard Klein, “Climate Change through the Lens of Nuclear Criticism,” *Diacritics* 41, no. 3 (2013): 82-87, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2013.0015>.

¹³ For a more detailed discussion of these concepts, see Klein, “Climate Change through the Lens of Nuclear Criticism,” 83-84; Stef Craps et al., “Memory Studies and the Anthropocene: A Roundtable,” *Memory Studies* II, no. 4 (2018): 501-503, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017731068>; Pieter Vermeulen, “Beauty That Must Die: Station Eleven, Climate Change Fiction, and the Life of Form,” *Studies in the Novel* 50, no. 1 (2018): 9-12. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2018.0001>.

¹⁴ Lucy Bond, Ben De Bruyn, and Jessica Rapson, “Planetary Memory in Contemporary American Fiction,” *Textual Practice* 3, no. 5 (2017): 860.

¹⁵ “WHO Definition of Palliative Care,” World Health Organization, accessed September 7, 2018, <http://www.who.int/cancer/palliative/definition/en/>; Peter Strang et al., “Existential Pain—an Entity, a Provocation, or a Challenge?,” *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 27, no. 3 (2004): 241–250, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2003.07.003>; Center to Advance Palliative Care, “What Is Palliative Care?,” accessed September 7, 2018, <https://www.capc.org/about/palliative-care/>.

we know it.¹⁶ Scranton proposes that humanity must “learn how to die not as individuals, but as a civilization.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Craps articulates mourning itself as a potentially transformative act, acknowledging humanity’s finitude without making excuses for destructive behavior or nihilism.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹ Anthropocene theorists like Chakrabarty distinguish even further between

¹⁶ Themes of loss and grief are particularly evident in his 2018 opinion piece on parenthood, Scranton, “Raising My Child in a Doomed World,” *The New York Times*, July 19, 2018, sec. Opinion., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/opinion/climate-change-parenting.html>.

¹⁷ Scranton, “Learning How to Die.”

¹⁸ Psychiatric conceptions of a good death are comprehensively explored in Emily A. Meier et al., “Defining a Good Death (Successful Dying): Literature Review and a Call for Research and Public Dialogue,” *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry : Official Journal of the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry* 24, no. 4 (2016): 261-271, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2016.01.135>; For examples of interdisciplinary discussions on death acceptance, see “Death Positive,” *The Order of the Good Death*, accessed September 9, 2018, <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/death-positive>.

¹⁹ Stef Craps, “Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory,” *Parallax* 23, no. 4 (2017): 479, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1374518>.

²⁰ Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa,” *Archival Science* 2, nos. 1-2 (2002): 64-65, 83-84, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435631>.

²¹ Andrew Delano Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Abbott argues that modern professions seek to gain and preserve power by claiming jurisdiction over an exclusive set of skills and knowledge;

written records (the common domain of archivists), recorded history, and “deep history.”²² 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.²³

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.”²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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.²⁷ In contrast, artists and humanities frequently speak of “the archive” as a conceptual container for broad

Association of College and Research Libraries, “Guidelines: Competencies for Special Collections Professionals,” July 8, 2008, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/comp4specollect>; Society of American Archivists, “Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies,” 2016, accessed February 14, 2019, <https://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/graduate/gpas>.

²² Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 212-213.

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.

²⁴ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 215.

²⁵ Society of American Archivists, “What Are Archives?” September 12, 2016, <https://www2.archivists.org/about-archives>. Some scholars include outreach and advocacy among the core functions of archival practice, including Kathleen D. Roe in “Why Archives?,” *The American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 6-13, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.6>; and Eira Tansey, “Archives Without Archivists,” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016): 10.

²⁶ “Record,” *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, Society of American Archivists, accessed August 3, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/r/record>.

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.²⁸ Non-archival, or extra-disciplinary, literature on memory tends to rely upon Derrida's *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.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.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.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.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 *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* identifies as a core function of a record.³³

²⁸ Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1–21; Eira Tansey, "Archives Without Archivists," 2015, 1-24.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 19-26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>.

³⁰ Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives"; Williams, "Implications of Archival Labor," *On Archivy*, April 11, 2016. <https://medium.com/on-archivy/implications-of-archival-labor-b606d8d02014>; Tansey, "Archives Without Archivists."

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.

³² "Record," *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, Society of American Archivists, accessed August 3, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/r/record>.

³³ "Record," *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, Society of American Archivists, accessed August 3, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/r/record>.

