“Capacity to Save”:
Preservation and Ownership of Archival Memory in the Near-Future Caribbean

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This paper seeks to outline the complicated ownership issues that exist in Caribbean collections as a result of colonial history and its present formations. As climate change creates ruptures in the archival record, by the reinstatement of neocolonial control or by disaster’s effects, it is crucial to view these ruptures as part and parcel of same project, the accumulation and extraction of the Earth’s resources in order to support the unequal balance of globalized capitalism. I argue that the issue of custody and community ownership of records in the postcolonial context is more crucial than appeals to conservation, which can be used to conceal and further neocolonial control and displacement of community memory.

In 1988, the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite's house in Irish Town, Jamaica was destroyed by Hurricane Gilbert. Within his house was his own personal archive and library, "one of the largest & most important archives of Caribbean literature & culture in the world… It contains a record – since I keep almost everything – of many of our writers' progress (drafts unpublished manuscripts letters diaries artifacts books books books thousands of miles of tapes LPs)."[1] The destruction of Brathwaite's archive at the hand of climatic disaster is explored in his book *Shar (Hurricane Poem)*, which calls for a sense of urgency and action *before* the disaster comes. As Herron advises in her introduction: "Don't wait until you hear that fire or flood destroy Bratwaite house to say that you sorry an start runnin arounn about what to do what to do how can we help etc etc etc."[2] Climate change is present and already posing ontological and epistemic threats to known modes of being. Not all such modes of being are given the same value within the current global economic system. So too are the documents and records of a nation, a people, or a community inherited into this value system, as storytellers for their lived experience. These divisions of value become increasingly defined and disparate when confronted with the threat of global precarity. Within the Caribbean context, the long extensions of drought and increasingly intense catastrophic storms[3] exacerbate a region already fraught with socioeconomic pressure, created by a history of colonial control and underdevelopment. I look to write alongside Jeanette Allis Bastian and Alison Donnell's

[1] Herron, Carolivia and Kamau Brathwaite. "Shar: Hurricane Poem." *Mona, Kingston, Jamaica. Savacou* (1990). The introduction to this text, titled "Saving the Word," was delivered by Carolivia Herron in 1988 prior to a reading of Brathwaite's nascent text that would become "Shar: Hurricane Poem."
[2] Ibid. Herron.
[3] Taylor, Dr. Michael. "Climate Change in the Caribbean – Learning Lessons from Irma and Maria." *The Guardian*, October 6, 2017, sec. Environment. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/06/climate-change-in-the-caribbean-learning-lessons-from-irma-and-maria.

work in outlining the complicated ownership issues that exist in Caribbean collections as a result of colonial history and its present formations. As climate change creates ruptures in the archival record, by the reinstatement of neocolonial control or by disaster's effects, it is crucial to view these ruptures as part and parcel of same project, the accumulation and extraction of the Earth's resources in order to support the unequal balance of globalized capitalism. I argue that the issue of custody and community ownership of records in the postcolonial context is more crucial than appeals to conservation, which can be used to conceal and further neocolonial control and displacement of community memory. In this paper, I will layout a general framework, and subsequently conduct a literature review assessing current conceptions of disaster preparedness and alternative archival dimensions emerging in the wake of climate change.

The archival project as constructed in its continental, professionalized context is one that gathers up the past and organizes and coheres it into narrative, in hopes that it will shape the future. In determining the values of a future archival record, there must be understanding around the archives' past role in the colonial state apparatus and how the same structures persist today in new contexts. Jeannette Allis Bastian's book, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*, discusses the case of the U.S. Virgin Islands and how its records' displacement to Denmark and the United States has affected the creation of a collective historical memory.[4] Beyond the acquisition of colonial records into Rigsarkivet (the Danish National Archives), the accessioning of records to the United States National Archives persisted until 1959. Few historical records

[4] Bastian, Jeannette Allis. 2003. *Owning memory: how a Caribbean community lost its archives and found its history*.

remain in the custody of local repositories in the Virgin Islands due to the process of records extraction. Along with the designated mandate of a National Archives as a centralized repository for governmental records, preservation was an issue that acted as a driving force for the removal of records from the Virgin Islands.[5] Compounded with the tropical climate's deteriorating effects on paper, hurricanes and emancipation rebellions threatened the existence of government buildings and their records repositories. Alison Donnell writes of the "dual sense of belonging" experienced by Caribbean authors, particularly Caribbean writers of color, who at once are implicated as colonial subjects, both politically and culturally, while also acting as representatives of the postcolonial nation born out of independence.[6] This notion of duality is represented in Caribbean archival holdings, as the grip of colonial rule creates a shared provenance in the records created surrounding the colonized nation. Many of these records hold information crucial to marginalized communities affected by histories of slavery and indentured labor. The contestation around archival custody exists in the colonial context as mandated by ownership and governance of the land, but as Bastian argues, records are also crucial to the ownership of community memory.[7] While the notion of a totalizing community memory can be problematized, it must be acknowledged that the tools for record creation, preservation, and access are unequally distributed. Supporting information systems built by and for communities requires transforming traditional resource allocation and foundational principles on which LIS institutions are built. Achille Mbembe writes on the

