

The Role of Special Collections in Climate Change Movements

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Abstract

This presentation examines the role that special collections can play in documenting climate change literature over the course of history. We chose to focus on artist books in particular due to their unique trait as a format found almost exclusively within special collections libraries. We connect artist books to other collections within Bruce Peel Special Collections to create a narrative of climate change across cultures, time, and social movements. This narrative focuses on the past, present, and future of climate change, showcasing how special collections libraries provide new perspectives on how we should view the role we have to play in climate change. We believe the creation of this narrative shows how collecting literature and archives is an active form of combatting climate misinformation. In particular, we believe connecting this narrative through artist books is a way to challenge dominant narratives due to the role of artist books in counterculture and alternate ways of viewing knowledge.

Keywords: climate change, special collections, social movements, climate crisis, environmental movements

In 2019, climate reporter Neela Banerjee and environmental historian Dagomar Degroot discussed the research potential of archives and special collections libraries for tracing the history and narratives of climate change through “notions of causality, accountability, uncertainty, and hope” (Banerjee & Degroot, 2019, para 1). Climate change narratives already have a long history, and this can be explored in many ways through archival and special collections research (Banerjee & Degroot, 2019). Institutions that preserve recorded history have an important role to play and the

following research explores this idea through resources found at Bruce Peel Special Collections.

Climate Change and Special Collections

A number of initiatives to collect and record climate literature have already been undertaken by Western and Canadian institutions. These include the United Kingdom antiquarian bookseller initiative *One Hundred Seconds to Midnight* and the University of British Columbia (UBC)'s Rare Books and Special Collections' *Climate Collection* (Peter Harrington London, n.d.; UBC, n.d.). The Canadian federal government also hosts a free database collecting climate literature (Government of Canada, n.d.). All these initiatives are trying not just to document the crisis of climate change, but to link the documents within to create a persuasive narrative urging us to change our approach to it. These collections hold everything from scientific literature to speculative fiction, encouraging critical thinking about the present climate crisis and alternate ways of viewing its history and consequences. We believe these initiatives provide an example of how special collections can be active members of climate movements.

Bruce Peel Special Collections and Climate Change

As two employees of Bruce Peel Special Collections at the University of Alberta, we chose to focus on literature related to climate and environmental movements found within our own collections. Bruce Peel Special Collections has collections dedicated to Indigenous knowledge and environmental movements. In the latter collection, particularly, are books written by early environmentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Alfred Russel Wallace. We believe these collections allow us to track the narrative of climate change. A great many past documents look at the direct consequences of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism on the natural world; for instance, Peel's collections document extinct creatures, and early scientific theories about how earth's climate has changed and how humans might have impacted it. Additionally, Peel's collection holds a great many books written during and after colonialism and the Industrial Revolution decrying the destruction and commodification of nature and natural products. We believe these historical documents are important to link to our modern artist book collection.

Artist Books and the Climate Narrative

An artist book is “a medium of artistic expression that uses the form or function of “book” as inspiration,” and is a fairly recent artform that only started to gain prominence in the 1980s (Evenhaugen, 2012). We chose artist books to ground our narrative, as artist books are almost exclusively found in special collections compared to other books. Artist books are also created with very specific intents and themes in mind that are often active responses to our social and political climate. By curating artist books within Peel and connecting them to the other collections, we hope to highlight how special collections items can create modern climate narratives that challenge us to critically think about our past, present, and future.

Coral Reef (2018) – Busquets

Coral Reef, by Carla Busquets, can best be described as a pop-up picture book. Each page is a detailed scene of the ocean—however, on closer inspection, we see white shapes hidden behind the colourful fish and seaweed. These shapes are either dead coral or ocean garbage. The book asks us to consider our relationship to water and oceans, and how capitalist ventures and careless practices have put them at risk. We chose to connect these books to works in the Peel library by Rachel Carson. Rachel Carson was a marine biologist whose books were unique in the way they were written: scientific, but personal and friendly, asking us to see the ocean through the eyes of the creatures that lived there. Her books were instrumental in popularizing marine conservation efforts. Both Carson and Busquets ask us to take a close-up look at how humans force change in ocean climates.

