

# **Letters from the Library at STRI**

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## Letters from the Library

### #00. A sort of introduction

"And what's a library for?", "Is being a librarian a profession?", "Do you have to study to become a librarian?", "Why should I go to a library when everything is on the internet?", "And what do you do in the library, besides dusting off books and sitting behind a desk all day?"

For a quarter of a century, my entire professional life as a librarian, I've been hearing those comments (and worse).

Yeap.

For all that time, two and a half decades, I've been trying to explain what we do in my line of work. And for those five lustra, I haven't succeeded, judging by how often these questions are repeated in my surroundings nowadays.

I started recounting the intricacies of my profession 20 years ago, when I launched "Bitácora de un bibliotecario" (A Librarian's Log), one of the first Spanish-language blogs about libraries (the third, to be more precise). The blog is still active, by the way, despite its many ups and downs, and in it, I keep scribbling down ideas, experiences, reflections, encounters, disagreements, and sometimes, a bit of anger and a tantrum or two. That's life: there are no lights without shadows, and libraries are not immune to all sorts of problems.

Writing (but also giving courses and lectures, or recording podcasts, or...) was and still is my way of sharing my passion for libraries, archives, museums, and all those corners that I now call "spaces for knowledge and memory management": rural libraries, community archives, houses of wisdom, documentation centers, mobile libraries, indigenous

museums, reading rooms... All of them, whatever they are called and wherever they are, are places where a community, whatever it may be, encounters and connects to its knowledge and memories: human in general, and their own in particular. And there arises the magic of identity, history, inspiration, innovation, resistance, struggle, change...

We are the managers of the human knowledge. We are the weavers of its memories. I know it sounds grandiose, and I do know that many times we don't live up to the expectations, but that's what we are. It's a challenging task sometimes, an impossible one at others, but always full of magical moments, of windows opening to the past and the future, of secrets unveiled, of latent opportunities, of hidden dramas and buried sorrows that surface in a scrap of paper, in the corner of a slide, in a note in the margin of a book...

The fact that "information is power" and that we, in our spaces, manage it, gives us an enormous capacity to support and accompany social change, cultural resistance, the discovery of identities, the finding of paths and the construction of future horizons, and the building of new historical narratives and alternative views of our knowledge and our memories. We are that, too. Something that implies an enormous responsibility and a kind of strong commitment to our communities. However small they may be, our corners end up being extremely powerful. And while new information technologies have helped us develop and grow, libraries are not that. The essence, what makes us what we are since we began to be, has remained unchanged.

We have always been the ones who lay the foundations for the castles in the air.

Hence, we are much more than shelves, dust, boxes, and the smell of old paper. And I'm going to share it, all of it, in a series of letters that I'll write from the library and that I'll send to you every Friday through this channel. In them, and to the extent that my limited literary talent allows, I'll try to show you the backstage of our work, the reasons why we

do it, the encounters and disagreements, the wonders and joys, the many paths to tread,  
and the many already traveled in the five millennia of library history.

So... don't lose track of me!

## Letters from the Library

### #01. The puzzle of the fragmented memory

Those of us who work in the field of knowledge and memory management —librarians, archivists, documentalists, museologists, or any of the other labels we have been saddled with in recent decades— have various kinds of inside jokes to define what we do.

One of them points out that we are the ones who talk to the dead: the ones who have conversations with them and take care of their voices.

Despite how laconic —or dismal— such a statement may seem, the truth is that it is not too far off the mark, nor from reality. Our spaces, physical or digital, preserve the past. Or, to be more precise, what those who preceded us bequeathed to us in relation to that gone time. What they said, what they thought, what they saw, what they heard, what they dreamed and hated. The voices of the dead.

*[And if, so they say, one of the few ways to survive the passage of time and death is the memory that remains of us, we, the managers of knowledge and memory, are a sort of "door to immortality". Which is another joke we use to define what we do. A bit grandiloquent, true, but a joke nonetheless].*

Preserving all that memory of what was, all that gigantic and varied heritage, is not always easy. Based on my own experience, I would dare to say that it never is. Basically, because such a heritage never reaches our hands in its entirety. It usually does so in a fragmented way, perforated on all sides, chewed by the fangs of an Oblivion that never forgives anything. Some scraps here, others there: shreds of what was once a complete history, sparks of fires that went out long ago.

The big problem is that the only possible interpreters of those remnants, the ones who could give meaning to those disjointed pieces, are no longer with us. Or they can't or don't want to remember.

And we find ourselves in front of a thousand, two thousand, five thousand pieces of an enormous jigsaw puzzle, without having the remotest idea of what the original image should or could be like that must be constructed with such tesserae. With few exceptions, we do not always know where to start winding that tangled skein, so full of gaps and discontinuities, which is memory.

We can guess the thousand stories encapsulated there, among those papers, those photos, those objects, those records and drawings. Reconstructing them is another matter. A very different one.

To make things worse, we know that this particular puzzle is connected to many other equally incomplete, equally fragmented ones. And we suspect the links, and dream with the implications of certain invisible and intangible relationships, and fantasize about the thousand and one possibilities that arise from all those possible interactions. But we don't see them.

It's frustrating. It's exasperating. And it's exciting. Step by step, paper by paper, slide by slide, we begin to let the voices of those "dead ones" sound. Reading the notes in the margins of the notebooks, piecing together bits of drawings, checking for matches in the dates of the letters or in the landscapes that appear in the background of the photographs, the pieces begin to connect. Slowly.

The tesserae begin to fit together. And the story begins to appear. Not always, of course: there are unrecoverable pasts. But, most of the time, the miracle happens.

An example? This week, going through one of the collections donated to our archive — personal papers of one of our late, most famous scientists—, I came across her business card holder: her collection of business cards. For many colleagues, this type of item is not important: after all, it is something personal, useless when the cards are no longer valid or when the person who kept them is no longer with us.

However, beyond having been a tool for identification and contact at the time, this collection of cards allows us to establish today a sort of "social map" framed in a certain period of time. A map that can help to understand the socio-cultural (and even economic and political) context of the research area of our scientist, of the institutions to which she belonged, and of science in her country and region at a specific point in the past. When the tesserae fit together, the story will appear. The stories. After an initial, quite superficial review, I had no doubt that, from those cards and their mutual relationships —not always visible, or evident— I would be able to establish a sort of "who's who" of that time, highlight the identity of the most prominent people in the academic world at that time, find out which were the organizations that were working at that time in the country at the international level (and which were their hierarchies, and which were their countries of origin), intuit which were the internal relations that existed between those actors, see in which discipline or field of knowledge they moved, and a long etcetera.

As I say, there's a story behind it. Or many. There always are.

*[There will also be many gaps: as I said, memory is always fragmentary. And there will be many silences. Silences that sometimes speak louder than a scream. What does it mean, for example, the stubborn absence of a certain institution in that card holder].*

I know, I know: finding those stories will be frustrating. And exasperating. But it will also be exciting. Searching for a missing thread, finding by surprise the fragment that solves this or that enigma, learning about the intricacies of a research or the internal struggles

for power, learning about the pleasures and sorrows... I will dialogue with those "dead ones" who, if you think about it, are not so dead. I will make their work and their struggles live on.

It will be quite a task. Inevitable. And, above all, necessary. Because, paraphrasing Mario Benedetti, those of us who work in these tasks "cannot and do not want / to let memory turn to ashes".

## Letters from the Library

### #02. The gaze on the details

Historically, spaces for knowledge and memory management —whether labeled as libraries, archives, museums, or by any of the myriad of other names they might receive— have traditionally filled their shelves, boxes and filing cabinets with a certain type of document. A particular, specific, well-defined type.

Traditionally, these spaces have reserved room for the great titles, the great authors (often white men), the great works (primarily academic), the great discourse (the dominant, the hegemonic), the great histories (the official, the victor's), and the great publishing houses.

"Great" is the adjective common to all these nouns. The buildings were also great. Grandiose, rather. Imposing in appearance, size, and structure. Spaces of high culture and civilization. Places where the knowledge and memory of humanity found rest.

But not all of them. Only the big ones.

A significant portion of the intangible human heritage was left unacknowledged. Specifically, the "other" knowledge, the "small" stories and proposals, the "non-traditional" documents, the spoken word, the "voice of the vanquished"...

At a certain moment, some spaces for the management of knowledge and memory adopted the adjective "small" as a banner, and we (and here I'll include myself because I was and still am an active part of that movement) began to propose other ways of working, thinking, and acting. We began to put our gaze on the details: the tiny papers, the seemingly insignificant anecdotes, those spaces erroneously labeled as "margins," the walls echoing through graffiti in the popular neighborhoods, the indigenous

communities expressing themselves through their weavings, and all those "alternative" perspectives, ideas, and activities.

In doing so, we discovered a universe hitherto invisible, silenced, kept in the shadows by force, and eventually forgotten. An immense accumulation of learning and experiences, dreams and failures, hopes and lived paths. Hundreds of millions of life stories that had never been considered by the "big" history, that had never appeared in the "big" publications, that had never graced the shelves of the "big" libraries or the boxes of the "big" archives. Yet, regardless of whose weight it may bear, these stories were also part of the intangible heritage of our species.

This gave rise to community archives, indigenous libraries, rural museums, and many other initiatives that, in a certain way, decolonized spaces and processes, allowing numerous human groups to reclaim a voice that they had never truly lost but had, in one way or another, been taken away from them.

Those professionals of knowledge and memory management ended up taking that perspective, that of putting the gaze on the details, to the large documents. And we discovered wonderful stories hidden in unknown corners. We gave ourselves the opportunity to look at those documents with different eyes, to touch them with different hands, to think about them from different places. And we were surprised.

I was reminded of all this recently, thanks to a book donated to us as part of the collection of a retired scientist. It was an old copy, although quite well preserved. As I turned its pages, feeling the gentle rustle of the paper and the unmistakable scent of aged volumes, I stumbled upon a note in the margin. It was a form of what we call "marginalia," encompassing a wealth of expressions.

This particular note underlined a specific sentence and, on the side, in pencil, and followed by several exclamation points, it noted, "Bullshit!"

This was not the first time I encountered such a word at the edge of a book. "Marginalia" include numerous acts of rebellion, of dissent against the dominant discourse and "the big things." (After all, it is the voice that asserts itself from the margins and on the margins). On a prior occasion, when I encountered a similar note, I investigated the reason behind the outburst. And I discovered that the author of the annotation, a scientist, ended up publishing many years later an article in which, without directly referencing it, she demonstrated that, indeed, the statement in the annotated book was false. A lie.

To put the gaze on the details, on the "small" things, on the everyday discourse and facts, is to grant oneself the opportunity to come across these stories — which are also part of the process of knowledge-building we refer to as "science". A process that always, invariably, begins with a question, stemming from our innate curiosity about the world around us.

Days ago, while sorting through a set of papers received as part of the collection of a botanist at our institution, I came across a diary of hers. The year was 1990. As I attempted to turn the pages, the booklet opened precisely between two leaves where the owner had tucked a fern frond. Dry, there, for more than three decades.

A trivial detail? Far from it. What impelled that woman to stop beside a fern, to snip a small portion of its "leaves," and to place the sample between the pages of her personal notebook? What question arose in her mind at that moment, what curiosity? Isn't that, ultimately, the primary driving force of scientific and academic endeavors? That sense of wonder, that curiosity about the unknown, that eagerness to delve deeper and explore?

Yet there is more to it: an entire narrative. Would our scientist recall that she had that sample there? Would she be able to identify it? Could that small piece of fern have served as the catalyst for something greater?

Putting the gaze on the details allows us to uncover stories of this nature. Incomplete, fragmentary, sometimes hypothetical, but stories, nonetheless. Some of my colleagues dismiss them as trivial, too insignificant. Perhaps they are. However, I always remember Lao Tzu's dictum that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step. Every big process is the sum of small elements: diverse, rich, unique, different, and plural. Elements that can offer alternative perspectives, a fresh outlook, or an unprecedented approach.

Learning how to observe is essential. Or, at the very least, having the willingness to observe. And from there, fostering a willingness to be surprised.

This forms the foundation of what we do — those of us who dedicate ourselves to what I do. And, if you ask me, it constitutes the essence of science itself.

## Letters from the Library

### #03. What do you want that in the archive for?

In a previous text I shared with you (or, at least, with those who ventured to read the first of this series of "Letters from the Library") the astonishment of many people who, to this day, still do not understand what those of us who manage knowledge and memory do for a living.

Among these astonished people are many scientists.

No wonder. In a compilation she published in 2017, the renowned American historian of science Lorraine Daston noted that "...archival research is assumed to be ipso facto historical in nature, and any archive to be of the sort prototypically investigated by historians: a fixed place with a curated, often official collection consisting mostly of old unpublished papers." She added that "...archives are mostly invisible in accounts of the sites and practices of science."

Bottom line: archives remain those stereotypical dusty, forgotten spaces that only a few Indiana-Jonesque historians venture into to try to make order and sense out of a series of old, crumbling papers that may give them a clue to some unknown incident in the distant past.

However, and as I mentioned in the previous installment of these letters of mine, for some time now —let's say, in the last two or three decades— many professionals of knowledge and memory management have dedicated ourselves to reformulate our profession and our activity a bit. To realize that archives do not only tell the big stories, nor do they only include the big papers.

To put our gaze on the details.

Since such a repositioning, our work has suddenly become very interesting (it already was, in fact, but the circumstances have improved a lot). Diversity increased, voices were reproduced as if by magic, possibilities multiplied exponentially... We realized that behind each small fragment of paper, each slide, each card or drawing, a whole bunch of stories were intertwined, whispering (or yelling) the adventures and misadventures of a whole bunch of other people. An entire universe of colorful characters and unique narratives.

