

Curating the Future: Museums, Communities, and Climate Change.* Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin, and Kristen Wehner, eds. New York: Routledge, 2017. 298 pp.

Review by Torben Rick

Climate change is one of the most important issues of the 21st century, with major environmental, social, political, and economic ramifications around the world. It is also an extremely polarizing and highly politicized topic. This is particularly true in the United States of America where, despite overwhelming scientific evidence, prominent elected leaders, government appointees, and a large percentage of the public deny climate change in general and human influence in particular. Enter *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities, and Climate Change*, a new volume edited by Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin, and Kristen Wehner.

The volume includes some thirty-two chapters and thirty-seven authors, and admittedly it is not possible to do justice to all of these in this short review. In chapter 1, Newell, Robin, and Wehner lay the groundwork, outlining the book's major emphasis and goals. They note that the book, "springs from the conviction that climate change demands urgent transformations...and that museums are effective places for supporting conversations about and action on this issue" (1). *Curating the Future* is divided into four parts: Welcoming New Voices: Opening Museums; Reinventing Nature and Culture; Focusing on the Future; and Representing Change and Uncertainty. Various chapters tackle issues of curation, education, representation, and relevance that are central to museums. The authors also issue a challenge to find new approaches for engaging communities around the world and using the museum in its many forms as a springboard for achieving this goal.

Newell, Robin, and Wehner note that this is "an experimental book" (3). The volume includes traditional academic chapters, but these are interspersed with short "Object in View" chapters. These are short notes that present an object and how it relates to the issue of climate change, including everything from a high-wheeler bicycle to a cucumber straightener, a Newfoundland's dog collar, and a *fale samoa*—a simple traditional Samoan wooden hut. I grew to enjoy these as a nice way of breaking up the longer chapters and as a refreshing and different viewpoint on a direct or tangential link to climate change. In addition to the "Object in View" chapters, one of the greatest strengths of the book is its inclusion of many authors from outside of academia. They often incorporate traditional song, stories, and objects in their chapters.

The various chapters are interdisciplinary, including some focused on biological specimens like the recently described mammal, the Olinguito (chapter 17), or the approaches aquaria are using to discuss rising sea levels (chapter 28). At its core, *Curating the Future* focuses on cultural anthropology and is geographically weighted to the Pacific, though there are several European and other chapters as well. Given the major effects of climate change in the Pacific this focus is good in that it helps draw out broader climate change issues (e.g., sea level rise) and places a

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focus back on the response, reaction, or perception of climate change among various communities. Other geographical regions, particularly Asia and Africa, would have made good additions, but this is a minor quibble.

I was most intrigued by the book's final section, a collection of seven chapters. These include some that focus on exhibits related to the proposed new geological epoch, the Anthropocene or Age of Humans. My own museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, will open a gallery on the Anthropocene in 2019 as part of a larger fossil/deep time hall. The approach taken by the Deutsches Museum in *Welcome to the Anthropocene* has some insightful examples of engaging people in thinking about our planet's past, present, and future through objects—like a crocheted coral reef—and a focus on integrating science, art, and history (chapter 31).

I strongly recommend this volume to any scholar interested in climate change and other environmental issues, but more broadly it is relevant to anyone seeking to engage the public about complex and challenging topics. I agree wholeheartedly that museums are often “safe places” (4) to start these conversations. This book would have benefitted from a formal concluding chapter. With such a rich breadth of topics, I would have liked to see a return to themes raised in the introduction and a discussion of how these chapters inter-relate and should drive future work. However, perhaps that is the point? Where we go from here is up to the reader to decide. In that sense, *Curating the Future* is a call to action that makes me look at my own institution and the need to do more to engage people on climate change issues and other challenging topics. There is much food for thought in this volume to help lead that endeavor.

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