



Edgardo Civallero

A library at the edge of the world



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**An interview with Galapagos librarian Edgardo Civallero**

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### **An interview with Galapagos librarian Edgardo Civallero**

The following is the original text of an interview that was published, as *Bibliotēka pasaules malā: Intervija ar Galapagu salu bibliotekāru Edgardo Sivaljero*, by the Latvian National Library on its website (<https://www.biblioteka.lv/biblioteka-pasaules-mala-intervija-ar-galapagu-salu-bibliotekaru-edgardo-sivaljero/>).

#### **What can books do better than anything else?**

I have to confess from the very beginning — I'm not a very big fan of books. I realize how strange this statement may sound, especially coming from a librarian. In my defense, I must say that I have spent a good part of my professional career (spanning for the last 23 years and covering almost all the possible fields and tasks within Library & Information Sciences) working with or supporting rural and indigenous communities, especially in Latin America. When you work in places like those, you realize that knowledge & memory, the material with which we work at GLAMs, can take many different forms, and use many diverse channels: multi-shaped, multi-faced, multi-

lingual containers for human experience. This is true also in huge cities and other urban areas, but it becomes quite evident outside them — far from the noise of the printed word.

Instead of talking about "books", I'd rather prefer to talk about "documents", understood as any potential "carrier" of information & memory. This way, a book becomes as important as a Peruvian Quechua engraved gourd, the hair arrangement of an Afro-Colombian woman, the graffiti and murals in all the South American capitals, some hand-painted, finely patterned Shipibo clothes, or an oral tale by a *llanero* in Venezuela or a *quilombola* in Brazil. By taking this idea on board, I position myself in a postcolonialist, equalitarian place that I have been defending for decades now... even when I did not know what "colonialism", "decolonialism" and "postcolonialism" meant.

Now, back to the question, I believe that all our documents are containers of our more precious treasure: our cultural heritage — the very thing what makes us precisely us, and nothing else. And I think that that's what they do best: keeping our collective social memory alive, sound and safe for the generations to come. Actually, that's what

they have been doing best for all our history as a species — regardless of our occasional, stubborn efforts to destroy them.

**Tell me about your journey of opening a library in the Galápagos islands.**

It's actually a kind-of life story for me. Even if I had a close relationship with books and memory since I was a child, I always wanted to be a biologist. And that was what I studied: Sea Sciences, at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, in the Canary Islands (Spain). Curiously enough, I never presented my final thesis and, therefore, I never graduated. A couple of years later I studied Biology at the National University of Cordoba (Argentina), but I only completed 3 out of 5 years... It was later on, after trying with History and even Law, that I studied Librarianship. The fact is, I could not erase all the skills and knowledge acquired while studying all those previous careers. That information got stuck with me. So, when I graduated on LIS (Library & Information Sciences), most of the earning-a-salary work I did was related to Sciences and Health.

In 2018 I accidentally found the call for a librarian in Galapagos: a position at the Charles Darwin Research Station, managed by the Charles Darwin Foundation, an international NGO devoted to the conservation of the islands' biodiversity. I instantly

felt that the profile was describing me — which was weird, since my profile is quite diverse and complex. I immediately applied and, after a long selection process, I got the job over a hundred other candidates from all over the world.

I recall all the warnings from the people in Galapagos during the selection process: "are you aware that Galapagos is a quite isolated place?", "are you aware that the Internet service is not good?", "are you aware of the distances, the solitude...?" I have to say, I did not pay much attention to these comments... until I finally travelled there (I was living in Spain back then). When I arrived, everything made sense. Yes, Galapagos is a special place. But it is also a very challenging one. Almost 97% of the insular territory is protected by a National Park and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, so the population is concentrated in the other 3%, in 4 different islands. You cannot move from those enclaves. You are 1000 km away from the nearest city in the continent (Guayaquil, Ecuador), you lack a number of important services (including drinkable water from the tap, specialized medicine, or a stable Internet connection) and you are subject to a ton of regulations.