And so, almost without knowing or expecting it, stories appeared everywhere in the archive.

In every corner. On every shelf.

And you will correct me if I am wrong in the following statement, but it seems to me that *everyone loves a good story*. Especially the juicy anecdote, the piquant detail, the freshly baked gossip, the witty invention, the epic endurance, the tragic melodrama... We may not know the dates of Napoleon's or Bolivar's battles, but I'm sure we do know a couple of gossipy details about them. Like the height of the former. Or the passionate loves of the latter.

*["Folks looooooove gossip, my dear..." my great aunt used to say — a good connoisseur and practitioner of the gossiping trade herself. And she wasn't wrong...]*

These stories, all of them, are the varied threads that make up our social and collective memory. And we, librarians, archivists and museologists, we are their weavers.

*[Says Australian archivist Sue McKermish (an authority on the subject of memory and archives) that "human beings are the sum of their memories", and that "the nature of their interaction with other humans, indeed their very identity, is determined by their memories"].*

Like good craftsmen, those of us who do what I do for a living are unwilling to discard any of those threads. Many of us have learned to detect and identify the many underlying possibilities. As a result, we end up keeping items in our collections that, to outside eyes, seem worthless. And then we have to listen to the eternal, shocked question.

"What do you want that in the Archive for?"

*[Eyebrows raised, eyes wide open, fright in the voice. Sometimes hands to the head and other vehement gesticulations. On select and memorable occasions, interlocutors ruffling their hair and tearing their clothes apart... Trust me: after so many years in the trade, I've seen it all...]*

"What do you want that in the Archive for?" they ask. Yeap. As if I were taking up the "important stuff" place with junk.

But we know that there, behind that supposed "minutia", there is a whole story to be told.

Or many, if you will.

It happened to me a few years ago with a little piece of paper napkin I found at the bottom of a dusty box in the Galapagos Islands.

*[Imagine that. A little piece of napkin. From a cafeteria. Stored in my Archive].*

The slip of paper in question had a date, a place, a scientific name, and the signature of the person who had made the notation. It was crumpled and moldy. "What do you want that in the Archive for?", the question echoed around me again. I didn't think much of that note... until it dawned on me that it documented a sighting. I ended up finding out

that that document —any material encoding a fragment of information is one— reported the presence of a marine mammal in a specific point of the Galapagos geography many years before the first recorded citation in the academic bibliography.

*[Why had that little piece of paper not been taken into account until then? Probably because the person who signed it was not a scientist but an unknown tour guide. And history, after all, is usually written by the powerful.]*

*And... of course, because it was a napkin. What biologists, what historians, what academic authorities would be willing to support their assertions on a napkin?]*

The same thing has been happening to me in our institution, especially when it comes to asking the people who make up our teams not to discard or throw away papers. Don't throw anything away, actually. Because many of those elements that these people consider "useless" can be very valuable if you know how to put them in context. Or if you know how to see the threads that run through them, the voices they preserve... "What do you want that in the archive for?" they ask me, somewhat annoyed. "Let me throw it away! It's nothing but trash!" Maybe some of it is, and I'll see to shredding and discarding it myself. But I'll bet you anything that in every one of those boxes they seek to wipe off the map there is much to be salvaged.

For example, field notebooks with unique drawings, sketched with a pencil in some corner of the Panamanian forest half a century ago. Or the preliminary outlines of the trails to be visited in a certain Natural Monument. Or lists with banding data of certain bird species. Or three hundred photographs of certain archaeological excavations that marked a milestone in Central American history. Or the original drawings of the first book with the description of a certain biological group...

So, the next time you are going to discard old papers, think that those of us who work in my line of action can preserve them, and look at them from other perspectives, and tell stories with them.

And the next time you go into an archive and find a hodgepodge of objects, each more diverse and curious than the next, don't ask "what do you want that for...?"

Ask, rather, for the story behind them. We will be more than happy to tell you everything about it.

## Letters from the Library

### #04. The people behind the things

Among his many masterpieces of German Renaissance art, the painter Albrecht Dürer produced, around 1498, a self-portrait.

I remember —as if I were living it all over again as I type these words— the moment when I had it for the first time in front of me. I was 12 years old, I was an introverted child and immigrant in a strange land, I adored art, and I was setting foot for the first time in the Prado Museum, in Madrid: a real dream come true for that project of a person that I still was at that time.

I found the painting in question in a corner. It was —and still is— much smaller than I had imagined, and at the same time much more beautiful. And it was exactly at the moment when I looked at that portrait that I realized that the author was looking back at me from the surface of that oil painting. Through the centuries.

I remember looking around me, dumbfounded, and thinking, not without a little awe, that in every portrait hanging in the many rooms of that museum there were people looking at me from the other side of time and silence. Some were smiling, others were serious. And I understood, a little diffusely (I was 12), that this was another of the many human attempts to escape death and oblivion, and to achieve a certain immortality.

Because if we are remembered, we do not die at all.

*[Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish novelist who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2006, once wrote that museums are places where time is transformed into space...].*

From that point on in my personal chronology, in every museum I visited —and there have been so many in all these decades of life— I was not only impressed by the appearance and the message of the artworks. I also looked for the people behind them. And not only those represented, but also the representers, the makers, the artists. In this way I noticed the brush and spatula strokes that could be seen on the surfaces of the canvases, or the marks of the potters' fingers on this or that vessel, or the traces of the calamus on the papyri, or the knots and the crosses of fibers in the baskets...

*[And, especially, I noticed the mistakes. You could say that I was looking for them: the erasures, the crossings out, a badly made knot in a weaving, a badly thought-out crossing in a basket, a detail out of symmetry in a ceramic... Errors are (or use to be) tangible proof that a human being was there].*

When I started studying library science, I was passionate about subjects that had to do with the direct handling of documents. Especially the paleography course, in which I worked with colonial notarial texts from the 17th century in the city of Córdoba, Argentina. The pen strokes, the crossings out, the glosses, the abbreviations, the choice of this or that term: the person who produced the document was there, still alive. Besides the fact that they gave clues about the historical moment, or provided vital information about the social, economic, and political processes of those past times, those papers presented the physical, tangible marks of the presence of a real person. One who had breathed on those sheets and who had left his fingerprints on them more than three hundred years before.

At university, librarians are not taught to look at these details. Neither at these nor at any other. We are usually educated to see certain elements in a document, and little else — an approach that is too technical, rather limited, and that often loses a certain humanity and all creativity. For the more orthodox and hard line of my profession, to deviate from that aseptic and "objective" approach to librarian work is typical of

dreamers, quixotes, literates... and failed imbeciles. It is not librarianship, but something else.

Thus, a paleographic analysis, which for me has always been a small window through which to peer into the past, for them is a simple and plain transcription. Period.

In that context, I couldn't help being a quixote (or a failed imbecile?): little by little I became more and more interested in the little things that gave away the people behind them. Marginalia, for example —which I have already mentioned in a previous post— are for me an inexhaustible source of surprises and amusement.

*[A whole universe of comments, insults, remarks, insults, corrections, insults, obscenities....]*

*[...insults...]*

So are ("inexhaustible source of surprises and fun", I mean — forget the insults) the small fragments of documents that, in order to be understood, require a lot of detective work. Or those imperceptible winks to the reader that appear strategically placed here and there. Or those elements that, if you look closely, say a lot about the character of the person who produced them, or about his/her mood at that moment, or about his/her situation...

I love to look at those details. Because they tell stories (and, as I said in my previous post, *everyone loves a good story*). And because they give me access to the universe behind the curtain: to the personal *quilombos* ("messes", in Argentinean Spanish), to the fights, to the brawls, to the palace intrigues, to the betrayals...

To love affairs...

I remember that some years ago I told, in a series of letters very similar to this one (but in a very different institution), the story of a love postcard that I found in an abandoned box in the archive. Honestly, I never managed to find out how that card got to the institutional archive, nor why it was kept; I guess someone saved it and then, shuffled and hidden among so many old papers, it went unnoticed.

But not for me.

*[Insert here the musical motif from Morricone's "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly". Yes, the little whistle. Too-tee-too-tee-tooooo... And Clint Eastwood's look from under his hat].*

It was a letter from a scholar woman who, at a conference, had met one of the scientists at my institution and had had what seemed a torrid (really torrid) affair with him. After the event, they had separated. But, apparently, she had not been able to forget him. And, since he had kept the postcard, it seemed that he hadn't either. The curious fact was that there were no names in the text, only initials, so we didn't know exactly who they were.

The story sparked passions and interest. I had the members of my institution, from the highest to the lowest level, racking their brains for weeks to find out the identity of the lovers. We finally succeeded. To our disappointment, they had not ended up together. It had been a failed love story. A sad ending.

Eventually I ended up talking to one of them. Him. An old man already, and the only survivor of that unlikely couple. And when I told him the story of that postcard, his eyes filled with tears. Although he had married, raised a family and was a happy grandfather of half a dozen grandchildren, he told me he had missed the woman on the postcard every day of his life, and always wondered what would have happened if...

*[I know: sounds moviey. Weepy Saturday-night Netflix romantic comedy. But I swear it's true and real].*

What importance could such a corny anecdote have in a scientific institution? In orthodox academic terms, none. However, from a broader and more comprehensive approach, it has a lot. It reminds us that researchers or scientists are human beings with their own stories, worries, dreams, a horrible personality, or an eternal smile on their faces. It shows us that behind things, behind tangible cultural heritage, there are always people — persons like us. As I have already said in other of these letters, behind every element in this world there is a story. A story made of small fragments.

And so, we learn that the discovery of a particular species of rainforest bird was preceded by two weeks of tick bites and uncontrollable explosive diarrhea and had very little glorious about it — and that all this was reflected in the curious and incomprehensible scientific name of the bird in question. Or that the voyages of exploration on that picturesque river ended in the wedding of two of those involved — a wedding from which offspring were born who continued the work of their progenitors in the same place, on the same topic. Or even that this or that respected Academy personality was, in practice, an emotional abuser. An absolute bastard. Or worse.

Seeing the people behind things, especially in science, helps to humanize the discourse, sometimes too "objective" and aseptic and sometimes too heroic and epic. It helps to enrich the story and the perspective, to make it broader and more diverse, and to include in the narrative a lot of characters, situations and events that, although they seem silly and anecdotal, become significant once they are grouped together.

And, above all, it helps connect us to those times and places where those events happened. Where those people, all those people, were.

So, from now on, when you look at a painting, or an old photograph, or a slide from three decades ago, or a pre-Hispanic statuette, or even an Instagram post or a Tiktok video, I invite you to look a little further: at the people who return your gaze, and at all those who put their hands at the service of preserving our knowledge and memories. You will discover a whole world. Many, in fact.

And you will see the same thing that some of us who preserve human knowledge and memory see every time we approach one of these documents.

*[Too-tee-too-tee-tooooo...]*

## Letters from the Library

### #05. Those old things you have there...

It happened about six years ago, in a place I can't remember — I have been in this profession of mine for too long, and places, faces, voices and topics start to blur, to mix, and not always in the most subtle way. I had been commissioned to receive, in the library-archive-museum that I was leading at the time, a group of elementary school students. To tell them what we did, why we existed, why they should visit us and use our services... You know: to do all those things that many people within one's own organization expect one to do, and to give all those answers that many of them expect one to have.

*[Spoiler alert: We don't always have them. We don't always look for them. And some of them we don't care about, truth be told].*

Anyway, there I was, a living being who usually prefers the company of musty papers to that of living, breathing, questioning humans, surrounded by a gaggle of kiddies. Two dozen little bonsái of a person making a fuss, fiddling with everything, messing everything up (oh, gods of Valhalla...) and looking at me as if I had stepped out of one of the drawers in which we stored ancient manuscripts.

*[Such a perception was not too wrong, by the way].*

I started telling them why we existed. What we did. What benefits our work had for the community. Why they had to come day in and day out to fill our reading room (besides for the official photo, of course). And after those delightful paragraphs of institutional promotion —those that usually leave a taste in my mouth that mixes bile with sulfuric acid— I showed them some of the artifacts / documents in our archival collection.

3 ½ or 5 ¼ floppy disks, ZIP disks, DATs, CDs... A select sample of a huge documentary collection that I myself had patiently built, organized, described and curated, many times rescuing material from the very trash cans.

*[Yep. I have the soul of a waste picker. So what?]*

Those kids looked at the materials I was holding in my hands as if I were showing them objects fresh from the tomb of Hatshepsut or the library of Assur-bani-apli. They were equally unfamiliar to them, equally unintelligible. And, I must say, equally ridiculous: was there, in that little plastic square, less than a megabyte of information stored? Was anyone happy —or proud— to handle information that way? Or to listen to music using a long, thin, brown tape that got tangled up for nothing and that, if brought near a magnet, would be erased? What's more, how was it all shared? How was it sent to a friend, an acquaintance?

*["By physical mail," responded a candid me to this last question. Imagine the faces...]*

I didn't just have to explain what each item was for and what bulky, convoluted, imperfect devices were needed to read or operate them. I also had to explain the context. What those of us who lived with that technology —which, for my very young audience, had very little in the way of "technology"— felt and did. I told them, for example, that to install a computer program on a computer required 15, 20 or 30 floppy disks (those "little plastic squares" in front of them), which had to be placed in the reader in the correct sequence (and fingers crossed that none of them would be damaged, and that there would not be a power cut during the long period of time it took to install them).

To increase their surprise and their expressions of pity towards me...