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ Bond, De Bruyn, Rapson, and Squire argue that climate fiction represents a proxy by which humanity can anticipate and imagine itself in disastrous futures.³⁷ Klein contends that climate fiction is particularly well-suited to imagining the

³⁴ Peter Gillis, “Of Plots , Secrets , Burrowers and Moles : Archives in Espionage Fiction,” *Archivaria* 9, no. 9 (1979): 3-13; Karen Buckley, “‘The Truth Is in the Red Files’: An Overview of Archives in Popular Culture,” *Archivaria* 66, no. 1 (2008): 95-123; Arlene Schmuland, “The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography,” *The American Archivist* 62, no. 1 (1999): 24-73, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.62.1.v767822474626637>.

³⁵ Mahlu Mertens and Stef Craps, “Contemporary Fiction vs. the Challenge of Imagining the Timescale of Climate Change,” *Studies in the Novel* 50, no. 1 (2018): 134-153, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2018.0007>; Pieter Vermeulen, “Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 5 (2017): 867-885, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1323459>; Klein, “Climate Change through the Lens of Nuclear Criticism”; Adeline Johns-Putra, John Parham, and Louise Squire, eds., *Literature and Sustainability: Concept, Text and Culture*, n.d.; Louise Squire, “Death and the Anthropocene: Cormac McCarthy’s World of Unliving,” *Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 211-228, <https://doi.org/10.3366/olr.2012.0042>.

³⁶ Rebecca Evans, “Fantastic Futures? Cli-Fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity,” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2017): 94-96.

³⁷ Bond, De Bruyn, and Rapson, “Planetary Memory in Contemporary American Fiction,” 863; Squire, “Death and the Anthropocene”; Timothy Clarke questions whether any narrative device can capture the incomprehensible scale of Anthropocenic destruction, as quoted in Vermeulen, “Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 5 (2017): 871, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1323459>.

Anthropocene, as the presence of a future observer makes it possible to narrate the horror of species annihilation.³⁸ 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.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ While social scientists have not reached consensus on the relationship between climate change and armed conflict,⁴¹ climate risks add an additional burden to institutions which have historically been targeted for looting, destruction, and military seizure.⁴² 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.⁴³

³⁸ Klein, "Climate Change through the Lens," 84.

³⁹ Evans, "Fantastic Futures?," 99; Richard Crownshaw, "Climate Change Fiction and the Future of Memory: Speculating on Nathaniel Rich's Odds against Tomorrow," *Resilience* 4, no. 2 (2017): 129-130, 134, 138; Vermeulen, "Future Readers," 868-869; Klein, "Climate Change through the Lens," 83.

⁴⁰ Matthew Gordon-Clark, "Paradise Lost? Pacific Island Archives Threatened by Climate Change," *Archival Science* 12, no. 1 (2012): 51-67, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-011-9144-3>; Eira Tansey, "Archival Adaptation to Climate Change," *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy* 11, no. 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2015.11908146>; Tara Mazurczyk, Nathan Piekielek, Eira Tansey, and Ben Goldman, "American Archives and Climate Change: Risks and Adaptation," *Climate Risk Management* 20 (2018): 111-125, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2018.03.005>.

⁴¹ Courtland Adams et al., "Sampling Bias in Climate–Conflict Research," *Nature Climate Change* 8, no. 3 (2018): 200–203, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0068-2>.

⁴² Laila Hussein Moustafa, "Cultural Heritage and Preservation: Lessons from World War II and the Contemporary Conflict in the Middle East," *The American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 320-338, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-79.2.320>.

⁴³ Mazurczyk et al., "American Archives and Climate Change"; Tansey, "Archival Adaptation to Climate Change"; Ben Goldman, "It's Not Easy Being Green(e): Digital Preservation in the Age of Climate Change," in *Archival Values: Essays in Honor of Mark Greene* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2018), 274-295.

Archival disaster response plans commonly recommend transferring materials to the custody of another institution, either temporarily or on a permanent basis.⁴⁴ However, the Anthropocene's threat of wide-scale destruction makes this an untenable strategy.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ Similarly, Edgardo Civalero 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.⁴⁷ Resource scarcity and its political consequences shape the archival imaginings of Emmi Itäranta's *Memory of Water* and Rivers Solomons' *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.⁴⁸

Even if materials remain intact, climate risks may render them meaningless by the loss of discovery systems, custodians, or users.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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

⁴⁴ Goldman, "It's Not Easy Being Green(e)," 280–284; Mazurczyk et al., "American Archives and Climate Change," 121; Tansey, "Archival Adaptation to Climate Change," 1-3.

⁴⁵ For a compelling presentation of the inevitability of institutional decline, see Edgardo Civalero and Sara Plaza, "Libraries, Sustainability and Degrowth," *Progressive Librarian* 45 (Winter 2016-2017), 21-26, http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL_Jnl/contents45.shtml.

⁴⁶ Goldman, "It's Not Easy Being Green(e)," 280-284.

