The Poetry of Government Information

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Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* is one of those beloved poetry books that everyone kept telling me to read, but somehow I never got around to it until recently.[1] Imagine my surprise to find government documents librarianship at the crux of the story! In Carson's poetic novel, our hero Geryon is so full of artistic and erotic passion that he appears as a winged red monster. After he is dumped by a lover, "Geryon's life entered a numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste," a poetic dark-night-of-the-soul rendered metaphorically as a job shelving government documents in a joyless library basement.[2] The forlorn, distinctly unpoetic texts are stored on shelves labeled in all caps, "EXTINGUISH LIGHT WHEN NOT IN USE."[3] This accuracy of detail suggests that back in 1998 when the poem was written Carson had most likely encountered an actual Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) collection. Nonetheless, she is kind to the librarians who occupy their dusty world willingly and consider Geryon "a talented boy with a shadow side."[4] Now that so much government information is online, this gloomy subterranean library may someday come to seem like pure imagination, a poet's fanciful invention of an impossibly drab occupation.

Yet government information is not without its poetic side. The title of *Whereas*, a 2017 National Book Award finalist by Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier, refers to the *Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans* signed by President Barack Obama on December 19, 2009.[5] Long Soldier points out that "no tribal leaders or official representatives were invited to witness and receive the Apology," which was later unceremoniously buried deep inside the *2010 Defense Appropriations Act*.[6] Perhaps because American Indian tribes are so closely tied to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, government publications crop up especially frequently in works by indigenous poets. In his collection *First Indian on the Moon*, Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d'Alene) has one poem titled "How to Obtain Eagle Feathers for Religious Use" that references federal wildlife laws, and another called "On the Amtrak from Boston to New York City" in which the poet politely conceals his irritation with a talkative white woman as the government-run train chugs through a stolen indigenous landscape.[7] In her collection *National Monuments,* Ojibwe poet Heid E. Erdrich references the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act*.[8] Her subsequent collection, *Curator of Ephemera at the New Museum for Archaic Media*, focuses on themes of cultural preservation and should be essential reading for all librarians. It opens with an ekphrastic poem titled "Curatorial Statement for *Wiindigo* Eye," in which the artist's DNA is cited as a non-visible element of the artwork that "creates an image of the indigenous corpus."[9] Librarians will also be amused by the way Erdrich deliberately employs QR Codes to represent ephemeral media phenomena.

The emergence of the environmental humanities as an academic discipline has created a new clientele for government information among poets and writers. Planning documents such as Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) or Resource Management Plans (RMP) offer a kind of detailed place-based history that is hard to find elsewhere. *Breathing the West: Great Basin Poems* by Liane Ellison Norman is based on journals her father kept while he worked for the US Forest Service.[10] There is an entry for the collection in *Great Basin Experimental Range: Annotated Bibliography* that notes, "Of the 70 poems included in this book, 14 treat life at the Station and another 11 are descriptive, philosophical, or insightful of ecology and natural history drawn from her father's journal entries or her experiences at the Station."[11] Nature poetry, particularly from the United Sates, is often inspired by experiences on public lands, especially the extraordinary landscapes managed by the National Park Service. Indeed, C. L. Rawlins titled his book of regional poetry *In Gravity National Park* to evoke the way that public lands shape the character of the American West.[12] "BioBlitz" events to document biodiversity in National Parks

inspired *A Poetic Inventory of Seguaro National Park* as well as *A Poetic Inventory of Rocky Mountain National Park*, the latter bound to resemble a guidebook.[13] You can take it with you to deepen the emotional impact of your summer vacation.

Government regulation and policy can serve to protect natural beauty, but can also cause environmental and social harm. Energy policy drives destructive land use practices described in activist poetry collections such as *Shale Play* about the fracking boom in the Marcellus Shale or *Coal: A Poetry Anthology* about mining in Appalachia.[14] In G. C. Compton's coal poem "The Strip Miner's Psalm to John C.C. Mayo Holy Father of the Broad Form Deed," he lampoons the inefficacy of government safely regulations: "Yea, though I mine through the valley of the shadow of death, / I will fear no evil: for MSHA and OSHA art with me."[15] Likewise, in the anthology, *Fracture: Essays, Poems, and Stories of Fracking in America*, Rachel Morgan writes, "In the fracking fields, burn-off glows / and roads connect, but lanes and places / lead nowhere"—a clear reference to the Obama-era EPA methane rule threatened with regulatory roll-back by President Trump.[16]

Government information frequently turns up in poetry with a social justice focus. Cameron Conway's *Malaria Poems* about the global threat of insect-borne disease was named one of NPR's best books of 2014.[17] In notes to accompany the poems, Conway cites the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the US Surgeon General, development of antimalarial drugs by the US Army, and World Health Organization guidelines for Artimisinin-based combination therapies.[18] Poems in Rob Carney's *88 Maps* refer to federal and state wolf management plans as well as imaginary congressional hearings.[19] He parodies the verbosity of government titles by giving his poems names like, "To the Man Who Scored 300k to Cry Wolf Before Congress on Behalf of Utah, a State in Which there are No Wolves," or "To the Representative on the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, Who in 2012 said, 'Evolution, Big Bang Theory, All That is Lies Straight from the Pit of Hell,' I Offer This Quick Study on Natural Selection, in Which the Eagle is Thought; the River is Reason; the Salmon is Insight; Tomorrow is a Salmon; and the Crows, of Course, Are You."[20] On *New Verse News*, a website that publishes progressive poetic responses to current events, recent poems have included references to government publications as varied as the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, Oregon State Senate hearings on *SB 608 Relating to Residential Tenancies* to enact a statewide rent control policy, and the recent shift in magnetic poles documented by NOAA.[21]

It's an amusing game to seek out government information in poetry, but is it relevant to the practice of librarianship? I believe that it is, since poetry can fundamentally change the relationship between librarians and government documents collections. We are accustomed to emphasizing the documentary, fact-based aspect of publications that record government activity, yet integrated with the humanities, documents tell a profoundly human story. Poetry shows us how government information is expressive of human relationships with the land, oppression and justice, and activism to make the world a better place. In Anne Carson's poem, the ghostly librarians offer a temporary refuge to a bright spirit. Once we librarians become aware of the bright spirit in even the most drab government publications we can start to imagine better ways to nurture it.

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