Rethinking Textuality in the Climate Crisis

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Review of Anne Baillot, *From Handwriting to Footprinting: Text and Heritage in the Age of Climate Crisis*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023. vi + 171 pp. ISBN 978-1-80511-088-0 (hardback), £32.95; ISBN 978-1-80511-087-3 (paperback), £19.95; ISBN 978-1-80511-089-7 (PDF), free to read online and download at https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0355.

Anne Baillot's *From Handwriting to Footprinting: Text and Heritage in the Age of Climate Crisis* offers a timely and sharply argued inquiry into the environmental costs of textual production, publishing, archiving, and preservation. Interweaving digital humanities theory with environmental critique, Baillot asks how the infrastructures enabling access to textual heritage—whether in print or digital form—contribute to the climate crisis and what can be done to mitigate their impact. By scrutinizing the material underpinnings of textual access and preservation, Baillot calls for a re-politicization of digital textuality in a time of climate crisis.

The first two chapters draw on Baillot's long-standing work in the fields of literary studies and digital humanities to examine the material conditions of archiving and publishing—tracing their technical infrastructures, methodological assumptions, and embedded social relations. In Chapter 1, "*Archiving Text*," Baillot explores the political and epistemological foundations of archives, emphasizing how selection and preservation practices reflect power dynamics. Referencing Goethe's self-archival efforts in 19th-century Germany, she shows how canon formation is deeply entwined with archival politics. Chapter 2, "*Publishing, Editing, and Their Digital Transformation*," analyzes how digital infrastructures shape textual production and access, critiquing proprietary constraints, binary formats, and invisible labor. Baillot advocates for open, sustainable, and interoperable practices—such as XML-TEI—that support care, transparency, and long-term accessibility.

In the third chapter, "*What the Climate Crisis Does to Text*," Baillot shifts focus to the environmental impact of accessing, producing, and preserving text in both physical and digital forms. She reveals the hidden ecological costs of digital infrastructures—servers, devices, formats—and critiques the myth of unlimited access. Advocating for energy-sober, shared, and ethically informed editorial practices, she proposes minimalist formats, decentralized infrastructures, and new educational pathways to reduce

the textual footprint. Drawing on the making of the book itself as a case study, Baillot unpacks the carbon footprint of textual production and dissemination, including the environmental impact of server-based digital storage. This self-reflective approach enables a lucid critique of the illusion that digital textuality represents a linear progression toward sustainability.

One of the book's central tensions lies in the effort to reconcile technological innovation with environmental responsibility. While Baillot recognizes that digital tools have transformed scholarly and cultural work—facilitating the preservation and dissemination of texts across time and geography—she warns against the unchecked optimism that often accompanies these shifts. Publishing digital infrastructures, she argues, are deeply entangled with extractive economies that deplete natural resources, generate e-waste, and exacerbate socio-environmental inequalities. Unpacking the microeconomies behind scholarly communication, she examines the energy demands of high-resolution scanning, cloud storage, and online dissemination, as well as the life cycle of the digital tools involved—from servers to data centers. If Jussi Parikka's *A Geology of Media* (2015) made visible the environmental harms of media technologies, Baillot applies these insights to the infrastructures of digital textuality, foregrounding the material and ethical dimensions of scholarly publishing.

A particularly compelling aspect of the book is Baillot's sustained critique of the notion that digital access equates to "access for all." She highlights the structural inequalities embedded in digital infrastructures, showing how high-speed internet, costly hardware, and sophisticated platforms privilege wealthier countries and institutions. What emerges is a sobering picture of "access for the rich" (Baillot 2023, 115), in which the environmental and financial burdens of digital dissemination fall disproportionately on less-resourced contexts (so-called Global South countries). In this light, Baillot links the seductive promise of openness to the risk of digital bloat. While she does not dismiss open access, she argues for ecologically accountable models that prioritize sustainability over the unchecked accumulation of digitized text.

One of the book's most innovative contributions is its epistemological reframing of textual preservation. "My goal is to frame the question of access to text and of archiving textual traces in an epistemological context so that it can be redefined, based on the premise that we do not dispose of infinitely available resources," Baillot writes (2023, 113). From this perspective, she advocates the strategic limitation of digital archiving: not every manuscript needs to be digitized, nor every edition preserved indefinitely. This ethical inquiry—what to preserve, what to let go—raises difficult questions often glossed over in publishing discourse. Baillot does not propose prescriptive checklists for green archiving, but calls instead for an ethical reorientation: a dialectic between preservation and destruction that resists digital hoarding while valuing textual heritage.

Still, Baillot's proposal for strategic limitation would benefit from a more explicit engagement with the politics of selection already shaping the archival field—choices historically driven by institutional, economic, and colonial legacies. What gets archived, and by whom, has never been a neutral process. The filtering of textual traces is already embedded in power structures, and while Baillot acknowledges this, it remains somewhat underdeveloped in the book's otherwise rigorous analysis.

Another important dimension of Baillot's intervention is her call to reorient textual practices toward shared, low-energy infrastructures. Instead of privileging technological novelty, she advocates material accountability: decentralized, community-based approaches to archiving that resist extractive, large-scale models. This position resonates with Janneke Adema and Samuel A. Moore's (2021) call in "Scaling Small; Or How to Envision New Relationalities for Knowledge Production" to design infrastructures that support epistemic diversity and resist the drive to scale. Baillot also calls for a more radical shift in reading practices, drawing on historical precedents such as 18th-century reading societies to propose collective modes of access. Community libraries, digital commons, and cooperative platforms, she suggests, could significantly reduce the environmental burden of knowledge circulation. Her examples—such as platforms that host minimalist web pages or projects such as Copim that offer sustainable models of open access—ground the book in pragmatic, actionable strategies.

The book's greatest strength lies in its self-reflexive mode. Baillot does not speak from a distance; she weaves her personal and professional experience into the text. Her efforts to implement low-energy publishing practices during the production of the book itself—developed in collaboration with Open Book Publishers—give the argument material weight. Yet this is also where the book's limitations emerge. While the critique of infrastructures is structurally situated, there is an occasional drift toward individual responsibility and practices—particularly within relatively low-impact sectors such as publishing—without adequate comparison to higher-impact industries. Some comparative data or even a brief contrastive analysis would have strengthened her claim and highlighted the disproportionate burdens being placed on cultural producers.

Still, *From Handwriting to Footprinting* stands as an urgent call for climate-conscious scholarship. It does not offer a universal solution, but rather a call to rethink our epistemic and infrastructural commitments. Baillot's aim is not to scold, but to shift the conceptual terrain: to challenge researchers, publishers, archivists, and policymakers to align knowledge production with ecological responsibility. In this sense, the book is a crucial intervention in publishing studies and sustainability debates—one that compels us to reconsider how we value, store, and circulate knowledge at a moment when ecological accountability is no longer optional.

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