Libraries, indigenous peoples, identity and inclusion

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Opening: Weaving Memory Before the Library

Fog gathers over the *páramo* at dawn, thick as breath, slow as thought. It drifts through *frailejones* and over the damp, mossy soil, blurring the line between mountain and sky. Beneath that mist, streams descend toward rivers that descend toward other rivers that descend toward the Magdalena Valley, carrying the voices of frogs, wind, and the soft rhythm of footsteps from people who have walked those paths for centuries. The land that we now call *Cundinamarca* holds other names beneath it — words in Muisca and Panche, names of rivers, hills, and forests whose syllables were carved by memory long before they were written on any map.

Before there were libraries, there were memories — spoken, sung, cultivated, carried in baskets**.** Knowledge did not live in shelves but in gestures: in the way maize was planted with the moon, in the story told to children when a vulture circled above, in the color of woven cloth that marked a lineage or a dream. Each act of daily life was an act of archiving; each voice was a librarian.

Memory was not stored — it moved. It walked, it sang, it fed.

To speak of libraries, Indigenous peoples, identity, and inclusion in Cundinamarca is to begin here — not with the arrival of paper, but with the endurance of oral, sensorial, and material worlds that never ceased to exist. The modern library, with its architecture, catalogues, and standards, did not invent the preservation of knowledge; it merely translated one of many possible systems into a Western script. Across Latin America, the archive has always been ecological: made of wind and root, of path and repetition. What we call “librarianship” today stands upon these older infrastructures of care.

The library is a continuation of ancestral systems of knowledge — a guest in a conversation that began long before any of us arrived. Every time a librarian in a rural *vereda* listens to an elder's story, records the name of a mountain, or keeps a child's drawing of a festival, they are not modernizing tradition: they are extending a lineage of custodianship that predates the printed word.

This opening situates the discussion within that continuity. What follows will be an exploration of the libraries' potential as living bridges between worlds of memory — between catalogues and crops, between metadata and traditional narratives, between what the system can describe and what it cannot yet imagine. From here, we can begin to unearth the hidden architectures of knowledge that breathe beneath our libraries, and ask how they might finally learn to remember the place where they stand.

1. The Colonial Spine

Every library, no matter how small or remote, is built upon an invisible architecture of classification: a skeleton of order inherited from elsewhere. That structure is not neutral. The very systems that shape how knowledge is stored and found — Dewey Decimal Classification, the Library of Congress Subject Headings, the Universal Decimal Classification — were designed within a worldview that divided humanity into centers and peripheries, sciences and superstitions, civilizations and "others."

When a rural librarian catalogs a recording of a farmer's planting song or an elder's memory of the river, they face a quiet violence of choice: under what heading does this belong? Does the term, the keyword, the concept we need even exist? And if it does, does it truly name what we mean? Or must we bend, distort, or even destroy the original idea so that it will fit within the architecture of classification?

These tools and infrastructures betray their ancestry. They were born in the metropoles of empire, and their hierarchies endure through every shelf and every database.

This is what we might call the colonial spine of librarianship — the rigid column that still holds up our institutions, even when the librarians themselves are progressive, generous, or decolonially inclined. A system does not need to declare its bias aloud; it can simply hide it in the structure of retrieval. In that sense, every search query may be an echo of colonial logic: what can be found depends on what has been named, and what has been named depends on who had the right to name.

To decolonize a library is not merely to include more Indigenous, rural, or local content; it is to question the scaffolding of meaning that decides where such content is allowed to live. And that decision may be vital. A story about the river classified as "myth" loses its ecological intelligence; a medicinal practice labeled as "folk remedy" is exiled from the domain of science.

And yet, libraries can also become spaces of insurgency. Decolonization begins not with expensive software or external consultants, but with little acts of rebellion. A librarian who writes a local term in the margin of a classification record is already performing resistance. A community that keeps a parallel notebook of words in their own languages or variants is creating a counter-catalogue. These may seem like small gestures, but they carve fractures into the spine. They let air and light in.

Consider a library where librarians, farmers, and students began building a shared vocabulary of agricultural and ecological terms based on the language of daily work — the words used for soil types, seeds, birds, and irrigation practices. None of these terms appear in Dewey, but all of them sustain life. When these words are written beside the "official" subject headings, the library gains a second language — a vernacular metadata system that grows from the ground up.

That is not disorder; that is survival.

