

What Is a Speculative Archive?

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This text is part of a series of creative projects on memory in which I work with speculative archives: constructed engagements with absence, limits, and non-recordability. What follows is a reduced extract of a broader line of inquiry that has been developed in a set of forthcoming academic articles.

Archives are often described as repositories of the past, as if they simply gather and preserve what has happened.

That description is convenient, but it hides a more decisive function. Archives do not just store records; they participate in defining what can become a record in the first place. What enters an archive is not only a matter of survival or chance, but of recognition. Something must be stabilizable, describable, attributable, and legible within existing frameworks in order to count.

From that perspective, absence in the archive is not merely the result of loss. It is also the result of limits. Entire domains of experience remain absent, outside archival recognition, not because they lack substance, but because they do not meet the conditions required to be acknowledged as records. Oral practices, embodied knowledge, ecological processes, or forms of collective memory may be documented indirectly, but they rarely acquire the same status as written or formally produced materials. They are translated, reduced, or treated as secondary.

This creates a specific kind of problem. It is not simply that the archive is incomplete, but that its incompleteness is structured. The question, then, is not only how to recover

what is missing, but how to engage what has never been allowed to count as record without forcing it into the very formats that excluded it.

The idea of a *speculative archive* emerges at this point. It does not refer to a separate institution or to a collection of imagined materials; it names a way of working at the boundary of archival recognition. A speculative archive engages forms of knowledge that exceed conventional recordability, but does so without assuming that they can or should be fully stabilized as records.

This requires a shift in method. Rather than attempting to fill gaps or reconstruct lost material as if it could be made complete, speculative approaches focus on the conditions under which certain materials do not appear as records in the first place. They operate at the boundary between what can be verified and what has been rendered unverifiable, not in order to resolve that tension, but to make it explicit and analytically visible.

One way to approach this is through the construction of counterfactual artifacts. Consider, for instance, the figure of a female *payadora* in the nineteenth-century Argentine pampas, performing publicly within a tradition historically structured as male. There is no archival record of such a figure. Producing an entry for her does not aim to recover a hidden subject, but to expose the conditions that prevented her from being recognized as recordable in the first place. The artifact does not function as evidence of a past event; it operates instead as an index of the constraints that made such an event unlikely or structurally excluded.

A similar logic applies in cases where material traces are fragmentary or absent. An instrument mentioned only briefly in a historical account, but never recorded, preserved, or classified, cannot be reconstructed with certainty. A speculative approach does not attempt to resolve that uncertainty by producing a definitive version. It retains the fragment, the absence of documentation, and the conditions that led to its

disappearance as part of what is documented. What is preserved in this case is not the object itself, but the structure of its loss.

In other situations, the archive may shift away from discrete objects altogether. A vanished lake, for example, may leave no continuous documentary record, but its disappearance can still be engaged through changes in soil composition, vegetation patterns, and local memory. Here, the archive is not a document but a distributed configuration of traces. The aim is not to expand the category of evidence indiscriminately, but to recognize that the distinction between what counts as evidence and what does not is historically produced and unevenly applied.

A further case concerns materials that are documented but remain misrecognized within existing classificatory frameworks. In such instances, the issue is not absence but misidentification. Consider an object preserved in a collection but catalogued under a generic or incorrect category that obscures its function, context, or significance. A speculative approach does not simply correct the classification by assigning a more accurate label. Instead, it examines the conditions that produced the misclassification in the first place: the limits of available knowledge, the biases embedded in taxonomies, and the epistemic assumptions guiding identification. The record is treated as structurally constrained. What is made visible is the object plus the classificatory system that renders it only partially legible.

Speculative archives do not reject verification, nor do they replace historical inquiry with invention. They remain grounded in available knowledge and contextual constraints. What they challenge is the assumption that only stabilized, documentable material can be meaningfully engaged. They work with what exceeds those limits without pretending to resolve it.

This approach is distinct from efforts that focus on expanding the archive by including previously excluded materials. While such efforts are often necessary, they tend to

operate within existing definitions of what a record is. As a result, they frequently translate diverse forms of knowledge into formats that conform to those definitions. Speculative archives take a different path. They do not aim to incorporate everything into the archive, but to interrogate the criteria that determine what can be incorporated at all.

There are, however, clear risks. Speculation can easily become aestheticized, turning absence into a narrative device detached from the conditions that produced it. It can also generate coherence where fragmentation should remain. In institutional settings, it may be absorbed as a stylistic variation, losing its critical force. For that reason, speculative work must remain explicit about its limits. It must distinguish carefully between what can be supported and what cannot, and resist the temptation to resolve uncertainty.

What this approach ultimately changes is not the content of the archive, but its orientation. Instead of asking only what can be preserved, it asks how preservation itself is defined, and at what cost. It shifts attention from accumulation to recognition, from completeness to the conditions that make completeness impossible.

A speculative archive does not repair the archive. It makes its boundaries visible and, in doing so, creates the conditions for engaging forms of knowledge that would otherwise remain unacknowledged.