Anyhow, the natural wonders of the islands help to deal with the problems. For in Galapagos, during centuries and centuries, the absence of humans or big predators



made the fauna so fearless that they approach you without too many reserves (although that's changing due to the massive tourism arriving to the archipelago). Some days, when I arrive to my library to open its door, I have to wait until a massive marine iguana decides to leave from the doorway...

### **What does it mean to be the only librarian in the Galápagos islands?**

I was born in Argentina, almost 50 years ago, and I come from what I call "the margins". That fact put me in a self-awareness position from the very beginning. I have been always a militant and an activist of different social & environmental causes, because I know that our voices and our needs at the margins are scarcely heard or met. Therefore, when I studied LIS, I quickly realized the power of knowledge & memory in order to impulse and support social change. From that point on, I have always engaged in social / critical librarianship — what we do as librarians, archivists, museologists, etc. is political and can bring equality, social justice, self-awareness, identity strength, and freedom to our communities.

In that sense, professional commitment and social responsibility have become a very important part of my work. Hence, when I arrived in Galapagos in 2018, the first thing I

did (besides getting familiar with the position I had to fulfil at the Charles Darwin Research Station) was getting in touch with the community.

And the community did not have libraries.

I learnt that in 3 of the 4 inhabited islands there had been municipal libraries somewhere in the past, but local politicians closed it in the belief that they were misused. They probably were — managed, as they were, by some bureaucrat with no knowledge or experience whatsoever about libraries or books. Who would have wanted to visit them, faced with the prospect of a barking, dog-faced "librarian" taking care of the collections as if they were sacred, untouchable objects, and imposing silence everywhere around?

Faced with this situation, and with the responsibility of being the only one in the territory with the know-how and the skills to do something about it, I started working on that topic. But I also had to address many other issues at my main job — the many valuable collections at the Research Station needed urgent care (the library is 50 mt from the sea, in Equatorial islands, in the middle of lush vegetation, so you can imagine the temperature, the pests, and the humidity level). I also had to give sense and

meaning to a wonderful set of documents, many of them unique: I manage the only constant, organized archive in Galapagos and, besides some particular collections, the only museum. Some of the information I handle is nowhere else in the world... That's what I call a responsibility!

After organizing everything a little bit, I connected the work I did at the Station with my outreach work with the community. And everything started to make absolute sense, specially from a social justice-related point of view. But also from a conservationist one, since "conservation" is a social process (supported by a purely scientific one, of course) and needs social interaction above all.

### **How has the presence of accessible books changed the lives of locals?**

The main action I took regarding the community was supporting the reopening of the only surviving library-related space in the islands — a privately-managed, municipally-owned place located in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island, where the Research Station is also located. I explored similar opportunities in the other 3 islands, with no success; in one of them, Floreana, there had never been a library in all its history of human occupation!

So, for the 3 library-less islands I created a mobile library program: the "travelling libraries". They are sets of books that travel by boat, inside suitcases, from Santa Cruz Island to the rest (Isabela, Floreana, and San Cristóbal), and are housed in schools. The contents of the suitcases are agreed beforehand with the teachers, in order to support their work — in the Galapagoan isolation, they suffer a chronic lack of access to vital educational resources. The program is a success (it brought the first library to Floreana ever!), and last year was also implemented in Santa Cruz, besides the fact that the local library at Puerto Ayora was re-opened and it is currently running.

Changes in the lives of the local communities are not evident yet — you cannot (and shouldn't, in my opinion) expect changes to happen so fast. It is a slow process (actually, everything is slow in Galapagos, just like the emblematic giant tortoises) that should wait for proper sedimentation. However, the wonder of seeing the faces of some children with their first book ever in their hands, their curiosity and astonishment, and their delight, is something that I take as a first positive result — and a reward for all the hard work that this kind of program needs. Travelling by boat between islands with a bunch of books in a suitcase is not easy, trust me!