This is what we might call metadata insurgency**:** the deliberate creation of small, localized vocabularies that speak from the territory rather than about it. It means, e.g., letting elders define the subject headings of their own oral archives, allowing each recording or

photograph to carry not just the imposed descriptors of an external taxonomy but also the names that belong to the community. Even if those words “don’t count” in the national catalog, they count for the people the library serves. They keep the knowledge alive within its own ecology.

Every librarian can participate in this quiet revolution. It requires nothing more than a notebook, a pencil, and the willingness to listen. Write down the terms that do not appear in the database. Ask how the community names what it values. Create local tags, bilingual glossaries, parallel taxonomies. Over time, these fragments will form a different kind of classification — one that bends rather than breaks, that listens rather than dictates.

Decolonizing a library does not mean rejecting the inherited systems altogether; it means recognizing their limits and weaving around them. The colonial spine cannot be removed overnight, but it can be softened — made flexible by use, contextualized by story, made porous by other languages. The goal is not to replace one authority with another, but to let multiple logics coexist: the institutional and the communal, the written and the spoken, the universal and the local.

To catalogue a local, rural, or indigenous story under a word given by the people who told it is to return classification to its ethical foundation — to acknowledge that every act of naming is also an act of relationship. And that, perhaps, is the first true decolonizing gesture: to make the catalog remember that knowledge is not an object to be stored, but a conversation to be continued.

2. Beyond “Inclusion”: Toward Epistemic Justice

The language of “inclusion” has become a comfortable trending topic in cultural and educational institutions. It speaks of including Indigenous voices, including marginalized communities, including “diverse perspectives.” But inclusion, as it is usually practiced, often stops at the door of the library. It invites people in without questioning who built the house, who designed its rooms, and whose furniture fills them. It is hospitality without

redistribution: a seat at a table whose menu has already been decided. “I invite you, under my own rules, like them or not.”

True transformation requires moving beyond inclusion toward what philosophers and critical librarians call epistemic justice — the right of every community not only to share knowledge but to define what counts as knowledge in the first place. This shift moves us from token participation to shared authorship. It asks us to change not the guests but the architecture of the invitation itself.

In much of rural Latin America, “inclusion” has too often meant programming an event once a year: an Indigenous speaker on a particular day, a workshop on crafts, or a folkloric exhibition. These gestures are not malicious; they come from good intentions. But they reproduce a colonial choreography: Indigenous, rural, and local people appear as performers of culture, not as co-authors of the institution’s intellectual life. Their participation is temporary, aesthetic, and extractive. Once the activity ends, the epistemic order of the library remains intact.

Epistemic justice demands another posture: to hand over the wheel. It asks librarians to move from inviting to listening, from representation to co-governance. It may begin with a simple but radical question: Who decides how the library operates? Schedules, topics, rules of silence or noise, modes of learning: these are not neutral parameters; they embody worldviews. For many Indigenous and local communities, knowledge is transmitted through sound, repetition, and movement, not through the silent reading rooms that Western models prize. If a library enforces silence as its highest value, it risks silencing the very knowledges it claims to include.

Imagine, instead, a library that lets elders shape its rhythms. Imagine that a weekly gathering of storytellers takes place at dusk, not at ten in the morning. Children come after school; grandparents arrive when the sun softens and the day’s labor ends. The librarians who shift the schedule to match that rhythm are not offering a favor: they are practicing epistemic justice. Time itself becomes a form of respect.

The same applies to content. A library that allows the community to choose the year's themes, or to co-curate exhibitions, or to decide how the community's language appears on signs and catalogues, is redistributing power at the level of knowledge. The library ceases to be a host and becomes a guest in the territory of others. It learns to move carefully, to ask permission, to recognize the authority of local epistemologies. This inversion of roles — the library as visitor — is one of the most profound decolonial gestures a public institution can perform.

The pursuit of epistemic justice asks libraries to cultivate humility: to accept that they may not always be the center of knowledge circulation, that there are other archives outside their walls, other librarians who do not carry that title, other catalogues made of memory, weather, and ritual. The task is to connect, not to absorb.

Moving toward epistemic justice also transforms the librarian's identity. The professional ceases to be a gatekeeper of information and becomes a mediator of dialogues and a facilitator of reciprocity. This is not a loss of authority but a redefinition of it. Authority here means the capacity to convene, to create conditions where different knowledge systems can meet without one dominating the other.