[5] Ibid. Bastian. 26.
[6] Donnell, Alison. 2018. "Caribbean Literary Archives and the Politics of Location: Challenging the Norms of Belonging." In *The Future of Literary Archives*, edited by David C. Sutton and Ann Livingstone, 15–32. Diasporic and Dispersed Collections at Risk. Arc Humanities Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvfxvcqc.6.
[7] Ibid. Bastian. 3-5.

insidious nature of colonization in memory institutions, calling for an "expansive sense of citizenship… which itself means nothing without a deep commitment to some idea of public-ness."[8] Conceiving of the archives from outside of its traditional framework of evidential or informational value requires an assessment of impact that takes into account the affective value of archival materials.[9] Working towards a decolonial framework from within the archival paradigm means contesting the historical grounds on which it was founded, and for whom it was built.

In situations of catastrophe, how are information professionals to respond to the preservation of communities and their memory, rather than the conservation of static materials? This question is prescient for the future of Caribbean memory institutions, which are faced with the biases of an archival field rooted in its traditionalist values. In review of the first Caribbean Archives Conference located in Grenada in 1965, American archivist T.R. Schellenberg summarizes the issues of preservation faced by the archivists present, qualifying his description with a value-judgment: "Although less sophisticated than the discussions at meetings of the Society of American Archivists, the general sessions, in a very practical way, served to elucidate the elementary problems that are encountered in countries where inadequate attention has been given to research materials."[10] His comment reveals the bias present in discussions surrounding preservation and expertise in the Caribbean. Rather than evaluating the structural problems that create barriers to adequate resources, Schellenberg critiques this simply as "inadequate attention."

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[8] Mbembe, Achille. "Decolonizing knowledge and the question of the archive." *Aula magistral proferida* (2015).
[9] Caswell, Michelle, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci, and Marika Cifor. 2017. "'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': Community Archives and the Importance of Representation." *Archives and Records* 38 (1): 17.
[10] Schellenberg, T. 1966. "Caribbean Archives Conference, 1965." *The American Archivist* 29 (3): 387–88.

Schellenberg's influence in archival practices is felt today in the modes of discourse surrounding the values given to records. Despite Schellenberg's judgment of the work being done in the Caribbean, the second conference in 1975 included a draft of resolutions and commitments for participating nations, with one concerning the issue of records custody:

> "That overseas countries holding archives of interest to the region be asked to make them known by similar means, to assist in their microfilming and dissemination wherever possible, and to give favorable consideration to requests to transfer documents originating from archives formed on the territory of other countries or relating to their history."[11]

This resolution reveals the need for autonomy over the colonial record, as formed around the 1960s and 70s, an era when many Caribbean nations were gaining independence. While tied to nation-building and postcolonial reconstruction, the restored public record also plays a key role in constructing a sense of the "public," as a concept. The archival field's rhetoric around preservation is and will surely change due to climatic shifts; and as such, it is important to keep the issues of custody and ownership closely tied to preservation.

In response to the effects of climate change, both studied and felt, disaster management has become a key area of focus in record-keeping and cultural heritage organizations. The Caribbean Branch of the International Council on Archives (CARBICA) has set its focus on disaster planning with the formation of Caribbean Archives Taskforce for Disaster Preparedness (CARTAS), created in response to Hurricane Ivan's effects on Grenada's archives in 2004.[12] This project focuses on "building infrastructures for rapid

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[11] Holmes, Oliver. 1976. "The International Scene: Report on the Second Caribbean Archives Conference October 27-31, 1975." *The American Archivist* 39 (1): 72.