**You've said [in a virtual conference organized by Latvia National Library and UNESCO] that in your case it is impossible to discern a library, an archive, and a museum. You compare it all with a fabric with many intertwining threads. Do you think it is because there hasn't been anything like it on the Galápagos islands or because the libraries have to become more multidisciplinary?**

Hmmm... I think that my statement has nothing to do with my work in Galapagos — although my activities with the CDF collections have helped me to get a clearer understanding of the problem. I think that what I call "knowledge & memory disciplines" are artificially divided into "fields" — e.g. Librarianship, Museology, Archival Sciences, and so forth. After some research, I've come to understand that the origins of those divisions are historical, and have to do with the creation of disciplines, sub-disciplines and extra-specialized sub-sub-disciplines in order to study the universe surrounding us.

The fact is, when you start specializing that much, you began cutting smaller and smaller pieces of that universe in order to study it. In the case of the knowledge & memory disciplines, which work with cultural heritage, you start fragmenting that heritage more and more, and putting those fragments in different places and

containers... I'll give you an example: those who studied the music of the Gunadule indigenous people in Panama put their musical instruments in a museum, their sound recordings in an archive, and the books and papers reflecting their research in a library (using a lot of academic extractivism and cultural appropriation, by the way). And they discarded or ignored a real lot of other information. Now, if you want to understand the music of the Gunadule from the records of our knowledge & memory-related institutions (let's say that Gunadule are extinct, which luckily is not true), you have to compile all the fragments (if you can) and try to reconstruct the original heritage, in a sort of back-engineering exercise. The result is, in general, absolutely incomplete, full of holes and gaps (and quite biased, by the way, since it is usually a Eurocentric, colonial, top-to-bottom approach). It is a mission impossible, and a quite frustrating exercise, if you ask me.

I like to compare the process with the Procrustean bed: the iron bed in which the mythical Greek bandit Procrustes put his victims. If the person was too long, it was cut to fit the bed; if it was too short, it was forcefully stretched... The bed are our disciplinary fields, and the victim, our heritage.

Needless to say, some people within the knowledge & memory disciplines are aware of that, and have engaged in a number of efforts to connect collections, and even processes, guidelines, and standards. But... it always seems to me that what they do is like breaking a plastic sphere in a thousand pieces, smashing it on the floor, and then trying to re-create it back by pasting the few fragments that can be found on the ground. The result would be necessarily imperfect and incomplete!

My main conflict here is that, even if I can identify the issue, I cannot provide a solution to the problem. A different perspective should be necessary in dealing with the conservation and management of our heritage: an integral one, aimed at preserving the entire set of cultural traits and intellectual / artistic products... In some ways, there had been international advances in that area — but there is still a lot to do.

**What are the advantages and joys and what are the challenges of running mobile libraries traveling between islands?**

As I write this, I am preparing my next trip with the "travelling libraries" to Isabela Island, the biggest in the archipelago, so I can correctly ponder my answer.

And I will start with the challenges. Getting on a small boat to travel 2 hours on a generally wavy sea, carrying a bunch of books in a suitcase, is definitely challenging. No accidents have been reported in the last 20 years regarding these boats, but when I disembark, I'm usually seasick to death — and, of course, the masochist part of myself always keeps reminding me that the slightest problem in that sea means to be surrounded by at least 5 species of different sharks (not a big fan!)

Also, preparing the collection inside the suitcases is a real nightmare, for a number of previous personal meetings are needed with teachers and other stakeholders in the islands (and for that, more travels by boat are needed).

Finally, budget is a great issue, since the Charles Darwin Foundation is an NGO, and each area usually has to get its own funding for its projects. Needless to say, getting people to donate money for a library (no matter how amazing it is) is a huge challenge — especially when the competition are projects taking care of the amazing giant tortoises or the cute Galapagos sea lions and penguins... For me, it feels like a continuous, 24/7 struggle to convince people to support my work. And that, fundraising, is a job for which librarians are not generally well prepared (and I could say that I suck at it, but, hey, nobody is perfect, right?)