In practical terms, librarians can begin by establishing "councils of memory"**:** small advisory groups composed of community elders, rural teachers, artisans, and youth representatives. These councils should not be symbolic; they should hold real decision-making power over collections, programs, and partnerships. They could move the library's calendar according to the climate (extend hours during the rains, close earlier during the harvest, program readings in the evening when the sun is low) or handle a participatory budget. Their guidance ensures that the library's work is not an act of benevolent inclusion but of authentic shared governance.

Ultimately, to move from inclusion to epistemic justice is to reimagine the library as a relational institution: one that learns as much as it teaches, that receives as much as it gives. When a library enters a community not as a missionary but as a listener, it begins

to heal the fractures left by centuries of epistemic exclusion. It becomes what it was always meant to be: a space where many worlds can read and write each other into being.

3. Living Libraries: Memory That Breathes

Many local libraries take justified pride in their photo archives and heritage collections. On their walls hang sepia images of plazas, bridges, and processions — testimonies of a past carefully guarded against oblivion. Yet, if those photographs remain untouched, sealed in folders or trapped in a digital repository that no one opens, they cease to be memory and become sediment. They are fossils — beautiful, inert, and lifeless.

The central paradox of preservation is this: to protect knowledge too well is sometimes to kill it. Preservation becomes harm when what must move is frozen. A collection can be perfectly catalogued, digitized, and backed up on multiple servers, and still be dead. The reason is simple: knowledge lives only through relation, through use, through voice. A story that no one retells stops being a story. A song that is recorded but never sung again becomes silence in another format. Knowledge and memory breathe only when used — when they return to the circle, when they provoke conversation and remembering.

Libraries were not meant to be mausoleums of meaning. In their deepest sense, they are ecosystems: dynamic environments where stories circulate, transform, and reproduce. A living library breathes through its users; it exchanges air with its community. Its archives are not cold storage but compost — materials that nourish new growth.

In many rural towns, that vitality still exists outside the library's walls. In a *vereda*, the act of storytelling *is* the archive. Each narrator, each listener, each interruption adds another layer of metadata. The rhythm of a voice, the gesture of a hand, the shared laughter — these are annotations more vivid than any written footnote. To digitize such expressions without the warmth of their context is to remove them from the conditions that keep them alive. Preservation should not isolate.

A different model is possible — one that turns preservation into participation. Librarians and neighbors may begin transforming their archival sessions into *tertulias de memoria*: open gatherings where a single photograph becomes the spark for collective narration. People might bring their own pictures, sometimes faded and bent, sometimes rescued from trunks. A grandmother may point to a figure in the background: "that's your uncle when they were building the factory." Someone may hum the song that was playing that day. A child may record the voices on a phone. And in that moment, the archive breathes again. What returns to the shelf is not a file but a renewed relationship.

These practices redefine what a repository is. Instead of exhibitions, librarians can create re-living sessions: spaces where memory is performed, corrected, and expanded (bring photos, tell the story, fill in the names, sing what was sung, name the ravine). The event itself becomes a metadata layer: time, participants, feelings, reinterpretations. The record grows not by accumulation but by resonance.

Other forms of living archive can emerge from the ecological realities:

- Seed exchanges where farmers bring local varieties of beans, maize, or potatoes, narrating the stories behind them. Each seed carries a genealogy that belongs in the library as much as any document.
- Sound library of the territory, with sound archives of birds, rivers, and wind**,** recorded by children or environmental groups. Played in communal sessions, they become reminders that the territory itself is an author.
- Seasonal storytelling circles, aligned with agricultural cycles. These rhythms connect the library's calendar with the ecological time of the region.
- Traveling memory kits: a simple tape recorder, notebooks, pencils, written and audio consent forms. The library goes for a walk.

Such initiatives turn the library into a stage for memory in movement rather than a museum of paper. The role of the librarian shifts from custodian to facilitator, from keeper of artifacts to curator of experiences. Their task is not to guard silence but to orchestrate dialogue between the stored and the lived.

This approach also expands what "collection development" means. In a living library, acquisition is not limited to physical items; it includes moments, voices, and relationships. A community event, a shared meal, a local song: all are potential access points to memory. Documentation remains important, but it follows the flow of life rather than freezing it. The goal is not only to save materials but to sustain the social metabolism of memory: its ability to regenerate itself through exchange.