[12] Matthews, Graham, Yvonne Smith, and Yvonne Smith. 2016. *Disaster Management in Archives, Libraries and Museums*. Routledge. 79.

post-disaster assessments, and developing a risk and vulnerability assessment component" through partnerships of support, in attempting to mitigate archival loss.[13] Layered within the larger network of the ICA, which has its own ties to UNESCO, CARBICA creates a more local and vital network of support from within the Caribbean. Due to histories of underdevelopment, limited resources available for Caribbean memory institutions can often mean that organizational models are borrowed from established and heavily standardized organizations. This raises the question of power and perspective in the models that are used to address preservation in the Caribbean. For instance, at the University of the West Indies Mona Library in Jamaica, librarians worked to institute a Preservation Awareness Week to address the challenges of developing preservation strategies for libraries, archives and museums, developing their strategy off of the model used by the American Library Association (ALA).[14] The resources provided by ALA are important for creating accessible practices, but we must also consider how universalized strategies are often inadequate to fit the needs of diverse populations. Librarians Tereza A. Richards and Dunstan Newman acknowledge the role human and financial resources play in allowing for the establishment of preservation practices, which can be difficult to advocate for (let alone design) amidst more pressing public service concerns. The danger of importing infrastructures from the United States or Europe is revealed and exacerbated by the precarity generated through climate change. Information & Communication Technology companies and private contractors infiltrate these spaces at risk and replace the public safety net with devastating effects on communities, a process Naomi Klein identifies as

[13] "CARTAS." *CARBICA*. https://carbica.org/Projects/CARTAS.aspx.
[14] Newman, Dunstan, and Tereza A. Richards. "Caribbean Library Journal Volume 3" 3: 18.

disaster capitalism.[15] Implicated within a neocolonial global economic system, projects and contracts written under the guise of disaster aid are not unconditional. They are rather designed with intent to further the extractive flow of resources[16] and systematize erasure of the most vulnerable.[17] As climate disasters in the region continue to ramp up, the dissolution of autonomy and systems governance can result in the loss of crucial infrastructures and networks for preserving community memory.

While preventative disaster planning has taken root in the discussion of climate, one can see the existing support infrastructures (and the lack thereof) in the mobilization of relief for post-Hurricane Maria Puerto Rico. Hilda Teresa Ayala-González has created a useful timeline of recovery efforts for Puerto Rico's libraries, archives and museums, which spans the year following the 2017 disaster.[18] The timeline outlines the constellation of partnerships, relief funds, reconstruction projects, and donations made in the effort to establish security for memory institutions, their collections, and their workers. Compounded, the diverse aid networks that came to the fore show the plurality of methods used to recover damaged materials and bolster reconstruction. As an archive itself, the timeline makes a case for the utility and power of grassroots documentary projects as one such tool.

The framework outlined by Anthony Carrigan in his paper, "Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies," is useful here for addressing the structural and cultural inequalities

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[15] Klein, Naomi. *The battle for paradise: Puerto Rico takes on the disaster capitalists*. Haymarket Books, 2018.
[16] Gómez-Barris, Macarena. *The extractive zone: Social ecologies and decolonial perspectives*. Duke University Press, 2017.
[17] Boyles, Christina. "Decolonizing Disaster: Surviving Surveillance in Post-hurricane Puerto Rico" *Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities* (blog). https://mith.umd.edu/dialogues/dd-spring-2019-christina-boyles/.
[18] Ayala-González, Hilda Teresa. "Puerto Rico's Libraries, Archives and Museums Road to Recovery: Introduction." http://scalar.usc.edu/works/prlamrecovery/introduction.

embedded in disaster planning and recovery efforts.[19] As applied to the preservation of records and cultural materials in the Caribbean, there needs to be wider understanding of how "neutral," technocratic solutions erase the particular needs of communities and institutions. In expanding the definition of disaster to include the colonization of information systems and erasure of public memory, the postcolonial lens calls upon the massive, abstract timescales of climate change as a socio-political process concerning human, extra- and non-human actors.[20]

As repositories in the Caribbean continue to feel the dramatic effects of climate on their own preservation, efforts to recuperate and manage ownership have taken form in the realm of digitization. The Digital Library of the Caribbean, in partnership with the University of Florida and the Florida Digital Archive, have begun to back-up their collections in direct response to the preservation issues felt by local repositories and archives:

> "In addition to its mission of providing scholars with open access to rare Caribbean resources, dLOC is also dedicated to the long-term digital preservation of all materials hosted in its collections. The present need for such action in the Caribbean is urgent, especially in consideration of the region's volatile climate, which renders a more traditional approach to preservation a daunting challenge for even the finest archives and repositories."[21]

This policy note, titled "Preserving Caribbean Heritage," points to the urgency of altering preservation methods due to climatic upheaval. While not invoking climate change

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[19] Carrigan, Anthony. "Towards a postcolonial disaster studies." In *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities*, pp. 135-157. Routledge, 2015.
[20] Lindblad, Purdom. "Archives in the Anthropocene." *Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities* (blog). March 20, 2018. https://mith.umd.edu/archives-in-the-anthropocene/.
[21] "About dLOC: Digitization." *Digital Library of the Caribbean*. https://www.dloc.com/dloc1/digit.