⁴⁷ Civalero and Plaza, "Libraries, Sustainability and Degrowth."

⁴⁸ Emmi Itäranta, *Memory of Water* (New York: HarpersCollins, 2015); Rivers Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (Brooklyn, NY: Akashic Books, 2017).

⁴⁹ Klein, "Climate Change through the Lens," 83-84; Tansey, "Archives Without Archivists," 15; Derrida, Porter, and Lewis, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," 20-31.

⁵⁰ Squire, "Death and the Anthropocene," 211–228; Pieter Vermeulen, "Beauty That Must Die," 15; Walter M. Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1959).

exploited by powerful institutions.⁵¹ 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."⁵²

FACILITATING A PEACEFUL TRANSITION

If archivists' 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ In their 2016 article, "Libraries,

⁵¹ Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves – In the Library with the Lead Pipe," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, 2018, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

⁵² Squire, "Death and the Anthropocene: Cormac McCarthy's World of Unliving," 213.

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

⁵⁴ Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 212-220.

⁵⁵ Christine Pawley, "Hegemony's Handmaid? The Library and Information Studies Curriculum from a Class Perspective," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 68, no. 2 (1998): 123-144; Jonathan Cope, "Neoliberalism and Library & Information Science: Using Karl Polanyi's Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Conceptions of Information," *Progressive Librarian* 43 (2015): 14; Samuel Trosow, "The Commodification of Information and the Public Good: New Challenges for a Progressive Librarianship," *Progressive Librarian* 43 (2015): 12-29; Karen P. Nicholson, "The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change," *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015): 328-338, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.76.3.328>; Nathaniel F. Enright, "The Violence of Information Literacy: Neoliberalism and the Human as Capital," in *Information Literacy and Social Justice*:

Sustainability and Degrowth,” Edgardo Civalero and Sara Plaza caution libraries to move away from practices which rely upon infinite resources for unchecked institutional expansion. Civalero 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.⁵⁶ They call for libraries to adopt strategies of “degrowth” that constrain expansion, extractive production, and indiscriminate resource consumption.⁵⁷ Intentional degrowth is presented as a means of mitigating a potentially sudden and violent decline.⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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-

Radical Professional Praxis, ed. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 15-38.

⁵⁶ Civalero and Plaza, “Libraries, Sustainability and Degrowth,” 22-24.

⁵⁷ Civalero and Plaza, 31–32.

⁵⁸ Civalero and Plaza.

⁵⁹ “Critical Work: Archivists as Maintainers,” Hillel Arnold, published August 2, 2016, <https://hillelarnold.com/>.

⁶⁰ This model of analysis is exemplified in Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics.”

⁶¹ In this regard, I am specifically thinking of the environmental demands of digital preservation, blockchain technology, repository climate control, and the U.S. field’s broad reliance on precarious and unpaid labor.

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.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.⁶³ This model of formation reflects what adrienne marie brown calls “emergent strategy,” an iterative, messy, and deeply relational approach to conceiving and building communities of practice which are sustainable, interconnected, and adaptive.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵ Archivists of Leland’s era had to envision an entirely new field, and practitioners of the latter 20th century experienced significant changes to that field’s identity, credentialing practices, and material expertise.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-

⁶² “Nelson Mandela International Dialogues,” Nelson Mandela Foundation, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/nelson-mandela-international-dialogues-overview>.

⁶³ Gould and Verne Harris, “Memory for Justice: A Nelson Mandela Foundation Provocation,” Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2014.
https://www.nelsonmandela.org/uploads/files/MEMORY_FOR_JUSTICE_2014v2.pdf,

⁶⁴ adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (AK Press, 2017), Chap. 3, Kindle edition.

⁶⁵ Ideally, future literature will include comparative studies of archival practice which decenter the U.S.

⁶⁶ Philip C. Brooks, “The First Decade of the Society of American Archivists,” *The American Archivist* 10, no. 2 (1947): 115-128, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40288556?>; Brenda Banks, “Seeing the Past as a Guidepost to Our Future,” *The American Archivist* 59, no. 4 (1996): 392-393; Patrick M. Quinn, “Archivists and Historian: The Times They Are A-Changin’,” *The Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 1-13.

driven disasters, poverty rates, food scarcity, and health crises.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ I hope, accordingly, that archivists will embrace this short-lived opportunity to grow towards a sustainable relationship with the broader ecosystem of memory work.

⁶⁷ International Panel on Climate Change, “Global Warming of 1.5°C,” sec. Projected Climate Change, Potential Impacts and Associated Risks, Geneva, Switzerland: World Meteorological Organization, 2018. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

⁶⁸ brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Chap. 1, Kindle edition.

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