Alice and Antius (2021) – Ingram & Tosswill

This book is a poetry epic following two lovers, Alice and Antius, set against the backdrop of a climate apocalypse. The book’s smoky pink sunsets were directly inspired by the forest-fire-impacted sunsets in Edmonton in the summer of 2021. As we grapple with this new reality of smoky summer skies, it is particularly poignant to see it documented and preserved in an artist book that is now housed in special collections in this way, communicating to future researchers both the lived experiences during this time and our imaginings regarding future climate consequences. Comparatively, we

also found an 1883 Canadian Department of Agriculture pamphlet that addressed and attempted to correct other published works' claims that Canada's prairies were frozen all year round. After countering these claims, it portrays Canada as a warm, farm-friendly climate. As this was likely an attempt to attract European settlers, we conclude that Canadian climate narratives in the 1880s were debated, misrepresented, and were also ultimately being used as propaganda for colonization. When looking at these two sources side by side, the story of Alice and Antius is both the real and imagined future resulting from the impacts that were created, in part, by the unsustainable agriculture and colonization that was being advertised in the 1880s pamphlet.

Poems for an Oil-Free Coast (2012) – Blomer et al.

Poems for an Oil-Free Coast is a poetry anthology artist book in which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and poets were prompted to create pieces in response to the “shipping [of] crude oil through ... Canada's fragile raincoast” (Niedzviecki, n.d.). In between each poem they used extremely thin paper, with art that looks like oil covering the surface of water, perhaps speaking to the embeddedness of climate issues in the “pages” of our lives; it invites the reader to look at the present issues and be present with them. We noted that a lot of the items we found combined poetry and art to communicate about the climate crisis. It is interesting to consider how poetry and art can convey deeper meaning and emotion, as we as a society grapple with this issue. Through the items in the special collections, we can also trace humanity's tendency to not only view nature, but also the climate crisis, through a poetic lens.

Words on the Edge of the Abyss (2019) – Atwood et al.

Words on the Edge of the Abyss is also an artist book poetry anthology, consisting of twenty-six poems in total printed on letterpress printers in broadside format. The poems feature themes of both reflecting on how this climate crisis was created as well as leaving messages for future generations. We chose to connect these books to early editions of Emerson's *Nature* and Thoreau's *Walden*. By extolling the beauty and importance of nature, both Emerson and Thoreau are said to have inspired later conservationist movements (McNamara, 2019). Both Emerson and Thoreau use

poetic language to ground the minds of their readers into a world where nature is not simply a tool or a place to live, but a valuable, living system that we are part of. These themes are also reflected in *Words on the Edge of the Abyss* despite the approximately 150-year gap between this work and the others.

Martyr, Mercury, & Rooster (2004) – Heft & Morin

This artist book looks at different themes that all connect to dying. Each of the three themes is bound in a separate booklet of recycled paper. Mercury, in particular, relates to our unsustainable industrial practices and use of unstable substances as a factor in killing our environment, which we believe is the “martyr” of this particular booklet. Each page has text or prints about the dangers of using materials not fully understood for the sake of industry. Images of fishing, agriculture, and other activities make up the prints—and on each page is an engraved image of a machine, permanently scarring each piece of recycled paper with the image of industry. This book reflects themes found in a great many Peel collections, such as anti-pesticide, anti-buffalo-killing, and anti-deforestation narratives in our entomology, Indigenous, and environmental science collections, respectively.

Conclusion

In short, we can use these artist books, and the themes within, to create a narrative we can connect to our past, present, and future regarding climate change. We have looked at how artist books, which are unique special collections items, can debate the past, present, and future narratives of climate change. Overall, special collections and archives have a role to play in climate change activism by documenting and preserving the history as well as highlighting, through the work of collecting and curating, the contributions and possibilities from works relating to climate. We consider the creation of climate or environmental collections to be one active process that information institutions can take to both combat inaction regarding the climate crisis and also to preserve these narratives as evidence for future generations.

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