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Introduction: Compiling 'Endangered Knowledge'

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Résumé de l'article

This essay introduces a special issue of KULA on the subject of 'endangered knowledge,' comprising 22 essays by 34 authors working across a wide array of disciplines and fields. Guest editors Samantha MacFarlane, Rachel Mattson, and Bethany Nowviskie have assembled a collection of scholarly articles, pedagogical reflections, and project reports that take up theoretical and practical considerations of archival salvage and erasure, the persistence of the public record, indigenous knowledge, and the politics of loss. The special issue explores endangerment as a critical category of analysis for records, data, collections, languages, ecosystems, and networks.

EDITORIAL

Introduction: Compiling 'Endangered Knowledge'

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This essay introduces a special issue of KULA on the subject of 'endangered knowledge,' comprising 22 essays by 34 authors working across a wide array of disciplines and fields. Guest editors Samantha MacFarlane, Rachel Mattson, and Bethany Nowviskie have assembled a collection of scholarly articles, pedagogical reflections, and project reports that take up theoretical and practical considerations of archival salvage and erasure, the persistence of the public record, indigenous knowledge, and the politics of loss. The special issue explores endangerment as a critical category of analysis for records, data, collections, languages, ecosystems, and networks.

The 22 essays comprising this special issue of *KULA* come from a place of vulnerability and take up themes of knowledge endangerment across a wide array of disciplines and fields. Composed by 34 authors working internationally—including independent scholars and those with college and university appointments; librarians and archivists in established institutions of cultural memory and in grassroots, community archives; lawyers, publishers, public servants, artists, and leaders of nonprofit organizations; knowledge workers in predominantly white institutions and in historically black or other 'minority-serving' organizations; graduate students and Fulbright fellows—they present their ideas in some genres of writing that readers may find unconventional in an academic journal. These include (alongside more traditional scholarly articles) pedagogical reflections and teaching materials, and a set of 'project reports' that share the experiences and ambitions of people engaging in a variety of practical and activist ways with the concept of endangered or lost knowledge and with the work that we do, individually and collectively, to press against the inevitability of loss—or sometimes simply come to terms with it. As guest editors for this special issue, we have taken advantage of the opportunities posed by a newly established and interdisciplinary journal to welcome disparate voices and to invite our contributors to write in ways that felt true to their material, their partnerships, and the values of their professions.

We present here theoretical and practical considerations of questions relating to archival salvage and erasure, the persistence of the public record, indigenous knowledge, and the politics of loss. Although imperfect and blunt, our term 'endangered knowledge' is meant to conjure a larger set of emerging ideas that cross disciplinary, practical, and professional boundaries. It was inspired in part by recent initiatives addressing the precarious state of public information under the Trump administration—efforts like DataRefuge, the Preservation of Electronic Government Information (PEGI) project, projects of the Government Records Transparency and Accountability group at the Digital Library Federation (DLF), and Endangered Data Week—and by conversations held under the banner of 'The Maintainers,' a research collective focused on enduring acts of sustainability and repair within larger cultures of innovation and the new. Finally, we drew on our personal scholarly and professional backgrounds in collaborating to edit the special issue. Our own work in community archives and academic libraries; in media and LGBTQ collections-building; in history and literary studies; in bibliography and textual scholarship; in teaching and organizing; and in the methods and aims of archival practice and the digital humanities informs and sustains us.

In soliciting contributions, we sought to explore endangerment as a critical category of analysis for records, data, collections, languages, ecosystems, and networks—and to consider the cultural and existential stakes of the dissemination and preservation of material at risk of disappearing, whether that risk stems from inherent ephemerality, environmental loss, a lack of proper preservation measures and care, or acts of deliberate erasure.

In truth, the stuff of cultural memory has forever been 'endangered.' Threats come from many sources to public access and the long-term preservation of records, objects, texts, and systems that contain, transmit, and enable the production of knowledge. Among these are the ravages of time, fire, floods, vermin and rot, mismanagement and poor planning, war and political upheaval, greed, structural racism, cultural annihilation, and genocide. And despite widespread rhetoric about the salvific virtues of the digital (and misunderstandings about the relation of digitization to preservation), dangers to the cultural record seem only to have multiplied with our growing reliance on information in rapidly proliferating formats and fragile networks, often existing under hostile regimes.

The essays, teaching reflections, and project reports assembled here ask: how might we preserve and most effectively disseminate knowledge in the face of environmental, political, financial, infrastructural, and related risks? What types of data are most at risk and what are the implications of their loss? What are the key values governing the preservation of knowledge in various communities and at different scales? How can we best grapple with the politics of data absence and destruction, and better develop methods and ethics of information preservation and knowledge transmission—suited to the world as we wish to know and share it, and the world that is to come?

They do not answer these questions definitively. Neither have we attempted to assemble an exhaustive collection of toolsets and disciplinary lenses that may be brought to bear. Instead, we invite you to engage with contributing authors and the projects and ideas they share, and to reflect on how an 'endangered knowledge' framework might illuminate, challenge, or bolster your own work.

Competing Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare.