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Review of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section 2019 Conference

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Rare Books Manuscript Section 2019 Conference: “Response and Responsibility: Special Collections and Climate Change.” Baltimore, Maryland, June 18–21, 2019.

The Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries met June 18–21, 2019, in Baltimore, Maryland. The conference theme was “Response and Responsibility: Special Collections and Climate Change.” This conference took a broad look at climate change and its potential impact on the special collections profession. Topics covered included climatological shifts, such as rising sea level and increased temperature, as well as other factors, such as environmental impacts of collecting and maintaining collections, and the role archives have played in researching and documenting climate change. This conference succeeded in advancing crucial conversations about anthropogenic climate change and special collections, including developing strategies for mitigation, responding to climate disasters, and ensuring long-term availability of library materials.

The conference opened with a plenary session, “Response and Responsibility,” addressing the role of archives in documenting climate change and archiving cultural heritage in areas threatened by climate change. The plenary also introduced the theme of Afrofuturism, a literary and artistic movement that explores the African American experience through science fiction and technology, which would continue throughout the conference. The moderator, Melissa Hubbard, framed the discussion with quotations from N. K. Jemisin’s Hugo Award–winning novel, *The Fifth Season*, beginning with the book’s opening line: “Let’s start with the end of the world, why don’t we?” and concluding with the closing lines of the prologue: “But this is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends. *This is the way the world ends.* For the last time.”¹

The first speaker, Brenda Ekwurzel, senior climate scientist from the Union of Concerned Scientists, spoke of the role of archives for studying climate change and documenting disappearing cultural heritage. She cited temperature records, which show an increase of 1 degree Celsius since the start of the Industrial Revolution. The next speaker, Frances Beinecke of the Natural Resources Defense Council, discussed the role of the United States in fighting climate change as historically one of the largest emitters of carbon dioxide. After opening with a brief discussion of record greenhouse gas levels recorded at the Mauna Loa Observatory, her talk shifted to positive environmental changes made in California and the benefits to their economy. She closed her talk with examples of climate documentation in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, which was named for her grandfather, Frederick W. Beinecke. She mentioned particularly a 1915 photograph of the Canadian Rockies; Thomas Thistlewood’s plantation records, which contain meticulous documentation of Jamaican weather; and Rachel Carson’s index cards, on which she began to discuss climate change sixty years ago.

Bethany Nowviskie, the incoming dean of libraries at James Madison University, closed the plenary. Her talk, shared publicly on her website, focused on the role of privilege in responding to climate change and the impact of climate change on marginalized communities. Nowviskie encouraged attendees to think of library holdings as a collective “archive of extinction,” not just of natural history but also of lost species, habitats, and people. Nowviskie’s talk also discussed the potential role of artificial intelligence, noting that the collections librarians choose to digitize

¹ N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (New York: Orbit, 2015), 1, 14.

provide reading materials to “algorithmic progeny.” She ended on a positive note, saying that while climate change will affect humanity, librarians and archivists have the opportunity now to center people in a field that has historically focused on physical materials and documents.²

The second plenary session, “Documentation of Climate Change Paradigms,” opened with Dagomar Degroot, associate professor of environmental history at Georgetown University. His talk echoed themes from the first plenary about conducting climate research in the archives, but with additional detail. He described the process of creating climate reconstructions to attempt to learn about past climate conditions. These reconstructions rely on data models; climate proxies, such as using tree rings to learn about rainfall or temperature over time; and documentary evidence of weather-based events, such as records of ice fairs or harbor closings. Archives especially play a role in finding documentary evidence of past weather. Degroot described his own experience using ship logs from the sixteenth century, which included in-depth details of daily activities and wind direction and velocity. In particular, he described how logbooks from the Anglo-Dutch War confirmed natural data regarding the North Atlantic Oscillation and linked the wind direction to victories in battles at sea.

This plenary continued with Neela Banerjee, a reporter for Inside Climate News, who discussed the role of public archives in climate journalism. Her talk focused on a news story about Exxon tracking climate change since the 1970s. She described the process of researching this story using public documents available in HathiTrust, the personal papers of Ed Davis archived at MIT, and documents held in private collections. Following these breadcrumbs, Banerjee and Inside Climate News reconstructed Exxon’s early knowledge of climate change. Banerjee said that her fantasy is to see a library or network of libraries with an archive documenting climate change denial, but libraries have often feared taking these papers for risk of being sued.

The conference closed with a final plenary session, “What a Living World Demands.” The first speaker, Shelley Streeby, professor of literature and ethnic studies at the University of California San Diego, prerecorded her presentation. Her talk focused on documentation of climate change in Octavia Butler’s archives, housed at the Huntington Library. Archiving and archivists appear frequently in Butler’s writing, as she believed the archival profession would be indispensable in the future. By contrast, Butler felt that historians had “axes to grind,” especially against minorities. Butler maintained files of disasters, both natural and manmade, from 1965 through 2005. Streeby also noted that it was unlikely that Butler spent much time at the Huntington, due to the Huntington’s strict admissions requirements, which require researchers to be university faculty or librarians, ABD Ph.D. candidates, or independent researchers.³ Students below the ABD level do not qualify, regardless of need, and readers in both the ABD and independent scholar categories need to submit letters of reference demonstrating need. Limiting access to those with higher degrees or institutional support will limit researchers to those with more privilege, and Streeby noted that most researchers at the Huntington are white. She spoke of the need to make these papers more accessible to a wider range of researchers.