*[And here comes to me a joke from the comic strip "Mafalda", by the Argentine humorist Quino. Mafalda asks her father, "Dad, when you were a kid, what TV show did you like the most?" The father replies that when he was a boy there was no television. Mafalda then asks, "And what were you a kid for then? What a fool!"]*

...I told them that I was showing them digital / computer things, which appeared in the world when I was about 15 years old, but that, before that, things were much more...

...more...

..."primitive", let's say.

*[People of my generation or earlier: please don't hate me. And, again, imagine the faces of my audience...].*

I then showed them films of the kind used with an overhead projector to give a lecture ("this was our PowerPoint", I pointed out...), 35 mm films and VHS videos ("this was our Netflix", I pointed out...), audio cassettes ("this was our Spotify", I lamented...), slides ("this was our Instagram", I cried...).

I even risked telling them that, in order not to waste the batteries of our walkmans ("walk-whaaaaat?"), we would rewind the cassettes of our favorite music with the help of a pen.

*[In my time, doing that was pure awesomeness... You had to have an excellent wrist technique... That was innovation, and the rest was just a story!]*

The looks oscillated between the most absolute amazement and the most infinite pity. They were receiving a sort of archeology lesson from a sort of recently thawed caveman

who, to make matters worse, seemed to consider that all those antiques he was showing were a sort of treasure.

Finally, my talk ended. And they left, muttering among themselves, and looking at me as if I had just stepped out of Marty McFly's DeLorean in an inverted version of the famous Zemeckis movie.

*[And here another "Mafalda" joke comes to my mind. A friend asks the girl: "Where was your daddy born?" After some thought, she answers: "He told me that when he was a boy he didn't know television, nor nylon, nor atomic energy, nor antibiotics, nor transistors, nor jet planes, nor artificial satellites, nor remote-controlled rockets, nor contact lenses. So he must have been born in Mato Grosso". For that child audience of mine, I must have been born in a corner of the Lascaux cave].*

Today, seen in perspective, the reaction of that group of young visitors does not seem strange to me, much less unexpected. In fact, and to be quite honest, I think it is precisely the reaction that I want to provoke nowadays among those who look at the collections that I keep in the archive: astonishment, incredulity...

*[...a little bit of pity...]*

...and perhaps, maybe, something of interest. Placing on a table, in a row, a succession of material supports of fixed image (photography), moving image (video), audio or electronic information, allows us to understand the gradual development of ideas and concepts of conservation and transmission of information. It allows us to see directly the trial and error, the formats that appeared and disappeared almost as if by magic because their results were not as expected, the technological revolutions, the solutions that always worked... All disciplines can show such movement / "evolution" / "progress" in their methods and materials, and information sciences are no exception.

And it is understandable that for those who did not have those materials close to them, who did not live with them, they are an antiquity. How do we feel, those of us in our fifties, when we see the televisions of the 40's, the radios of the 30's, the telephones of the 20's, the telegraph?

*[Do we know how to send a telegram? Have we ever sent one?]*

In my direct experience, I think these things tend to make us laugh. But I understand that it is usually a laughter somewhere between curious and amazed. Probably because, deep down, we realize that we have history in front of us: a succession of events that have taken place in a period too short to be considered "history". We believe that history is made over decades, or centuries, but the reality is that history began yesterday. Or an hour ago. Or five minutes ago. And it grows and happens and unfolds before our eyes.

Sometimes, in the span of a human lifetime, events of brutal amplitude happen at breakneck speed. Those of us who were born and grew up before the advent of the Internet can attest to this.

The archives, and the materials stored in them —especially this type of material, so striking, so multiform, so subject to rapid changes and unstoppable evolutions— allow us to realize this phenomenon of "fast history". That we have been direct witnesses and protagonists of historical changes. In communications (do you remember the first time you sent an email?), in the handling of documents (do you remember the first time you made a photocopy?), or in the search for information (do you remember your first Internet search engine, before Google appeared?)

I understand that it is for that very reason that, for many of us, being in contact with those materials brings us infinite nostalgia. We are touching history: our history, that of our families, friends, towns and societies... For me, seeing an audio cassette takes me back to the copies of Dire Straits I listened to when I was 18, when I started college.

Holding a VHS tape in my hands reminds me of those rare movies that a group of very young and very cinephile friends of mine used to look for among the shelves of the neighborhood video store... The sounds produced by a fax machine, by the keys of a typewriter, by the early modems when connecting, by the Commodore 64 when loading a video game recorded from a cassette: all of that is part of my personal history.

Of the history of a whole generation, in fact.

Today, a discipline, "media archeology", is devoted to recovering that memory, studying it, giving it a meaning and, above all, a context. There are even online projects that recover those sounds I just mentioned above and revive them for us, the old nostalgic ones: the sounds of the first video games, of the video cassette players rewinding the tape, of the turntable needle when touching the surface of the vinyl LP... And we recover series and more series of this kind of material in our archives. And we treasure them, and show them, and try to make sense of them — even if people look at us like weirdos.

"But what do you want that for in the archive?" they keep asking me (a question I've already explored in these "Letters...") "All that content is already digitized on the Internet!" Aha, they most certainly are. But it's not about the content. It's about the containers. The materiality of those things, the physical object and its characteristics, and all the emotionality and experiences linked to such elements.

And it is about that magic that happens when one really understands what is the meaning, the value and the power of one of "those old things we have around here...".

## Letters from the Library

### #06. A knot in the fabric

"I was told to deliver them in person. In-per-son. So here they are, doctor" said the man, a colleague from the Operations area who always shows me the great kindness of calling me "doctor" despite the fact that I neither have such a title nor do I think I deserve that label. He arrived at my office, in the library, loaded with a couple of old wooden boxes and placed them carefully on one of the tables. He pointed out that these materials had originally been in the biological station that STRI maintains on Barro Colorado Island, shook my hand, and hurried off to other tasks, wishing me luck and hoping that the packages contained something interesting.

And they did. Boy, they did.

Over the past few months, I have built up a network of "old stuff providers" within STRI. I guess because so many people have discovered that I care for and appreciate these materials, they send them to me, or deliver them to me personally. And I'm happy. Absolutely happy. Peering into those artifacts and documents —items that sometimes have endured years of neglect and oblivion— is something similar, I assume, to what an archaeologist opening a tomb that has been closed for centuries must feel.

*[Who am I kidding? The archaeologist's stuff must be infinitely better. I'm soooo jealous...]*

I approached the table. The boxes had been varnished, but that had been a long time and many rains ago: the humidity of the Panamanian rainforest had removed their original shine and covered them with a solid, mildew-colored patina. The bronze metal latches had a greenish tinge to them, courtesy of an advanced oxidation, and gave off an aroma that stuck to my hands for half a day. I lifted the lid of the first box, the smallest

one. Inside, I found an optical device that I immediately identified as a theodolite: a measuring instrument, similar to a small telescope, used by topographers and surveyors to measure distances and unevenness and thus draw maps and plans.

A label on the inside of the lid indicated that the device in question had been produced by a company in Canada. Another label, smaller and attached to the wood by means of completely "fossilized" adhesive tape, indicated a year: 1935.

"The Panama Canal was already finished," I thought, "What was this crap doing in Barro Colorado?"

*[My inner dialogues are not always very academic. There goes a warning...]*

And that's when the adventure began. The detective works. Lifting clues from that item, from its container, from its parts, to try to find out where it came from and what exactly it was used for. Finding small pieces and putting them together to try to produce a picture that, unlike what happens with traditional puzzles, I do not know beforehand.

In this work, one identifies dots and then tries to connect them — not always with success, or in the right way, truth be told. The element one studies is always, unfailingly, part of something bigger: it is a knot in a gigantic web of human activities. Once one locates this knot in such a fabric, one can follow the threads that touch it, and through them, it is possible to identify people, institutions, research, stories, anecdotes, places and related times...

And it is then, and only then, when everything makes sense.

*[With a lot of luck and the help of all the gods of Olympus and Valhalla].*

The theodolite I had in front of me had been used by someone to do something, in a particular place, at a particular time. Were there photos, diaries, notes, plans, blueprints, plans, directives, reports, illustrations, articles, books...? Probably that someone was part of a team, worked for an institution or organization. Surely, if he worked in Panama, he got knee-deep in mud, got eaten by mosquitoes and ticks, got soaked in the rain, slept on a cot somewhere, ate local dishes, sweated under these tropical skies... Maybe he got sick, maybe he got exhausted... If he was a foreigner, he may have written letters back home, telling all or part of his experiences... I already told you about "the people behind the things", didn't I?

What is the point of preserving the artifact if we do not know its many stories, if we are unable to find and listen to (and learn from) what it has to tell us?

There is a concept that is central, I would say essential, in the information sciences: that of "document". It is a much-discussed concept, even a disputed one, because what we professionals of these disciplines do in our daily work depends on its (broader or narrower) definition. The broadest, produced by Michael Buckland in the 1990s, states that any artifact or element capable of transmitting information should be considered a document. That is the one I use, based on my years of experience working in different and very diverse spaces in Latin America. But conventional librarianship tends to reject it: imagine that, if accepted, a Latin American library should include, among its collections, Andean textiles and altarpieces, urban graffiti, ceramics and baskets from the Amazon, Afro-Antillean hairstyles...

*[Can you imagine a library that complete, that diverse, that plural? Such awesomeness...]*

At a conference I gave a few years ago on this topic, a librarianship student raised his hand during Q&As and asked me if I was so naive as to believe that the ear tag of a cow going to the slaughterhouse was a document. I replied, calmly, that indeed it was. I told him that this label gave an account of the identity and destiny of a living being that was

about to become a food product for people like him. That this label could be linked to many other documents: records, above all. That there were thousands of stories behind that label.

The cataract of denigrations that followed my response is not reproducible in a decent space like this one...

*[Yes: believe it or not, librarianship conferences can be intense places].*

It happens that traditional librarianship still believes that libraries are places of "high culture" where only books and a few scholarly articles, theses and encyclopedias, have pride of place. Some other things may find their way to their shelves: maps, photos, films... But those items are "special collections". That is, they are not [as valuable as] books.

And everything else is, in any case, "archival fodder". Or just trash: things we should not even worry about, much less preserve.

*[And here we would enter into a discussion of long standing and still without a definitive answer: why do we fragment our cultural heritage among libraries, archives and museums? And another, thornier one, which has to do with a question of colonialism: why do we still consider that "high culture" (or "truth") is stored in our libraries and that there should be no room for certain "trash" ]?*

Going back to my idea of "document", the theodolite is one. A knot / node in a gigantic network of elements and relationships to be discovered and analyzed. Who knows what will be behind those rusty bronzes and those woods eaten by humidity?

And if I extend that perspective and that proposal to each of the elements that we manage in the STRI library and archive... can you see the magnitude of the project?

My head went back to the object before me. And it began to plan, on its own, the steps to be taken. I was to treat the wood with baking soda, vinegar and water to remove molds, with alcohol to treat certain stains and discolorations, and with lemon and olive oil to rehydrate and protect it. I was to unscrew and disassemble the metal parts of the case and immerse them in pure white vinegar, and rub them carefully to remove rust, and then protect them with mineral oil to prevent further deterioration. And I had to check the instrument itself: most probably the lenses were damaged and could not be used again, but at least I could recover, very slowly, the rest of the structure. And, in the meantime, I would start looking for data about the manufacturer, check if there were any records with serial numbers or patents, trust that there were sales notebooks in some archive dedicated to industrial history...

Who knows? With a little luck and a lot of tenacity, I might be able to make that slightly musty and slightly rusty "document" that had just been handed to me "in person" talk. And, if I succeeded, maybe I could pull the end of that ball of yarn and unravel a big story.

Or a small one. It doesn't matter. It would be, of course, a story all our own.

That's where I am today. I'll let you know how it goes. Most likely, though, the next time I talk about this theodolite, it will be to extend a cordial invitation to come see it on display at the library.

In-per-son. As it has to be.

## Letters from the Library

### #07. Tangled, like cherries

I didn't understand the meaning of the old Castilian saying "words and cherries get entangled with each other" until the day I tried to take a couple of cherries out of a huge basket full of them, freshly harvested, back in the Jerte Valley in Extremadura, western Spain. The stems get hooked together and create bunches of cherries. To grab just one is pretty difficult: a whole bunch gets tangled up behind the first one.

The same thing usually happens with words. That is what the ancient wisdom of the Castilian peasants wanted to capture in the proverb, I guess.

And, when you think about it, something similar happens with ideas. Or, at least, that is what I have been experiencing lately.

Let me tell you. I happen to be putting together a "Historical Bibliography" of STRI for "Donde habitan las palabras", the Library & Archive's digital humanities project / virtual platform. So, I diligently started researching. And, respecting the necessary and convenient chronological order, I began with the documents produced during the renowned Smithsonian Biological Survey of the Panama Canal Zone (1910-1912).

*[If you are not familiar with that part of STRI's history, do not worry: I am also preparing a "Chronology" (parallel to the "Bibliography..." mentioned above) where I will collect all those facts].*

One of the most complete (and at the same time concise) sources about this project turned out to be an article included in the *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections...*

[If you don't know what the SMC are, see "STRI en BHL" in "Donde habitan las palabras". An umpteenth, shameless attempt for self-promotion...? Naaaah: it's called "mar-ke-ting"].

...precisely titled "Smithsonian Biological Survey of the Panama Canal Zone" and included under the heading "Expeditions organized or participated in by the Smithsonian Institution in 1910 and 1911" (SMC, 59 (11), July 1912, pp. 15-26).