The advantages? Well, I can travel to all the inhabited islands, have contacts everywhere, learn about needs and gaps, hear personal stories, and of course enjoy the different landscapes, flora and fauna... Also, I can learn more about myself and my own profession, and about why I do what I do — a question, "why?" and "what for?", that librarians are not used to ponder enough (especially outside the international guidelines and textbooks).

And the joys? As I commented above, witnessing children holding their first book (sometimes, when they are 12 years old) is amazing. Witnessing *their parents* holding their first book is even better... Also, being able to explain that all the knowledge & memory is born equal is fantastic: many of the colonists in the islands coming from continental Ecuador belong to two Quechua-speaking indigenous groups (Otavalo and Salasaca), and still suffer the consequences of the cultural colonization so extended in all Latin America. Chatting with them in their own language (I can use some Latin American indigenous languages) is absolutely wonderful.

## **What role have libraries played in your own life? Do you have your favorite libraries?**

I was born in Buenos Aires. There, we have one of the best networks of basic libraries in the world: the "popular libraries". The reason for the "popular" label is that they are created by people, by the community itself. Eventually, if they fulfil a number of features, they are supported by the country's government: all the money collected by Argentina's official Lottery is devoted to them.

As a child, I had the chance to use the library at my school, and the popular library in my neighborhood. I cannot stress enough the importance of access to knowledge & memory, no matter what format, books, or whatever. In a world where misinformation is the rule, where memory-related skills are lost because of quick access to any data through Internet, where writing and research skills are also lost because typing in cellphones and copy-and-paste are the normal thing to do, growing up reading, listening to music, following rivers over the surface of huge maps, etc. felt (and still feels) like a miracle. In time I created my own personal library, full of second-hand books and discarded documents rescued from big libraries... And I visited many, many more. After becoming a professional librarian, I collaborated with libraries in all Latin America, and when I travel (and I'm an avid traveler) I always look for the chance to

visit libraries, to collaborate with them, to lecture or to help, or to chat with librarians over a coffee or a couple of beers (last option preferred!)

My favorite library? Well, right now that is my library in Galapagos, of course. Its door faces the Pacific Ocean, it is surrounded by vegetation, it is visited by blackish marine iguanas and Darwin's finches all day long, and it contains a lot of secrets still to be discovered and explored. I've collected, organized, and shown many of them in *Galapagueana* (<https://galapagueana.darwinfoundation.org>), a digital archive that I designed and keep active myself, aimed at disseminating the social and scientific memory of the islands. But there is still much, much more to see...

**You come from the field of music. How do music and libraries inspire each other in your work?**

Guilty! I'm a musician indeed. I am the proud descendent of a long line of popular musicians, and I already was a musician before I wanted to be anything else. Music (both listening and performing) is a necessary part of my life. Learning about different instruments and how to build and play them is an important part of my daily routine.

Working with indigenous peoples, as I have done extensively, put me in contact with different sound worlds and traditions. In time I was able to understand that sounds and silences are an intertwined element in our global cultural heritage — they help codify and transmit important traditions and stories, they define historical moments, they represent landscapes and territories...

Among those sounds, I think that orality, the spoken word, is the most remarkable one. I learned the importance of oral tradition during my initial contacts with indigenous communities in Argentina: while trying to work with the Qom people, in the north-eastern area of my country, I had the chance to chat with an old man who accepted to talk to me about the history of his community. He spent talking an entire night — and shared with me an important piece of his traditional knowledge & memory, which cannot be found in any library or archive. I understood many things that day, including how important sounds are, and how much damage has been done to some social and ethnic groups all around the world. And how colonial many libraries still are.