The final speaker, Ramesh Mallipeddi, discussed the intersection of plantation agriculture, slavery, and the sugar trade. Mallipeddi, associate professor of English at the University of

² “Change Us, Too,” Bethany Nowvickie (website), June 30, 2019, <https://nowvickie.org/2019/change-us-too/>.

³ “Using the Library,” Huntington Library, <https://www.huntington.org/become-reader>.

Colorado–Boulder, talked about “replaceability” and the damaging effect of the sugar trade on both human bodies and land. Monocropping on Barbados led to loss of woodlands and erosion, causing Francis, Lord Willoughby, to state as early as 1668 that “the land is almost worn out” and “that the inhabitants are ready to desert their plantations.”⁴ These effects contributed to global climate change, reminding attendees again of the relationship between climate change and white supremacy. Mallipeddi called on participants to begin a meaningful dialogue about catastrophe and compensation.

The RBMS conference also featured seminars, panels, posters, and participant-driven sessions. One highlight was a panel, “The Limits to Growth,” which examined problems with unchecked growth in special collections and archives. Presenters noted that while librarians in circulating collections have begun to limit collection growth, special collections libraries have generally not followed suit. Chela Scott Weber, senior program officer at OCLC, pointed out that, as a profession, librarians continue to use collection size as a measure of quality, even as costs for storing those collections climb. Shannon Supple, curator of rare books at Smith College and chair of the RBMS, advanced the discussion with several “provocations,” including a statement that over-collecting is unethical. She then suggested rare book collections should be reappraised, similar to practices for archival collections. Curators should consider rare book collections for possible deaccessioning and reconsider them as collective collections. Supple noted that all special collections libraries have underleveraged collections, while many collect materials from the Western canon, which creates a documentary monoculture.

Another notable panel was “Environmentally Sustainable Preservation of Physical and Digital Materials.” This panel opened with Christopher Cameron, sustainable preservation specialist at the Image Permanence Institute. He discussed common problems that lead to increased energy use in special collections, including lighting empty spaces, poor thermostat placement, and collection spaces kept too warm. He presented simple mitigation strategies, such as periodic half-day HVAC shutdowns, which lead to substantial savings with minimal temperature fluctuations. Linda Tadic, CEO of Digital Bedrock, then discussed the environmental impact of audiovisual digital content. She opened by stating that while analog magnetic media needs to be digitized for preservation, this requires energy usage, as preservation requires electricity. Further, digitization of these materials creates “media carcasses,” the physical remains of the original analog medium, which has become obviated by digitization. These “carcasses” then require energy to discard. Tadic also discussed the lifespans of electronic products and the environmental impact of their disposal, including burning of e-waste and exportation to underdeveloped countries. She provided recommendations for environmental planning for technology, including purchasing clean energy, efficient hardware, and recycled devices. Tadic’s speaker notes, publicly available on the Digital Bedrock website, contain links to these resources, including guides to ethical shopping, suggested recyclers, and recommendations for electronics reuse.⁵ The final two speakers, Laura Alagna and Keith Pendergrass, discussed strategies for digital preservation, including scheduling high-capacity activities for off-peak times and developing a tiered approach

⁴ *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series: American and West Indies* 5 (1661–8), 586, quoted in Jenny Uglow, *A Gambling Man: Charles II and the Restoration, 1660–1670* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 74.

⁵ “The Environmental Impact of Digital Preservation: References,” Linda Tadic (website), October 1, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y5em5t7j>.

to preservation, only giving the highest level treatment when needed. In particular, Pendergrass advised attendees to reevaluate the goal of zero-loss for digital preservation.

Although this year's RBMS conference was powerful and thought-provoking, an area that needs further improvement is diversity and equal representation. As an organization, RBMS has made strides in combating the whiteness of the library and archives professions, including creating a standing committee on diversity, providing scholarship and mentorship opportunities, creating a "diversity recruitment toolkit," and collecting oral histories from people of color in the profession.⁶ Despite these positive developments, RBMS 2019 underscored the need to further support and develop diversity, equity, and inclusion in the organization. Although numerous sessions thoughtfully addressed issues of white supremacy, notably Mallipeddi's plenary session, others fell short. For instance, a panel on "Ethical Outreach with Culturally-Sensitive Content" featured a white librarian displaying racist images on screen, which led conference attendees on Twitter to question both the number of images displayed and the length of time they were on screen. A well-attended pop-up session on using Asian materials in special collections has similarly been criticized for not including any Asian or Asian American presenters. Future program planning committees should take a careful look at these panels and responses from attendees. Creating a welcoming conference environment goes beyond statements of inclusion. Sessions and presentations need to incorporate inclusion and embrace diverse voices without "othering" the people of color in the audience.

RBMS 2019 raised issues that will profoundly affect the archival profession. Bethany Nowviskie closed her plenary saying, "I hope this conference will be remembered. I hope it will be remembered as a catalyzing moment for the special collections community."⁷ To return again to the words of N. K. Jemisin, "This is the way a new world begins."⁸ Although irreversible climate change will literally and figuratively rewrite the map, archivists and librarians can respond. Some changes, such as turning off lights, will be simple. Others, such as reimaging approaches to collecting, will be difficult but crucial. This conference presented many critical ideas, began important conversations, and moved archives and special collections libraries in a positive direction. Now, librarians and archivists will need to continue these conversations.

⁶ "Diversity," RBMS, <http://rbms.info/diversity/>.

⁷ "Change Us, Too."

⁸ N. K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* (New York: Orbit, 2017), 398.