The text describes the participants of the Biological Survey, their tasks, and their travels, and includes a number of rather interesting photos that, at first glance, seemed to me to have been taken by those participants, the Survey scientists. However, one of them — that of a man standing in front of some huge grasses at Mindi in the Canal Zone (p. 25)— caught my eye. "Photograph by Hitchcock," the caption at the bottom read.

There was no Hitchcock on the list of researchers who worked on the Biological Survey. But that surname rang a bell. A lot. From where?

At that point my other self, a tiny, intense (and unbearable, but don't tell him I said that) character who rents me a room in some corner of the inside of my head and who has the same damned photographic memory I have, pointed out that we had come across that name in an article by Pamela Henson.

"Ahaha..." I smiled. Henson had published a text on the Biological Survey in a special issue of the journal *Environmental History* (21 (2), April 2016, pp. 222-230). The paper had caught my attention because the bibliography included archival resources from the Smithsonian — a rare occurrence. Hitchcock's name appeared a couple of times in that bibliography.

I pondered the evidence for a while. And I concluded that this Hitchcock guy would have probably been a traveler who had been in the area at the time of the Biological Survey,

who had taken a couple of cool photos at the Canal Zone, and who was friends with one or more of the scientists who were working there, thus lending them the images for their publications.

"Ahaa..." smiled my other self, mimicking me (poorly). If Henson had included that name among the relevant archival resources in relation to the Survey, it would be necessary to check it out. The ideas were beginning to hook together, like cherries, and that, to me, is always good news. Paths that branch —into ten, into a hundred, into a thousand— lead to much more than a single destination or just one point on the horizon.

It turned out that Albert Spear Hitchcock —so this guy was called— was an American botanist specialized in grasses, and had carried out a scientific expedition through Central America —including Panama, of course— during the same period as the Biological Survey (although without any relation to it, and without many relevant results in relation to the Panamanian flora). He had, however, taken a couple of interesting photos around the Canal.

Including the one of the tall grasses.

*[The fact that Hitchcock was a grass researcher solved an existential doubt that my other self and I had: why did that good man photograph precisely those plants, no matter how tall they were, with an entire exotic jungle of hundreds of unidentified species surrounding him...]?*

Looking through the digital archives of the Smithsonian Archives, I discovered that years after that expedition, in 1923-1924, Hitchcock visited Panama again, this time *en route* to Guayaquil, on a trip in which he planned to study the grasses of the Ecuadorian, Peruvian and Bolivian Andes. During his passage through the Canal Zone —which he described in a quite succinct page-and-a-half of his personal diary, written in practically unintelligible handwriting— he again took a number of interesting photos, including

some of Barro Colorado Island (BCI). One of them, showing the tree stumps sticking out of Gatun Lake, stuck with me — probably because it is one of the images that most caught my eye during my first visit to the island.

More cherries in the bunch. And I kept pulling.

From in there, my other self prodded me, "Could it be that those pictures of this Hitchcock guy were published somewhere else?"

He knows me well, the little rascal, and knows I'm not going to sit idly by while I have an unanswered question in front of me. So, I went to my early bibliography list on STRI, Panama and Barro Colorado and, after the *Miscellaneous Collections* and the *Annual Reports*, the first book published on the topic was *Jungle Island*.

*[Something you all already know because you have read the entry we have dedicated to that book in the "Tesoros" section of "Donde habitan las palabras", right?]*

*[\* Fingers of my right hand rhythmically tapping on the table, tucutucutú-tucutucutú \*]*

*[Right??]*

*Jungle Island* was a book produced by Warder C. Allee and Marjorie Hill Allee. Marjorie was an excellent writer, especially in the area of juvenile popular books, and her husband, Warder, was a renowned zoologist. They both traveled to Panama in the winter of 1923 and worked on the “jungle island” of the title: Barro Colorado. And they wrote a very entertaining (and educational) account of their wanderings on Panamanian lands.

But no, they did not include any photographs of Hitchcock in their pages. They did include images taken by themselves, though, or borrowed from BCI's resident custodian, the ineffable James Zetek, or from German naturalist Otto Lutz, who by that time had

already been living in Panama for several years — and whose work in the country deserves a separate narrative.

One of Lutz's most interesting photos included in that book —the first entirely dedicated to BCI, by the way— shows the famous "Shannon Shack", a somewhat improvised hut that visiting scientists used for a long time for their observations in the middle of the forest. The photo hooked, like a cherry, with a fragment of oral tradition stored in some hidden fold of my memory: a conversation with a naturalist guide on the island who told me that this had been the first construction to be erected there.

But... What about this Shannon guy...?

Before I could complete the question, my other self was already tugging at my sleeve insistently, suggesting (suggesting?) that we continue tangling cherries. How could I resist? When you have the end of a ball of yarn at the tip of your finger and the soul of a cat, like the one I have inside, you can't resist the impulse.

Raymond C. Shannon was an American entomologist who spent the months of June and July 1923 studying mosquitoes and other insects in Barro Colorado. At least that is what he stated in one of his articles (The occurrence of *Phlebotomus* in Panama. *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences*, 16 (7), 1926, pp. 190-193). And he did not lie: the first *Report of the Canal Zone Biological Area* —which so far exists only as a mimeograph copy in the STRI archive and was produced by Thomas Barbour in 1925— confirms these facts and adds that he was "the first to live upon the island", the person who "built and occupied" the "Shannon Shack", and the one who "chose the site which was finally decided upon for the buildings" of the scientific station in BCI.

And there, at that point, I decided to stop. I had had enough: from paper to paper, from cherry to cherry, I had traveled in time from the Biological Survey to the beginnings of the Institute for Research in Tropical America, predecessor of today's STRI. I slipped my

other self an imaginary, well-charged linden tea to calm him down, and took a panoramic look at the little historical-memorial fabric I had sketched in a matter of minutes. How many more elements could I add to it? Would only the tasty, ripe cherries come out of the basket, or would the green, the wormy, the rotten, the broken ones come out too? How many bifurcations, ramifications, twists and turns would these paths have? Where would they lead? How many threads would be needed to complete the weaving? What image would such a textile show at the end?

I had just finished, and I already felt like starting again. And that's one of the interesting things about weaving memories: once you start, you can't stop.

Almost the same as when you eat cherries, isn't it?

## Letters from the Library

### #08. This library is always empty...

"This library is always empty — a library should be full of people...!"

*[Ohmygoooooooooooooooood...].*

No matter when you read this: the saying "for a library to be a real library, it has to be full of people" has been around since the mid-19th century. To this day.

*[Literally. I just heard it this very morning. Ohmygoooooooooooooooood...]*

I'm not sure when that comment originated. It's hard to imagine it being used in earlier times. I can't picture, let's say, Sargon of Nineveh, "lord of the totality of the four corners of the universe, including all its regents"...

*[Yep, that's what he called himself, the modest fellow. Šar kiššat kibrāte ša napḥar malkī kalīšunu. He recorded that in cuneiform on murals in Nineveh, the Assyrian capital].*

...saying to his chief librarian: "Hey, mate, this library is empty... Do me a favor and fill it up, will ya?"

*[This Sargon of mine came out sort-of Australian... Sorry...].*

What I'm getting at is that the phrase "the library is empty, you have to fill it with people" is one we hear a lot in my line of work. In a world where effectiveness and impact are measured by numbers, not by process characteristics or qualitative elements, a library whose weekly statistics do not hit certain targets risks losing funding, staff and, in the long run, closing down.

*[Sometimes decision makers do not wait for the "long run" and move straight to sudden closure. I think I've mentioned before, in another of these letters, that my profession can be quite dramatic, haven't I? "Exciting and challenging," they say...]*

To save their necks, many library (and archive, and museum) workers "inflate" the numbers.

*[Nothing new here. Don't look shocked].*

No matter the innovation in the services, the detail in the activities, the beauty of the products and final results, or the proposals thought out in the long term to ensure sustainability: if our reading rooms are not packed with people, if the graphs do not climb off the PowerPoint and up the wall to the ceiling, our results are deemed unacceptable.

And the question hanging over our heads like the sword of Damocles is: "What's the point of having a library if it is not delivering the expected results?"

*[Emoji of teary face. Emoji of a sad face. Kitten GIF. More kitten GIFs. As many kitten GIFs as you have...].*

Librarians (and archivists and museologists, though less so) are a contentious guild. At the end of the last century, we were living happily with our books, and our catalogs, and our stuff, and our bustling reading rooms. Then the internet arrived.

I admit without shame that it felt like a right punch to the jaw with a glove filled with screws.

And just a couple of years later we got the e-book. Hook to the liver, technical KO in the first round, referee counting to ten, and we were lying there not knowing what hit us or how it happened.

We faced a massive identity crisis. "What are we good for now, what do we exist for, if what we do has no value, if everything is on the internet, if Google answers all the questions? Why do we accumulate books on our shelves if any John-of-the-Winds can carry two or three thousand digital books in a little device the size of a handkerchief?"

*[I don't know if you have any kitten GIFs left, or weepy, sad little faces. Add them here at your leisure].*

It was around that time —the beginning of the new millennium: longed-for times, when I was young and had hair...— that we began to redefine our name. We could no longer be "librarians". The word "library" derived from a Latin root that means "book". But the world no longer seemed to need books. "Info-brarians"? "Information scientists"? "Documentalists"? "Professionals in the knowledge disciplines"? No one knew where to go. Nobody knew what to do.

What we did know was that, as if by magic, our reading rooms had begun to empty. Loans had been dwindling. Queries had been scarce. And our supervisors and bosses, our private Sargons, sitting in their offices and looking at our statistics, had started to say, "mate, this library is empty...".

We told ourselves then that it was necessary to dive headlong into this new digital world — the one that had fallen on us like an ACME brand trap successfully launched by the coyote on duty against us, poor roadrunners who were not running at all. We learned to move on the Internet, yes, and we created digital libraries... In fact, we changed the paradigm so much that we forgot who we were —and I'm talking about centuries of history here— and we became something else. "The library will be digital or it won't be,"

said some enlightened library guru; "the book is dead," said another of those poor devils...

And our confusion and our stress and anxiety levels went up, up, up. And our stats went down, down, down.

*[GIF of sad little Korean girl. More GIFs of other equally sad little girls].*

To make matters worse, to top it all off and put the red-scarlet cherry on the summit of the cake, social networks arrived. People started to prefer to ask questions on LinkedIn, broadcast on Twitter, or share on Facebook instead of using libraries that were already half-forgotten and were starting to become a thing of the past.

*[So harsh was that perception of "libraries as a thing of the past" that many of my colleagues were quick to jettison anything that linked them, even slightly, to an "analog" or "paper-based" past. Thus, there were people who threw away their card catalogs, the result of years of work by generations and generations of careful librarians, or who made a gigantic hole in the desert and buried thousands of their paper journals because "what do we want them for when they are already digitized and a click away on the Internet...?"]*

*[No one thought that this "click" away was going to cost them thousands of dollars... for something they had just buried in the desert. "La vida te da sorpresas, sorpresas te da la vida, ay Dios..."].*

As I was saying, people embraced social networks, the umpteenth technological boom of the decade. And we became the last lug in the jar, a zero seven hundred places to the left.

But we didn't shrink back. We got on Instagram, we did Pinterest, we opened Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, we created blogs... What's more: we went overboard about five times, we were more papist than the Pope, and we stopped being librarians to become influencers who didn't know very well what they were showing, nor what discourse they were selling, nor who they were influencing, nor why, nor for what...

The crisis of identity and values was absolute. But instead of stopping the ball in the middle of the field to see where the opposite goal was (we Argentines are very fond of soccer metaphors), we kept running, fleeing forward at full speed.

The rooms, however, remained empty.

At the same time, dark libraries and other pirate sites were growing and reproducing online like mushrooms, and anyone could have books that cost us law-abiding people a kidney and hit the shelves three months after everyone else had already read them.

And TikTok became the new search engine for young people, who didn't even use Google anymore...

...and we were there, paralyzed, or running back and forth saying "shit, shit, shit" like a bunch of chicks under an unexpected hailstorm.

*[GIF of a running chick. Emojis of chick head, chick coming out of egg, whole chick].*

That's when we started inventing what we shouldn't have invented. And all because of statistics.

With our reading rooms empty and our numbers down the drain, and with a bleak outlook all around us, and with our beloved Sargons cracking their whips over our shaking, chicken-like little heads, and not knowing quite what to do about it, a number

of libraries around the world turned their rooms into something else. The point was to fill them. Some argued that they did not want those spaces to die of loneliness, but we all knew very well why they were doing it. The fact is that reading spaces were transformed into cafes, gyms, video game rooms, chill-outs, lounges, art galleries, concert halls...

Even places to take a quick nap.

In this way, many large libraries were able to achieve their goals through statistics that, in a way, were not real. Because a library is not an exhibition hall, nor a concert hall, nor an art gallery, nor a place to relax. It can be, of course, but in a complementary way, and as long as these activities serve the primary objectives of the library: to manage knowledge and memory.

Think about it: what is the difference between an art exhibition in a gallery and one in a library? Leaving aside the fact that a gallery is an expert in carrying out these activities and dedicates 100% of its time to it, and a library is not, the main difference should be the objectives. A library should not exhibit just for the sake of exhibiting: galleries already do that (and much better, because, as I say, they are 100% dedicated to it). A library should exhibit so that the materials exhibited serve as a gateway to its collections, to its documents. The exhibition is an excuse for attendees to enter a "knowledge route" carefully designed in advance: one that, from each element of the exhibition, brings the interested party into the collection and allows them to tour it, discover it and understand it, and provides doors and windows attached to other routes and other complementary documents.