Music was a second stage, for a lot of oral tradition comes with the necessary, vital accompaniment of musical instruments or singing. A musical instrument is a document

in itself: it codifies a particular natural environment through its materials, a long building tradition transmitted from generation to generation, a number of stories and local customs, a set of standards, a repertoire including oral literature...

Finally, including the music element in my librarian world helped me to build that "Procrustean perspective" I was talking before. How fragmented our vision is, if we fail to see that all those pieces are part of a unique, single, solid, heterogeneous, wildly diverse panorama!

**You have a book coming out next year. Can you tell us more about it? What inspired you to write it?**

The book is provisionally titled "Libraries in the margins: experiences in Latin America", and it will be hopefully published by Routledge in 2023.

As I have commented above, I come from the margins. During all my life, using / receiving that label was not much of a trouble: at least, it wasn't a lie. I do come from the margins. However, today I've become a little bit tired of being labeled, so I decided to appropriate some of those "labelling terms".

Needless to say, appropriation needs subversion, and that's what I'm doing in this book. I speak of margins, but not in the sense of "marginal" or "peripheral", like "that space where the poor and all those *Other* people subsist". I talk about margins like the blank spaces in the printed pages, around the fixed text, where the most interesting things may and do happen. Marginalia —what is written or scribbled in the margins of a page— are terribly diverse, creative, critical... They even mock the main text! The printed words, doomed to rigid rules, cannot move, cannot change, but the margins can: they are able to expand, correct, criticize, deny...

So, what has all of this to do with libraries? Well, there is one "fixed text" regarding libraries and LIS: what is published in textbooks, in handbooks, in international guidelines... And there's a wide, huge margin around that text: the daily practices in many countries and regions where that "fixed text" cannot be applied or is useless — for a number of reasons. Therefore, there's a "marginal" librarianship going on... but it's not a "poor", "alternative", "Other-ish" librarianship. It is a real, vindictive, subversive one. It is a librarianship that realizes that many LIS standards, categories and concepts cannot be applied to most socio-economic, cultural, identity situations in the planet and, instead of waiting for solutions that will never arrive, creates them —

and put them to the test by turning them into library services and activities, projects, collections or policies...

And so, the margins speak, as they have always done. Libraries "in the margins" create a new kind of librarianship, strongly committed to its communities and users. Those libraries are spaces for resistance and activism, for struggle and militancy. They are cultural trenches for many communities and groups — and not only the "usual suspects", the labelled ones (the poor, the immigrants, the different, the subaltern, the urban tribes...).

And, it must be said, that "marginal" way of seeing libraries (and other aspects of life) was active decades before all the current, politically-correct fuzz with diversity: it was a necessity, and it was met by some very brave, innovative (really innovative, before all the fuzz with "innovation") librarians who started walking "a path outside the border of the world", as they old Argentinean rock song says.

## **What would you want the libraries to be like after 100 years?**

Well... If in a hundred years we're still inhabiting this planet (let's hope we do, but we'll need a lot of degrowth and minimalism to balance what we have done to our poor Earth during the entire Anthropocene), I hope libraries to be more than that: I'd like them to be integral spaces for knowledge & memory — all knowledges and all memories, not just the hegemonic, dominant, academic, white, male ones...

I hope we, as a species, have overcome the artificial conceptual division between Nature and Culture, and between Nature and Society, and that the spaces for knowledge & memory (and their contents) reflect that. People and territory are one and the same: an entire biosphere of human and non-human living beings crossing their paths and lives and constructing a common history full of connections. Notions of Men as Kings of the creation (note the all-male nouns...) should be discarded, and an ethic of care, of reconstruction, of equity and solidarity should be got on board...

I hope for a postcolonial, really diverse, label-free reality to exist and for the spaces of knowledge & memory to encourage and support it. I hope those spaces to become places for struggle and resistance, for remembrance and activism... Spaces where



people may fight against oblivion and injustice. Because information is power: the power to change things in many ways and at many levels.