explicitly, there is awareness of the present and future need to act in response to the increasing precarity of Caribbean heritage materials. Another digitization project of note is the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), which offers grant funding to create digitized records of at-risk materials (pertaining particularly to "pre-industrial societies") to be retained both locally and at the British Library. Here, provisions are made regarding the custodial retention of the original materials:

> "The original archival material will not leave the country of origin except in exceptional cases when it is required to do so temporarily for specific conservation or copying purposes. Even then, this will only be permissible with the written approval from the relevant governmental authority and the material will be returned to the country of origin once the reason for its temporary removal has been fulfilled. At least two surrogate sets of all material copied are made – one to be deposited at the British Library and the other to remain in the country of origin at the designated archival partner institution to facilitate access by local researchers."[22]

The EAP reserves ownership and custody of the original materials with the local institution or repository, while retaining a digital copy for the British Library's online archives. This globally sourced archive has created several Caribbean collections, including materials from Anguilla, Cuba, Barbados and more. It is important to consider the practical benefits that such a project has offered to communities, by providing a preservation infrastructure, bolstering local capabilities, and enabling wider access to the materials.[23] Without discounting the real need being fulfilled for local institutions at the British Library's expense, it is important to consider the context in which these online repositories are being

[22] "About." Endangered Archives Programme. September 11, 2017. https://eap.bl.uk/about.
[23] Kominko, Maja, ed. *From Dust to Digital: Ten years of the Endangered Archives Programme*. Open Book Publishers, 2015.

designed, and how their epistemological structure can underserve these communities. Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan suggest using participatory models to "[position] users as the designers of their own systems," such that community knowledge is framed itself by the community.[24] Truly participatory projects are incredibly difficult to implement, as they entail a great amount of labor and resources that are not often available across institutions. The Caribbean Memory Project (CMP) is one case of a participatory, digital archive that exists for Caribbean individuals, families, and institutions to digitize their own stories and materials, with the mission of "counteracting the effects of erasure and forgetting."[25] Projects such as the CMP are important for establishing a foundational infrastructure that is born out of community production, and in service of that community. Digital efforts to remedy the preservation issues facing the Caribbean are complex and multi-directional; however, Jessica Marie Johnson credits digital work as a space for emergent forms of community:

> "I think the digital humanities, or doing digital work period, has helped people create maroon — free, black, liberatory, radical — spaces in the academy…DH has offered people the means and opportunity to create new communities. And this type of community building should not be overlooked; it has literally saved lives as far as I'm concerned."[26]

It should be noted that Johnson's vision for digital practice is rooted within community production, not conceiving of the digital as a space absent of sociohistorical formation.

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[24] Shilton, Katie, and Ramesh Srinivasan. "Participatory appraisal and arrangement for multicultural archival collections." *Archivaria* 63 (2007): 96.
[25] "About Caribbean Memory Project." The Caribbean Memory Project. http://www.caribbeanmemoryproject.com/about.html.
[26] Johnson, Melissa Dinsman interviews Jessica Marie. "The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Jessica Marie Johnson." Los Angeles Review of Books. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/digital-humanities-interview-jessica-marie-johnson/.

Issues of community memory and ownership can be addressed using the networked relationships made possible by digital systems, yet this is always contingent on the involvement of community within such a system's production.

Amidst disaster, archivists, librarians, and information workers will be called upon to preserve records and information that can be activated to aid their communities, in the Caribbean and beyond. By building information systems that prepare for a future of potential catastrophe, the preservation of community memory, and its agency within that community, should be a priority for record-keepers and cultural institutions. Working with communities to preserve their memory can take many forms, from developing disaster planning strategies to digitally copying materials to supporting community-led documentation. None of these efforts escape the issue of the historic and globally ingrained unequal distribution of resources, and therefore, information workers must act (pro-actively) with this knowledge in mind before restorative work can be done. To return to the words of Carolivia Herron in facing the wreckage of Brathwaite's literary archive: "many times the Western epics supersede the Third World epics to such an extent that there is not enough energy or interest in those of us who have the capacity to save words, to go to the places where these poems and epics are being spoken and sung, to save them."[27] As offered here in Herron's words, the role of the archives and archivists might not be merely to save these materials, a task that is always reactionary and working amongst scarcity, but rather to actively give communities the capacity to own and preserve their own histories and futures.

[27] Herron, Carolivia and Kamau Brathwaite. "Shar: Hurricane Poem." *Mona, Kingston, Jamaica. Savacou* (1990).

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