The same happens with a concert. With the presentation of a book. With video games.

*[Let's forget about coffee, gym and siesta. They always seemed to me as nonsense, products of desperation].*

While we librarians were discussing all this, the pandemic fell upon us. It was the coup de grâce: as if Sisyphus' damned stone, in addition to rolling downhill for the infinitesimal time, had crushed him as well. People all over the world discovered (by force, against their will, but they did) that they didn't have to go anywhere in person: that practically everything could be done without leaving home. In pajamas. Or without.

And then came artificial intelligence.

Yeap.

*[I don't know about you. I ran out of emojis. And GIFs].*

Today many libraries are still empty. A lot of them. If tumbleweeds were rolling through our reading rooms, we probably wouldn't be amazed.

*[What's more: we would probably run after them offering them the latest edition of...].*

However, that does not mean we are not doing our job. We are concerned with maintaining the integrity and health of our physical collections, understanding and maintaining our virtual collections, and seeing how to connect those collections of knowledge and memory to the community. Because that, in my view, is what a library (or whatever they are calling it these days) is: a space, physical or virtual, where people can connect with knowledge and memories. Nothing more. And nothing less.

We continue with our identity crises, with our chicks-under-the-hail behavior. We continue to wonder why we exist. Sometimes we ask ChatGPT, or some other artificial intelligence. ChatGPT reaches out a virtual hand and pats us on the shoulder, and fills our glass with *aguardiente antioqueño* while Paquita la del Barrio's "Rata de dos patas" plays, and says nothing. What is it going to say?

I know that eventually we will find our way. A path that will go through accepting what we have always done, understanding that it is something valuable, stop chasing novelties as if not embracing them would mean the end of us, embrace technologies as a tool (and not as an end in itself), stop keeping up with fashions and trends, and have a good plan. I am convinced that, with a good plan, bringing people to the library will be feasible.

People coming *to the library*. To use the library and its collections. Not (just) people coming to relax, or to use the internet, or to hang out because it's cool inside and hot outside. That's not a "vibrant community." Not at all.

To get them to come to the library, we need to show them why what we librarians do is valuable, and how our services and products, in person or online, can be useful to their work and interests.

It turns out that, for that to happen, we first have to understand (and accept) it ourselves.

And then, our Sargons on duty.

*[Emoji of... Argh, I don't know anymore... Ohmygoooooooooooooooood...].*

## Letters from the Library

### #09. The gaze of the woven masks

Hanging on a wall that they cover entirely, three hundred faces woven in plant fibers watch me with their three hundred pairs of empty eyes. They compose a scenario of hollow, tawny, cream, mahogany, and ashy gazes — with their rough threads creating curves and straight lines, and their ancestral designs based on animal profiles, or mythical beings...

I've just arrived in Panama City (Panama), and one of my first strolls leads me directly to the Old Town: a gridded and colonial peninsula overlooking a bay that stretches to the Pacific, amidst islands and mangroves, within the "tristes tropiques" that Lévi-Strauss described in his renowned travel diary.

And in that corner of a small, humid, and intense city, hotter than the fifth pot of hell, I find a magical place — a kind of store-gallery on a narrow street. A street covered by colorful hats, suspended several meters above the ground by ropes that cross from sidewalk to sidewalk.

There, in that gallery, *nemboro* are sold. *Nemboro*: the famous "masks" made by the women of the Embera people of the Panamanian Darien rainforest, out of fibers of the "chunga" palm.

They say that the Embera people of Colombia also make them, as well as their Wounaan neighbors, inhabitants of the lowlands of the Chocó department. I don't remember hearing about them during my years of residence in Colombian lands. However, here, the artisanal —or should I say "artistic"?— works of the Embera of Panama are widely known for their exquisite design, their many details, and, above all, their meanings.

*Nemboro* are not actual masks. They are not merely used to disguise their wearers and conceal their identity. At least, they are not just that. Their original name, which in Embera language translates as "head," provides a hint of their ultimate function. By wearing them on their faces, those who don them not only obscure their features but also assume the nature of the entity the *nemboro* represents.

And they quite literally transform into something else.

Hence, a "mask" of an eagle is not just a disguise: it turns the person wearing it into that bird. And it does so to protect the life of the masked one. Originally, *nemboro* were used exclusively by the *jaibana*, the "shamans" of the Embera people, during their healing ceremonies. Armed with their sacred wooden staffs, entranced by hallucinogenic herbs, these "witches" battled against any evil spirits that dared to afflict the bodies and souls of the people in their communities. And during those lengthy ceremonies, they would put one or many *nemboro* "heads" over their mud-colored faces. Transformed into something or someone else, or into many consecutive things, the *jaibana* were able to mislead and confuse their adversaries... and continue their fight.

Once their mission was accomplished, those *nemboro* used in a healing ritual were burned. Inevitably. No one wished the defeated spirits, in a fit of vengeful anger, to seek and find those false faces that humiliated them.

Moreover, these items were imbued with a particular energy after the rituals. An energy that nobody desired to harbor in their houses. It's akin to as someone in our Western culture deciding to salvage the flowers used in a wake or burial and displaying them in a vase as a centerpiece. In general, many would agree that those flowers should be discarded because they carry a certain symbolic charge that no one would want in their daily life.

Interestingly, *nemboro* are now one of the most coveted artistic products in Panama, alongside the *mola* appliquéd clothes produced by the women of the Gunadule people from the San Blas archipelago.

It is in this commercial context that I have my first encounter with the Embera "masks." There, in the Old Town of Panama City, on a January Sunday, taking shelter inside a store to escape a noonday sun that scorches everything in its path.

It is there that I find myself, almost unintentionally, face to face with three hundred pairs of empty eyes made of palm threads, staring at me, inquisitively.

\*\*\*

The "masks" are marketed in their original sizes —capable of covering a human face, or much larger— as well as in medium and small versions. Except for a couple of long strips that act as support structures, which can be vegetal or wire, the entire piece is carefully woven with thin, short threads, using various patterns. The material used is a stiff fiber extracted from the youngest leaves of a palm known popularly as *chunga*, *macora*, or *guérregue* (*Astrocaryum standleyanum*). Spread between Costa Rica and Ecuador, the palm provides raw material for making baskets and other everyday items. And *nemboro*, of course.

In general, those who produce these works in the Embera communities of Panama — mostly located in the Comarca Embera-Wounaan in the Darien region, to the east of the country, near the border with Colombia— are women. These artisan-artists have managed to recover and preserve traditional structures, techniques, and patterns, even maintaining the old processes of dyeing fibers with natural colors. However, they have also innovated, integrating the use of vivid aniline tones in their work, as well as unusual cutting, weaving, and braiding patterns, into the "masks" of yesteryear.

As mentioned earlier, *nemboro* are no longer quite used in the rituals of the *jaibana*, who can be both men and women. For some time now, these individuals have been experiencing a certain setback in indigenous societies, where the impact of currents like evangelism has been severe.

Therefore, since they are not used much in healing ceremonies, the "masks" can be sold without any inconvenience. There are no rules or taboos prohibiting such trade, and, most importantly, the "heads" will not be pursued by any spiritual entity seeking revenge. In fact, confronted with their dry gazes, their beaks and open mouths, their sharp or curved silhouettes, there, in the store in Panama's Old Town, I don't sense them laden with "bad energy." Not at all.

But they do carry meanings, knowledge, and memories, though. That, I can feel.

I feel an entire universe hanging on that wall in front of me. It's the worldview of a people and the knowledge of generations of artisans and *jaibana* who collaborated to develop the best way to defeat dark souls. There are crests, fangs, and more and more empty eyes observing me from the depths of time.

A significant portion of these *nemboro* could be considered authentic documents, serving as vessels for the transmission of specific types of information. At least, if we adopt the broader concept of "document," common in museums and among the more contemporary currents of information science.

The "masks" speak of specific materials (fibers, frames, dyes, ornaments), of their strategies of collection and use, and of local ecologies and biologies; of specific construction techniques, with all their many variations across space and time; of the religious meanings of colors and shapes, and the symbolism of iconographies; of stories related to the represented characters, and of others related to the numerous healings (successful and unsuccessful), which are essentially battles against the world of darkness

and evil. Ultimately, they represent the culmination of all their components, and a node, or a knot, in the intricate tapestry of Embera traditional knowledge and memory.

*Nemboro* tell of territories and people, and their benign and malignant spiritual entities. And they achieve this solely through their silhouettes, volumes, textures, and shades. Incidentally, these features render them aesthetically beautiful, highly appreciated, and valuable objects.

And, therefore, very marketable.

\*\*\*

I select one of the smallest among the many "masks" displayed in that store. The larger ones feel too imposing to me. I prefer to have one with me that does not invade my space but keeps me company, allowing me to appreciate its details — the repetitive interweaving of fibers forming a pattern, the color that is stronger here and fades there...

And one that tells me a story. Its story.

Its *potential* story, for example: what would have happened if it had been used by a *jaibana* in some corner of the ancient Darien forest to combat the nauseating claws of a mythical beast, or the dark influences of a particular shadow?

But its *real* story as well. The story of the many women who harvested the *chunga* leaves, painstakingly extracted the fibers, dyed them, skillfully wove them, and envisioned this or that form, detail, and structure... Or the narrative of those who journeyed kilometers to sell their creations, striving to earn a few coins for survival, or those who were compelled to undersell them due to necessity, or those who fell victims to unscrupulous intermediaries... Stories of resilience and exploitation, of cultural and identity shifts, and also of losses and oblivion.

I opt for those without bright aniline colors and choose one in dark brown, cream, and beige hues. In the shape of a feline. Is it really one? I'm not entirely certain; it might be a deer. As soon as I have it in my hands, I find myself instinctively classifying it. After all, isn't it a document? Am I not a librarian?

And, naturally, I realize how unaccustomed my profession is to classify anything other than paper-based documents, and the myriad possibilities that emerge as I contemplate this knowledge-turned-into-a-"mask" that I hold timidly between my fingers.

\*\*\*

On the empty walls of my new apartment in Panama City, there is enough space to hang several dozen "masks." Hammer and nail in hand, I finish placing the first one: the *nemboro* that I just bought in the Old Town. I step back a little to look at it from a distance. It's beautiful, with its array of brown tones standing out against the immaculate white background.

In that moment, I imagine a library shelf with a collection of those indigenous ritual "heads," carefully classified and cataloged, engaging in dialogue with books, articles related to the Embera people, and other documentary materials — understanding "documents" in the broadest sense of the term. And inevitably, questions arise. Why are we taking so long to put into practice this concept of a plural, broad, decolonial, and interdisciplinary "library"? Why do we persist in fragmenting the memory and knowledge of our societies into separate entities as libraries, archives, and museums when, in truth, they form a single, rich, and integral entity? Why does our information universe always revolve around the same formats, media, materials, origins, languages, and codes? Why do we overlook other ways of storytelling, knowledge expression, and memory encoding?

With these thoughts swirling in my mind, I settle at my desk and begin drafting the first paragraphs of this text. Beside my laptop, carefully spread out, lies a *mola*: one of the vibrant fabrics crafted by the Gunadule women of Panama and Colombia. An artistic creation with a very different story from the Embera *nemboro*, yet possessing a similar representational significance. I pause for a moment, lost in the *mola*'s colors, its drawings, the tiny stitches of the threads that bind the entire work together. And I realize that the same thing I'm about to say about the chungá "masks" could equally apply to the Gunadule fabrics. Perhaps even more so.

I resolve that this will be a tale for another occasion. And I resume typing this one.

## Letters from the Library

### #10. Pulling the thread

They appeared. Just like that. It often happens this way, and that's one of the charms of this profession that I experience daily and share with you through these letters.

I'm talking about two documents I found in a corner of my office. No one has been able to explain how they ended up there. As I said, they just appeared. When I unpacked the first one, I found the seal of James Zetek's library on the first page. It sent shivers down my spine. Just like that.

*[James Zetek was an American entomologist, and in the second quarter of the 20th century, he was the resident custodian of the Barro Colorado Island (BCI) Biological Station in Lake Gatun: the germ of what is now STRI.]*

The page with that seal displayed the title of the document: *Reports of the Canal Zone Biological Area, 1925-1940*. These were the earliest reports from the BCI biological station. First-hand data: a log of everything that happened during each of those years, with names, budgets, actions, data, and some anecdotes...

I searched our institutional database. I looked through other international databases, the Biodiversity Heritage Library, Archive.org. I scoured the entire Internet. And found nothing. Nothing at all. No one else seemed to have a copy of these documents.

I was holding a treasure. Quite unique, indeed.

What I'm telling you happened months ago. Today, the document is already scanned and transcribed, and little by little, I have been annotating and translating it into Spanish. And

in the process, I've discovered smaller treasures within the big treasure. Like a giant Russian *matryoshka*.

*[All are, in fact: just look a little more carefully. Pay attention, as I once told you in another letter, to the small details.]*

One of those smaller-treasures-within-the-big-treasure was found a couple of weeks ago. While examining the first report, from 1925, I began to detect, among its paragraphs (specifically in the "Visitors" section), some words and phrases that stood out from the general fabric of the text as if they were loose threads.

I confess that my impulse, when I find these threads, is to pull on them.

*[You are trying to imagine the state of my clothes, right?]*

You probably know that this curiosity, the one sparked by small elements that seem to "stand out" from the panoramic picture, is what has fueled many investigations. You might also know, or imagine (and if not, here I am to tell you), that sometimes the thread leads nowhere: it's simply a false lead. Other times, it leads to interesting discoveries: the beginning of a long and rich path of building and developing new knowledge, all motivated by an initial "small detail."

That being said, the first fragment of text that caught my attention was this:

"Dr. Harrison G. Dyar, Curator of Mosquitoes, U. S. National Museum, Washington, D. C., worked principally at Ancon, but visited the island with Mr. Shannon. Mrs. Dyar assisted in his studies of mosquitos."

I must clarify that one of my main interests in bibliographic-historical research is finding the traces left by women. In general, they have been greatly overlooked in scientific

literature and academic reports, despite having been involved in many important activities. In this context, and given that Dyar's wife apparently was involved in the work on Barro Colorado, I tried to find out who she was.

I've been surprised many times when diving into these types of processes. But what I found here, I truly did not expect.

It turns out that Harrison Dyar (American entomologist, 1866-1929) was bigamous. He was married to Zella Peabody (with whom he had two children) and in a relationship with Wellesca Pollock (with whom he had several children), whom he met (a) while Pollock was a part-time assistant at the Smithsonian Institution, or (b) at Baha'i meetings both frequented (in fact, Pollock adopted the Persian name "Aseyeh," and was one of the earliest adherents of this faith in the U.S.).

*[If you don't know what the Baha'i religion is, I invite you to do a little research about it. Wikipedia may help...]*

When the topic came to light, it caused a huge scandal in the Washingtonian society of the time. In 1921, Dyar finally "regularized" his situation: he divorced Peabody and married Pollock...

...who was the one who visited Barro Colorado in 1924 assisting him in his studies of mosquitoes.

*[It's not the ending I would have liked to read, I must admit. But well, perhaps it's my vengeful spirit speaking...]*

Dyar's story is much more complex and goes beyond this: he quarreled with half the world at the Smithsonian Institution, had quite complicated personal habits, and

adored... digging tunnels, a fact discovered when a large truck casually driving down the street sank into one of them.

If you're interested in this character, check out Marc Epstein's book *Moths, Myths, and Mosquitoes: The Eccentric Life of Harrison G. Dyar, Jr.* (Oxford: University Press, 2016). You can ask me for it if you wish.

The second text that caught my attention in the 1925 report from the BCI station (in the same "Visitors" section) was this one:

"Dr. Reginald Gordon Harris, Director, Biological Laboratory, Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, came here for studies of endocrine control of metamorphosis in lepidopterous larvae, which were carried on at Board of Health Laboratory, Ancon; as well as several daily trips to the Island when some lepidoptera were secured. These studies were carried on while waiting for the arrival of Mr. Marsh who had arranged to take Mr. and Mrs. Harris to the San Blas coast to study the 'White Indians.'"

Harris (1898-1936) was an American biologist, but his true passion was travel and contact with different cultures. At that time, the story of the "white Indians of Darién" was popular. It turns out that, apparently, the Gunadule people were famous at that time (I don't know if they still are, and honestly, I don't know if they ever were) for having one of the highest rates of albinism among Latin American indigenous societies. In 1923-1924, Richard O. Marsh's (tragic, indeed) expedition to Darién described these "white Indians" or "blond Indians" (there's a review by H. L. Fairchild in *Science*, 60 (1925), pp. 235-237, regarding this trip, which is worth reading — and you can also ask me for it if you wish).

The fact is that, during his stay in Panama, Harris took the opportunity to visit the San Blas archipelago and later wrote one of the books by which he is best remembered, and

which has nothing to do with biology: *The Tule Indians of San Blas* (Panama: Imprenta Nacional, 1926).

And finally, the third fragment of text that caught my curiosity was this:

"Dr. Dorothy L. Popenoe, Student of Grasses, formerly at Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, England, visited the island to collect grasses."

"A grass student?" I wondered. I found it curious, so I dug a little. And I discovered that Dorothy Kate Popenoe was an English botanist (a specialist in grasses, indeed), archaeologist, and illustrator. In 1925, her husband, agricultural explorer Wilson Popenoe...

*[An agricultural explorer was a botanist who traveled the world seeking new potential agricultural products, and the tropics, as you can imagine, were a fertile ground for such discoveries.]*

...accepted a job with the United Fruit Company. At that time, they moved to Honduras, where she conducted a series of interesting academic works, including the study of numerous Maya ruins (Tenampa, Cerro Palenque, Playa de los Muertos...).

During her work in Playa de los Muertos, she ate an unripe akee.

*[The akee (Blighia sapida) is a tropical fruit.]*

And it was thanks to her that part of the European world learned that akees must be fully ripe and cooked to be consumed. Because Popenoe died of poisoning in 1932. At the age of 33.

By something known in the Caribbean for decades as "Jamaican vomit."

Evidently, none of these stories I've shared here are "great stories." They are rather "circumstantial anecdotes." To say the truth, they are simply "curiosities." But from each of these threads that appear by chance, we can begin to weave a fabric. Start asking questions. Did all those people on the 1924 visitor list meet each other while working on Barro Colorado Island? If they did, what conversations did they have? Did they influence each other, perhaps?

When pulling one of these threads, usually nothing appears. Or maybe we only find a string of small curiosities. But let's not lose the habit of pulling on each thread we find. Who knows? We might discover the subject of our next research. Or our next book.

*[Or our next blog post. Right?]*

## Letters from the Library

### #11. Those who remained behind the curtain

All stories, our stories, the biggest and the smallest, have actresses and actors. Main and secondary characters who participate in them, who develop them, who interpret them, who conclude them: heroes or villains, noble or base, comedic or tragic.

It is thanks to these people, their actions and searches, and their stumbles or victories, that this enormous and plural narrative called "History" has been moving since humans have existed.

Those of us who manage knowledge and memory —whether in libraries, archives, museums, or any other similar and equivalent space— know these actresses and actors well. And we have learned (the hard way, not because anyone has explained or taught us) that there are always great figures who occupy the entire screen or stage, and others who remain behind. Sometimes out of focus and out of the credits. Behind the curtain.

Finding out and understanding that these characters were present in a specific scene, at a particular moment in history (or in several) is sometimes extremely difficult. No one speaks of them; there are no traces, they don't appear in photos, field notebooks, or travel diaries. There's no writing about them; they aren't in the acknowledgments of books or articles... However, for those of us who can read between the lines, there are silences or gaps in the narrative that reveal that there, precisely there, were people. More people. Different people.

Invisible people. Or invisibilized (because why and for what reason would anyone talk about them?)

*[And here words like "colonialism" or expressions like "hegemonic discourse," "dominant narrative," or "official history" come to my mind, to my mouth, and to the tips of my fingers typing this text. But my mood today asks me to leave them unwritten. Perhaps another day I will bring them up...]*

I have had many encounters with these kinds of invisibilized characters; after all, I have spent two decades and a half in these endeavors. One of the cases that caught my attention was during my work in the Galápagos Islands. While reviewing old papers, I found the story of the discovery of a certain zoological species (which I prefer not to mention) on a particular island (whose name I will also withhold). The scientist (whose identity, paraphrasing Miguel de Cervantes, "I prefer not to remember") who found it published his discovery with all the fanfare he could muster.

But... how did that scientist, a foreigner with poor explorer skills, reach that remote piece of land? How did he traverse its rugged volcanic slopes?

The Galápagos oral tradition (the living and critical voice of those without written and recognized voice) preserves the names of the sailor who led the "discoverer" to the island and the local guides who accompanied him on the journey. Without them, the discovery would not have been possible.

*[Some gossip suggests that it was the guides themselves who made the discovery...]*

It goes without saying that those people are not mentioned in any printed text.

That's how I learned that behind every fragment of "official" history, there are a thousand and one small "unofficial" stories that provide context, nuance the dominant narrative, enrich the scene — and sometimes radically change the narrative. Those "other" stories, starring "other" people, generally go unrecorded. They are preserved and transmitted through orality, the spoken word: a medium generally dismissed for

being unreliable, subjective, unstable. And also rebellious, critical, nonconformist, and utterly unwilling to swallow nonsense.

At other times, such stories can be found when one, like a detective in old nineteenth-century novels, starts to pay attention to seemingly irrelevant details: the presence (or absence — the silences are very telling) of certain words, the gesture in the inner corner of a small, worn-out photo, the note in the margin that fades away...

This happened to me a couple of weeks ago while working with the early reports from the Barro Colorado biological station (specifically, the one from 1925) when I found an apparently irrelevant name.

The past year [1924] has been so eventful that it is by no means easy to deal with all the details of construction and maintenance. The location of the buildings has made this work unusually difficult. Sincere thanks are due to the officials of the Panama Canal for unanimous cooperation and enthusiastic assistance on every possible occasion. Ex-Governor Morrow, Governor Walker, and many others including the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department and Mr. J. B. Shropshire, Chief Sanitary Inspector, U.S. Army deserve hearty thanks.

Why was a "Chief Sanitary Inspector" appearing in this list of governors and generals? This detail piqued my curiosity. I began to delve into the annual reports of the Governor of the Canal Zone from the early twentieth century, chasing that surname like a bloodhound. Shropshire appears there, as early as 1919, as "Army sanitary inspector" (Report of the Chief Health Officer. In *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal Zone on the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1919*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919, p. 313).

Thus, I confirmed the identity of the character mentioned in the Barro Colorado report. But... was there nothing more?

I kept searching and, to my surprise, the surname appeared a few years later in an article in the magazine *Zoologica* written by Samuel Hildebrand, one of the scientists who participated in the Biological Survey of the Panama Canal conducted by the Smithsonian Institution around 1910. In that text, Hildebrand describes Shropshire as a "malarialogist" (a scholar of malaria, which aligns with his role as sanitary inspector in an area like the Canal at that time), but also as an important collector of biological samples (Hildebrand, Samuel F. The Panama Canal as a Passageway for Fishes, with Lists and Remarks on the Fishes and Invertebrates Observed. *Zoologica*, 24 (1), 1939, pp. 15-45).

As a malariologist, he captured and collected mosquitoes, and apparently provided access to his collections to many visiting scientists. This is reflected in texts by Harrison Dyar and Graham Bell Fairchild (Dyar, H. G. & Shannon, R. C. A new sabethid mosquito from Panama. *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences*, 15 (11), June 4, 1925, p. 234; Fairchild, G. B. Notes on Tabanidae from Panama. IX. The genera *Stenotabatus*... *Annals of the Entomological Society of America*, 35, 1942, pp. 289-309; Arnett, R. H. Notes on the Distribution, Habits, and Habitats of Some Panama Mosquitoes (Diptera, Culicidæ). *Journal of the New York Entomological Society*, 55 (3), Sep. 1947, pp. 185-200).

Once involved in the adventure, I kept digging. Someone with such an interest in natural history could not have limited himself to just mosquitoes in such a lush and vibrant environment. Surely his curiosity would have led him further. And I was right in my assumption. The fish *Gobiomorus dormitor* was recognized thanks to a specimen he himself captured, and the snake *Phrynonax shropshirei* bears his surname in the scientific binomial because he found a specimen near Gatun in 1924.

All those articles, all those new species for science, all that knowledge that has shaped the narrative and development of the history of science in Panama and the tropics, would not have been possible without that person who dedicated his time to traversing the forests and rivers in the Canal Zone, observing, capturing, and preserving specimens.

A person who selflessly opened the doors of his collection so that other scientists could describe and publish those species, thus advancing knowledge towards new horizons. A person who spent his free time muddy, wet, and hot (and, surely, bitten by those same mosquitoes he must have come to know so well), in many corners of a Panama rich in life waiting to be discovered and understood.

There are hundreds, thousands of stories like this, hidden in manuscripts and archival notebooks, in the labels that identify our biological collections, in the photos and notes that we still have the luck to preserve. In this case, there was a clear mention of a specific name. But this doesn't always happen. It's not always so easy, so evident. Which makes the detective work much more exciting. Who was s/he, where was s/he, what did s/he do...? What happened, how did it all end, what remained?

I invite you to look at what you do from this perspective. You will see that, one way or another, the panorama expands, the image becomes much more diverse and dense, the threads that form the fabric multiply as if by magic.

And I also invite you to remember that, many times, the papers, objects, and materials we consider "trash" —disposable elements that have already fulfilled their purpose or that, due to the effects of time, seem to have nothing to say— are essential items for telling a story. A complete story, with its many facets and many angles, sometimes sharp, always interesting.

In entry #4 of this series, I spoke of "the people behind the things." The intention of this text is to ask myself (and you to ask yourselves) what people are behind what things. And which ones don't appear, even though we know —or intuit— that they have been there. Which ones were left out of the picture, backstage, or behind the curtain?

And, above all: why?

P.S. After writing this entry, I continued researching J. B. Shropshire. And, in the most unexpected way imaginable, among the documents digitized by the National Library of Panama, I found a true treasure. Here it is, to complete my account.

"J. B. Shropshire: He was born in Paris, Kentucky, U.S., and obtained a Master of Arts degree, specializing in English Literature at Princeton University. He arrived in the former Canal Zone as a nurse, to escape unfortunate romantic entanglements! The eminent American pathologist, Samuel T. Darling, discoverer of the etiological agent of histoplasmosis, took Shropshire and Dunn, who was also a nurse by profession, under his protective wing and trained them in the rudiments of medical entomology, as he believed that the newly created Canal Zone should have this type of personnel, essential for health work in the tropics. Shropshire was a talented man, whose worth was generally unrecognized due to his shyness. For a time in his life, he was simultaneously a champion in tennis and chess, as well as the main promoter of music festivals in the former Zone. Initially, he worked for the Panama Canal Company but later became the Chief of Malaria Control at the United States Army facilities in the former Canal Zone. Shropshire was very beloved by the Caribbean community, who made up the bulk of the labor force in the Canal Zone; and the health inspectors, mosquito catchers, and ditch diggers who worked under his direction would do anything for him. He planned and directed the construction of many miles of concrete-lined ditches around the Army facilities, and due to his familiarity with the forests and swamps, he came to know Panamanian wildlife intimately. American zoologists visiting the Isthmus could almost always count on Shropshire's help to obtain the most diverse variety of animals. He collected many of the mosquitoes from Panama that were included in the work of the famous author of "The Mosquitoes of the Americas," H. G. Dyar, who named a subgenus of culicids in his honor. He also created an entomological surveillance group to protect the Army facilities against malaria infections. Shropshire never married and lived in humble bachelor quarters surrounded by his water lilies and by the affection and admiration of his Caribbean subordinates, mainly of French descent. He spent his salary on trips to New York City during his vacations to attend performances at the

Metropolitan Opera and to support the education of a large number of nephews. Shropshire never claimed to be an entomologist and was rather a self-taught individual in the field of Sanitary Engineering" (pp. 39-40).

[In Trapido, Harold. Carne y espíritu de Herbert C. Clark, MD., o cinco lustros de historia del Laboratorio Conmemorativo Gorgas. N.d.].

## Letters from the Library

### #12. A lesson on ticks

"Please keep this folder always in the library room, on the table. Do not remove it from the library".

This is how a curious document I just found this week in our special collection begins, while I was conducting a (very necessary) inventory. A very particular, original, and unique typewritten document, produced by James Zetek, the custodian of Barro Colorado Island biological station, in 1951.

The text is titled "Information for Scientists," and in its sixty-some pages, it covers everything a visitor needed to know upon arriving at Barro Colorado in that era: from basic rules to payments and invoices, purchases, water and electricity usage, train schedules, use of the herbarium, the library, the laboratory, the dining hall, and the darkroom, to mailing services, specimen collection, and even some survival tips for the forest.

The last section is dedicated to ticks. I liked it so much that I decided to share it in full with you.

So, here are Zetek's paragraphs. Written over seven decades ago, but still useful today.

[The photograph features James Zetek, was taken by Alexander Wetmore in 1946, and is currently housed in the SI Archives.]

## **Ticks and red bugs**

Ticks are very plentiful during the dry season, red bugs in the wet season. Ticks you can see, but the very minute "seed" ticks, that is, the very young, are hard to see and very abundant. They are on the tips of grasses, etc. Red bugs you don't see, but feel. There are some people that are little attacked by red bugs or ticks.

The bigger ticks are easy to remove when crawling. Seed ticks, because of their very small size, are harder to remove because they are harder to see. All ticks work upward, hence, insofar as your skin is concerned, the vulnerable areas to protect are the region of the ankle, the waist, and the wrists. Dress against ticks. Tuck your pant legs into your socks and then sprinkle heavily with powdered sulphur. Carry with you a "tick-ball" which I devised in 1923 and still consider efficient. This is bees wax with pine oil added. If you keep it in the hand, the body heat will keep it soft. Stop occasionally and go over yourself by tapping each crawling tick you see with the tick-ball. The ticks will become imbedded in the wax. If there are any crawling in your skin use the tick-ball, and the bit of pine oil that stays on the skin will help you to prevent scratching.

You may have used "622" [insect repellent used during WWII in jungles, made mostly of dimethyl phthalate] and you may like it. It is good, but I do not like to smear it over my flesh. It is good to spray on your pant legs. Or you can dip the pant legs in water made soapy with "Tide" [laundry detergent originally designed for heavy duty machine cleaning] into which you have added the "622" and many believe this is excellent.

But if you tuck your pant legs in your socks, use powdered sulphur, use a belt and powder the belt-line with sulphur, and if ticks are very bad, de-tick with a tick-ball, you will find that this answers well the purpose.

We recommend when you come in from the forest that you change trousers, and go over yourself for ticks, using the tick-ball. And also, de-tick your field clothes. Stretch a strong

cord between two posts. Make out of wire "S" shaped hooks. Put the hooks on this cord and suspend your field clothes from the S-hooks. Since ticks crawl upward, by next morning practically all of them will be congregated on the S-hooks and your field clothes are deticked. But you must drop the S-hooks into a jar with alcohol.

Eventually, when we have more of electricity, we plan to have a room heated to above 140 degrees Fahr., where you can hang your field clothes and bake the ticks to death.

In going over your body for ticks, team work is often needed to get ticks where you can't see them or reach them.

Once the ticks stick their mouthparts into your flesh, as they eventually will, you have another problem, which leads to itching. A method we found worthwhile is to wet the tick with your saliva and then rotate the tick with your finger, and you will "work" it loose and not leave the mouthparts in the flesh to cause festering.

A shower bath will remove free ticks, and some that are just attached, and also will help with red bugs, is splendid IF you do it right. The ritual is as follows: open shower and slowly count to three. Close shower. Soap yourself well (lifebuoy [a brand of soap created in 1895] is very good) and when well lathered, open shower to take off the soap and count to ten. This is ample to de-soap. Shut off shower. If you prefer longer baths, use the lake. We do not have enough water storage to allow for extended showers. Of course I know that this "system" is hardly ever followed to the letter.

For red bugs no remedy is better than "don't scratch". There are any number of "remedies". The following one is fine if you have patience. Take a piece of cotton, wet it with chloroform, put it over the tiny red dot, cover with finger, and hold it until it feels real warm. Remove and go to the next spot. Rubbing alcohol is also good. Do not use menticol [refreshing lotion to avoid itching] or other cooling lotions over large areas

because of the cooling effect. The "Zetek" liniment [?] is ok, but be sure you rub it till it is dry, do not put cloth over an area still wet with the liniment, because it will burn.

If you can't help it, and scratch until the hide is denuded, you have a problem worse than the red bug. In such a case, Abbott's Butesin picrate [Australian ointment, applied to skin lesions as a topical anesthetic, analgesic, and antiseptic] is excellent unless you are one of the very few sensitive to picrates. Or, you can paint small areas with the following: Tincture of Benzoin Compound [invented ca. 1760 and sometimes called "Friar's Balsam"] one part, tincture of iodine one part.

I have known individuals (myself included) who go into the forest in shorts and ticks and red bugs do not seem to bother them much — probably in part because when they come in they go over themselves for ticks and use rubbing alcohol on legs and feet. And others, with all precautions, come back loaded.

## Letters from the Library

### #13. Travel notes about a Panama of yesteryear

Travel diaries have always been among the most incredible bestsellers in world literature.

Throughout the centuries, the travel expectations of the vast majority of the human population were limited to the surroundings of their hometown and, with luck, perhaps a market in the neighboring town. And that was it.

Thus, travel has always been among the most sought-after narratives by audiences hungry for stories. And there is nothing we, humans, like and that moves us more than a good story: from the "odyssey" of Ulysses, sung by the *aedas* of archaic Greece to the tune of a lyre...

*[The term "odyssey" comes from the original name of the character of "The Odyssey", Odysseus, and his long and tumultuous journey across the Mediterranean Sea].*

...and the adventures of Gilgamesh, to the travels of Marco Polo and the chronicles of Spanish conquistadors, passing through the Nordic *Eddas* and sagas, and the *Rihla* of Ibn Battuta.

Of course, if the journey was accompanied by adventures and exotic landscapes, the tale sold better. And, after the advent of the printing press, "selling" was literal. The British privateers (better known as "pirates," though there is a technical difference between the two terms) who ravaged the Caribbean and, crossing the Isthmus of Panama or rounding Cape Horn, did the same with the waters of the Latin American Pacific, when those lands were still Spanish colonies, knew this well. Lionel Wafer, William Dampier, Basil Ringrose, and Raveneau de Lussan recorded adventures —many of them taking place in what is

now Panama— that eventually sold like hotcakes to an audience hungry for strange descriptions, incredible events, and much, much exoticism.

The naturalists of the 18th and 19th centuries took advantage of the general public's taste for logs and diaries to narrate and spread their journeys... and gain some notoriety. Charles Darwin, the great Alexander von Humboldt, Alfred Russell Wallace, Thomas Belt, and Richard Spruce wrote and published (with varying degrees of success) accounts of their wanderings through the Americas and the tropics.

But they were not the only ones. Actually, the publishing industry preferred the less formal / academic and more... "scandalous" accounts, especially those produced by "common folk," like the readers themselves: a sailor, a railroad worker, a governess...

...or a gold seeker.

The sadly famous "Gold Rush" of California (1848-1855) was an important and interesting period in the history of the West Coast of the United States. For the merchants and prospectors on the US Atlantic coast who wanted to reach the other side of the country (at a time when the Transcontinental Railroad did not yet exist, having been inaugurated in 1869), it was much easier to take a ship to Central America, cross Panama or Nicaragua —the most popular routes of the time— and, once on the Pacific coast, take another ship to reach the city of San Francisco. Many pamphlets, flyers, stories, and novels were published about the "golden fever" at that time. One of them was *California Illustrated: Including a Description of the Panama and Nicaragua Routes*, written by a certain John M. Letts and published in New York by R. T. Young in 1853.

*[An original copy of the book is held in our library's special collection].*

Letts' book served as a travel guide, describing the two possible routes, and narrated both the potential problems and the local landscapes, territories, and characters. And all

the anecdotes, events, and details that the author's more or less inspired (or imaginative) pen could manage to collect. Generally, the more scandalous and sensational, the better.

I bring up Letts' book because it has a chapter dedicated to the city of Panama. And an illustration!

A chapter that begins with a description of Panama from the ship...

"The city, nestling cozily at the base of Cerro Lancon, looks enchantingly, her towers and domes being lighted up by the morning sun. Her dilapidated monasteries are also seen, and her extended wall, the base of which is washed by the gentle surf. That distant tower, shrouded in ivy, dripping with the morning dew, seems weeping over the tomb of a departed city. Everything conspired to awaken emotions of the most romantic character" (p. 185).

Ah, those towers covered in ivy bathed in dew! Such semi-Gothic romanticisms could not be missing from the literature of the time, even though in Panama, the morning dew and the ivy did not exist, or bore no resemblance to those of more northern latitudes.

Nor could detailed descriptions of promenades and places be left out...

"After supper, we strolled to the 'Battery', seated ourselves on a brass fifty-six [cannon] and viewed one of the most magnificent moonlight scenes I ever beheld. The bay was as placid as a mirror; the ships lying quietly at anchor, loomed up like phantoms; the islands being just visible in the distance. Behind us was a ruined monastery, the moon looking in at the roof and windows, disclosing the innumerable bats that nightly congregate to gambol through these halls of desolation. After spending an hour here, we passed through one of the dilapidated gateways and took a surf bath; we reentered through the gateway, and passed along the wall to the convent of San Francisco, an immense

structure covering an area of 300 feet square; it is now untenanted, and in ruins. Near one corner of this, standing in the street, is a stone pedestal surmounted by a cross, where the devout are wont to kneel and kiss the image of 'Nuestra Señora.' Passing up the main street, 'Calle de Merced,' we found the citizens all out enjoying the evening; and as we passed we could hear them modestly whisper, 'Los Americanos tienen mucho oro'" (p. 186).

And, of course, the eerie touch...

"There are many things here to attract and awaken interest in the mind, but no matter how strong the desire for information, nothing can be learnt from the lower classes of the population. The source of information which, in the States, is inexhaustible, is here barren; for to say that a New Grenadian even knows his own wife and children, is awarding him, comparatively, a very high degree of attainment. Pass and inspect the ruins of a monastery or other edifice, and ask the first person you meet what it is, and what the cause of its destruction. The invariable reply is, 'no sabio, Señor.' In passing along near the head of 'Calle San Juan de Dio,' my attention was attracted by the movements of a little girl who, with a lighted taper in her hand, passed rapidly along to an elbow in the main wall of the city, and leaving her light, hastily retreated. Upon inspecting the spot, I discovered that part of the wall was laid up of human skulls, and removing a stone that closed up an aperture, I saw a burning taper which is kept here as an 'eternal light.' I stepped into a small store near and inquired the history of this catacomb; the response was 'no sabi, Señor.' My solution was that they were the bones of heroes who had fallen in the defense of the city" (p. 187).

Travel diaries, logbooks, and other similar narratives that include the current Panamanian territory in their pages are more than abundant: Panama has been, since the Spanish conquest, a land of passage and a meeting point for explorers, discoverers, travelers, and all sorts of curious individuals. In this literature, one can find more or less detailed, artistic, and fortunate descriptions of roads, towns, cities, ports, and people.

And although, in general, the contributions of these texts to history, geography, or ethnology are neither broad nor deep, it is worth considering them. You never know when an unexpected surprise might appear on one of those pages.

Like the comment that the old Panama wall was built on a base of human skulls. Doesn't that leave you wondering, now?

## Letters from the Library

### #14. The history of Barro Colorado according to Zetek

Created and developed during the first quarter of the 20th century, the Barro Colorado Biological Station, located in the heart of Lake Gatún, in the Panama Canal, has been one of the most iconic and significant spaces in the history of tropical biology and conservation. And the American entomologist James Zetek was one of its key founders — in addition to being its "resident guardian" for many, many years.

The history of the station since its inauguration has been told both in internal reports and in external books and articles, and is well documented. The history of its early years is a bit more complicated to uncover: several fragments scattered across diaries, reports, newspapers, and third-party sources must be recovered, and memories must be "woven" very carefully to create a narrative that, while consistent, still leaves many things up in the air.

And the history of the idea behind all that —the one that led to the creation of the station, the "why" behind this space that eventually became an international reference— was mostly preserved in oral tradition. It was what the oldest of the old told, generally through references.

Until recently, when I found, in the special collection of our library, a brief document of about six pages, original and unpublished, typewritten by James Zetek himself and titled *The History of Barro Colorado*. One of his most personal versions of the events, where he gathered part of his personal story and the evolution of "his" idea for a biological reserve in Panama.

I had often wondered what Zetek thought of the entire Barro Colorado story. His name appeared many times in the papers and accounts of others —usually in the

acknowledgments for his indispensable contribution to the development of the station— but very rarely had I been able to read it in his own voice, as I did in *The History of Barro Colorado*. It seemed to me that he had conducted an interview with himself. That he sought to have his version of events reflected somewhere.

I share here some excerpts from the manuscript, directly transcript, respecting Zetek's personal writing style, sometimes informal and repetitive.

\*\*\*

"The idea of establishing a biological preserve in the Canal Zone, available to our scientists for study, dates back to about December 1911, shortly after the writer arrived on the Isthmus as entomologist to the Sanitary Department of the Isthmian Canal Commission, to work under Colonel William Crawford Gorgas on problems related to malaria, yellow fever and bubonic plague [...]

Upon arrival in the Canal Zone, a new world opened to him [...]. And it was right then when the idea of a biological laboratory in the tropics got its start. Everywhere there was destruction going on. Let us have a sizeable tract of undisturbed tropical forest set aside to remain undisturbed by man, where scientists can come and study [...].

With the completion of the Panama Canal came the cry for economy, and among the many positions abolished was that of the entomologist [...]. The writer then became State Entomologist to the Republic of Panama, and while this was of relatively short duration, it enabled him to see much of the interior of Panama, and this only helped to make the idea of a biological preserve an obsession with him [...].

The idea of a biological preserve had to wait for better days. During the [First World] war, and immediately following it, were bad times for such projects. However, the writer obtained from [Panamanian] President [Belisario] Porras a choice area just opposite

where now stands the United States Embassy [in Panama City], for the establishment of a Marine Biological Laboratory. What an opportunity this was, but lack of support left this project dormant. Today, at this spot, is a big statue of Balboa, rediscovering the Pacific [...].

These years served as an impetus for the idea of a biological preserve. This, then, is the background without which it is very doubtful if such a preserve would ever have been established here.

What follows is the rapid growth of this idea into reality. The writer was made a member of the Conservation of Natural Areas Committee of the Ecological Society of America. The National Research Council was deeply interested in research in the tropics. The Institute for Research in Tropical America was formed, and while it only had a paper status at the time, it played a very important role once Barro Colorado Island was set aside for research.

February 1923 was an auspicious month. Three leading authorities came to the Canal Zone: Dr. William Morton Wheeler, Dean of Bussey Institution, Dr. Richard D. Strong, Professor of Tropical Medicine at the Harvard Medical School, and Dr. C. V. Piper, noted agrostologist of the U. S. Department of Agriculture [...].

Wheeler and Piper shared the writer's laboratory, Wheeler interested largely in ants, and Piper in grasses. Wheeler, Piper and the writer made innumerable field trips together, and on many of these Strong was also present. Both on these field trips, and in the laboratory, these four discussed the writer's idea of a biological preserve. We decided it should be a large island, in the Canal Zone, and as undisturbed as possible. We felt that this was the place to have it because the Canal Zone was the focus of travel facilities, the preserve would be close enough to civilization, and very close to the best hospital facilities south of the Rio Grande. We also felt that such a preserve, when in operation, should provide meals and lodging for the scientists, thus relieving them of these two

major chores, hence all of their time would be available for their research work. We also stressed the importance of 'safe' water supply. Anyone who has gone on expeditions into the tropics knows what these facilities mean. Was there such a sizeable undisturbed area?

A friend of the writer, Mr. Bill Irwin, was with the land-lease division of the Panama Canal. Land in the Canal was being leased in parcels of from one to fifty hectares for such as wanted to engage in agriculture. It would, it was thought, provide more food, and also be a source of additional labor forces. Irwin surely would have the answer. It was Barro Colorado Island, right in the center of the Gatun Lake, bordering the Canal. Only about eight hectares of it on the south side were leased to settlers, and he would see to it that they would get off the island provided we would pay them for their improvements. Irwin gave us valuable suggestions.

The four decided that the writer should address a letter to Governor [of the Canal Zone] J. J. Morrow, asking that the island be set aside for this special purpose. On the 17th of April, 1923, Governor Morrow issued an order to that effect. The vision became a reality. We now had six square miles of splendid tropical forest reserved for our biologists [...].

For the past twenty-five years the writer has looked after the laboratory, a task which, despite the worries and trials, has been pleasant [...]. This, then, is only the introductory chapter of this history. The many hundreds of scientists who during these twenty-five years have been on the island, and who contributed almost 650 individual books and papers covering their studies, give the finest testimony of the island's worth in science."

## Letters from the Library

### #15. The Voices Our Documents Left Outside

#### The Collections of Discovery, the Silences of Memory

In the bibliographic collections and archival records of the Smithsonian Institution, there are manuscripts and notebooks that once traveled deep into Panama's forests. Along its rivers. Through its mangroves.

There are books, theses and articles built upon those texts. Letters that crossed oceans, carrying home tales of tropical wonders and hardships — fragments of a world at once intoxicating and unforgiving. There are stories everywhere.

Those pages brim with detailed observations — sketches of orchids, notes on rainfall patterns, tree girths measured and remeasured, passing curiosities about leaf-cutting ants marching over fallen, rotting leaves, or about those kaleidoscopic toucans, yelping playfully up there, in the canopy, just out of sight...

Each of these paragraphs shapes the foundations of tropical science as we know it today. Yet, just as revealing as what is written is what remains unsaid.

The expeditions that crafted this early (and not-so-early) scientific knowledge were never solitary ventures. Western researchers and travelers did not wander alone into the rainforest, among the mountains, or along coral reefs. They were guided — by local fishermen who knew the tides, hunters who could read the faintest tracks of the most elusive animals, farmers attuned to the many rhythms of the earth. And yet, in their carefully preserved notes, their names are rarely — though not never — recorded. Their expertise acknowledged only in passing, reduced to vague, impersonal terms: "Native informant." "Local knowledge."

(Sometimes they are mentioned. And sometimes, those mentions are tainted — laced with condescension, or shadowed by a barely concealed attempt to underscore their supposed "ignorance").

Nowhere in these records do they appear as co-authors. Scarcely are their contributions fully credited. They exist only in the margins — if at all.

### **Field Notes as Gatekeepers of Knowledge**

Early 20th-century expedition records in Panama —and elsewhere— offer a glimpse into how selective the documentation of the process of academic knowledge-building has been. Many of these texts focus on the local biodiversity, meticulously cataloging flora and fauna, or on the collection of specimens that would later be classified in museums and universities. But knowledge does not only reside in observations and specimens alone — it lives in the relationships between people and ecosystems, in the ways plants are used, in the rhythms of a landscape that cannot (and should not) be measured in millimeters or confined to taxonomic labels.

Patterns of omission emerge within these notes. A plant's morphology is carefully recorded, but its medicinal, nutritional, or dye-producing properties —known to local communities for generations— are left unmentioned. A species is described, but its indigenous name never makes it into the final report. A river's location is mapped with precision, but the knowledge of those who navigated it first is erased. Agricultural practices —observed but not understood— are dismissed as mere "folklore."

Sounds familiar?

What these field notes captured shaped what became science.

What they ignored shaped what was forever forgotten.

## Those Who Broke the Silence — A Rare Exception?

Some voices, though rare, did make it onto the page.

A number of researchers, explorers, and authors did acknowledge the people who guided them, assisted them, and walked beside them. Among those who worked in Panama, a couple stand out — Warder C. Allee and Marjorie Hill Allee. Not for any groundbreaking insight, but for something surprisingly simple: they named names.

Marjorie was an excellent writer, especially in the area of popularization for young audiences, and her husband, Warder, was a renowned zoologist. They both traveled to Panama in the winter of 1923 and spent most of their time doing research in Barro Colorado Island. As one of the outcomes of their doings, they published a highly entertaining (and educational) account of their wanderings: *Jungle Island* (Chicago & New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1923).

Unlike most of their contemporaries, they recorded not only their own observations but also the names of the men who helped them navigate and work in the forest. They also documented some aspects of life around Lake Gatun, including places now forgotten — such as the small village of Frijoles.

In a delightful chapter titled "My tree" (pp. 38-53), Warder described his fascination with the towering trees of the Barro Colorado forest (the "jungle," as he put it) and his desire to climb one to observe what was going there. "I wanted to climb up one of these tall trees above the jungle roof and see what was happening there, what plants and animals lived so high, and what they did," he wrote.

This was an unusual idea at the time — one that would later evolve into the now-established field of canopy biology. It can be said that he was the precursor, in Panamanian lands, of many other scientists who eventually devoted their work to study

life in the canopy — and produced an amazing corpus of scientific papers, books, and photographs about biodiversity "up there." *Studying forest canopies from above* by Basset, Horlyck and Wright, *Life at the top* by Ellen Doris, the International Canopy Crane Network...

Climbing such a tree was no simple task. To make it possible, Allee planned to construct a ladder using leftover materials abandoned by the French during their attempt to build the Panama Canal. And he brought them to the island "with Linder, a tall, lazy negro from the British West Indies..." They stayed at the famous "Shannon Shack", "a funny little shack on the island, a good deal like the playhouse a boy might build for himself," which had been crafted by renowned entomologist Raymond C. Shannon some months before.

However, the work (incrusting spikes into a sandbox tree, *Hura crepitans*, to create the ladder) was too difficult for Linder, who eventually "decided that he wanted to get away from the island, that the work was too hard, and that his shoulder hurt him very badly, and so we went back to Frijoles." After a couple of days, Allee found out that Linder had brought Santiago to the island as a replacement, and that the man "had already run the spike ladder twice as high as I had left." Santiago "had done much tree climbing in the days when he collected rubber." The author continued describing that "he [Santiago] climbed in bare feet, with a rope over his shoulder tied to the highest spike. When he reached the branches, he could stand on them or pass his rope around the body of the tree where it became smaller. By night he had driven spikes to the second big limb. This made a convenient saddle ninety feet above ground. The branches were fifteen inches thick and very strong. We could sit comfortably on them and look about us and down on the plants below. Not many white people get to see the jungle from above." He took a photo from that vantage point — and another of Santiago, posing with a fern vine.

The rest of the chapter was used to describe the vegetation seen from above, especially the lianas. Allee told how Necto, another local guide in the island, "attacked a large liana" with his machete "and cut from it a piece nearly a yard long ... Necto lifted one end over

his mouth and water ran from it so fast that he could not swallow it all. He cut pieces for the rest of us, and we found the water cool and of a very good flavor."

Finally, Allee reached the top of the tree, where, he noted, "I could again get a glimpse of Gatun Lake. The rest of the view was jungle roof, much as it appeared from the Canal." He wanted to replicate his ladder experience on a guayacan tree (*Handroanthus chrysanthus*), but Santiago declined: "Can't drive nail in it, Boss Doctor. Must use screw. Oh, hard, hard, hard!"

All the names listed above —Santiago, Necto, Linder— are more than just passing references. They are, in all likelihood, the few names of local collaborators recorded in the extensive scientific literature of that particular period.

This is what makes *Jungle Island* remarkable: not because it fully credited local expertise (it didn't), not because it challenged the hierarchies of its time (it didn't), but because it left a trace — a small, rare acknowledgment of the people whose labor and knowledge made scientific discovery possible.

If more scientists had done what Allee did, we would have something truly invaluable today — a fuller, richer understanding of the human landscape of Barro Colorado and its neighboring areas a century ago. We would know more about the communities surrounding the island, the networks of knowledge that shaped exploration, the lives that moved through these forests alongside those who recorded them.

But they didn't.

And that silence remains. If more voices had been included, how much more might we understand today?

## **Re-reading the Margins**

The story of these documents is not just one of omission — it is also one of possibility. These notebooks, these annotations, these old books and reports still exist. They sit in libraries and archives, waiting. If we learn to read them differently, to detect where the silences are, we may uncover what was once meant to be forgotten.

A name scribbled in the margin of a botanical notebook could lead to a family, a lineage of knowledge that still exists outside the walls of scientific institutions. An annotation about plant use —dismissed as "native superstition"— may hold a pharmacological insight that science is only now beginning to recognize. A passing mention of a guide, unnamed and uncredited, may point toward a community that still holds ecological wisdom that Western science failed to acknowledge.

These documents were not meant to be read in this "out-of-the-box" way. They were created to serve a specific vision of knowledge: one that classified, categorized, and often erased. But libraries and archives are never just collections of facts; they are landscapes of memory, shaped by power, yet always incomplete.

What would it mean to re-read these records not as static relics, but as sites of recovery? To treat them not as the final word, but as unfinished conversations?

Perhaps, in these margins, in these silences, something still speaks.

## **Toward Libraries and Archives That Speak**

The past is not gone. It lingers in these texts and materials, pressed between pages, waiting — not to be uncovered, but to be read differently.

We think of libraries and archives as places of remembering. But they can just as easily be tools of forgetting — and when they are, the consequences are profound. Remembering is not a passive act; it is a choice. It requires more than just preservation — it demands reinterpretation, a willingness to read against the grain, to search between the lines, to seek out the traces left in the margins, the footnotes, the gaps.

What happens when we let these records speak beyond their intended narrative? What would it mean to restore names, to retrace forgotten knowledge, to acknowledge not just what was recorded but what was deliberately left out?

Perhaps the real question is not whether libraries and archives can speak.

The question is: Are we willing to listen?