To sustain a living repository, librarians can create simple, recurring structures: monthly *tertulias*, annual *fiestas de la memoria*, traveling exhibits that return materials to the communities that produced them. Instead of "visitors," participants become co-archivists, adding their annotations to the collective record. In this model, the library ceases to be the final destination of knowledge and becomes a node in a larger network of transmission.

Ultimately, a living library accepts that forgetting and transformation are part of memory's ecology. What matters is not permanence but continuity: the capacity of knowledge to adapt, migrate, and re-root. To preserve something is not to keep it still, but to help it keep moving in time. A photograph is safe when it returns, again and again, to the conversation that first gave it meaning. A song is preserved when it is sung. A library lives when its collections breathe.

4. Libraries as Sites of Caring Disobedience

Public librarians in Latin America often find themselves caught between two forces: the expectations of centralized institutions — from the Ministry, from the capital, from IFLA — and the realities of the communities they serve. The directives arrive neatly packaged: modernization programs, digital literacy campaigns, makerspaces, STEM kits, and performance indicators. These initiatives, though well-intentioned, often carry an implicit assumption that progress looks the same everywhere: that the path to a "modern" library is paved with screens, metrics, and imported technologies.

But local and rural librarians know otherwise. In many *veredas*, what people need is not another tablet or coding workshop, but help recording the names of local birds, mapping water springs, or preserving herbal recipes before they vanish. These acts may never appear in a national report, but they are the real modernization of knowledge: rooted in the land, relational, and sustainable.

This tension reveals a deeper truth: true inclusion sometimes requires disobedience. To care for the community, the librarian may need to bend, delay, reinterpret, or quietly resist external mandates that don't fit. This is not rebellion for rebellion's sake. It is what we can call caring disobedience: the ethical choice to prioritize the community's well-being over bureaucratic compliance.

Not every mandate serves the community. Not every modernization fits in the mountains. Caring disobedience means saying *yes* to a tool when it helps, and *no* when it breaks the fabric. It means caring for the community, even if that means going against a template, an indicator, or a trend.

Caring disobedience is grounded in love, not defiance. It arises from the recognition that one-size-fits-all models can harm local ecologies of knowledge. When the library is treated as a franchise of global modernity, it becomes alien to the people whose stories it should protect. When it learns to say *no* with care, it reclaims its agency. Saying *no* can be a form of stewardship.

A librarian practicing caring disobedience might, for instance, accept a shipment of tablets but use them to record oral testimonies instead of delivering standardized digital lessons. They might attend a workshop on Koha, not to replicate official cataloguing norms, but to imagine how such systems could accommodate Indigenous and rural vocabularies or local metadata. They might file a report that translates institutional language into the idioms of community life — transforming, e.g., "user engagement" into "neighbors gathering to share memory." Each of these actions subtly redefines the direction of knowledge flow: from the center to the margins, back toward the soil.

This is not insubordination; it is contextual intelligence. It understands that modernity must be negotiated, not imported. To resist an unsuitable project is not to reject progress — it is to demand relevance. It is the librarian's duty to translate between worlds, to ensure that resources serve the living fabric of the territory rather than the abstract logic of a spreadsheet.

Examples of this principle abound. Latin American librarians have transformed national "innovation programs" into local knowledge projects. A donated computer lab may become a space to document ancestral plant catalogues, with elders teaching youth to identify medicinal species and record their uses. The project might fulfill the institutional requirement for "digital inclusion," but its true achievement is epistemic: it reconnects technology to territory. The computer is not the message or the goal — it is a simple tool, the recorder of a living dialogue.

Such gestures exemplify caring disobedience as a practice of translation and reorientation. Librarians navigate between the official and the local, the standardized and the situated, constantly asking: Who benefits from this program? Who is silenced by this metric? Whose knowledge is being made visible, and whose is being erased? These questions are not obstacles to progress; they are its conscience.

Practicing caring disobedience also involves building alliances beyond institutional hierarchies. When librarians collaborate with rural teachers, healers, farmers, artisans, and storytellers, they form a distributed network of knowledge keepers that no decree can fully control. These alliances generate what might be called invisible collections: materials that are not in any database but live in the librarian's listening practice. A story told over coffee, a recipe learned while shelling beans, a song hummed at a community meeting, all are forms of memory that resist standardization. They do not appear in catalogues, but they circulate through trust, presence, and care.

To formal institutions, such practices may seem minor or even invisible, but they embody the library's deepest mission: to sustain the diversity of ways of knowing that allow a

community to survive. They prove that librarianship, at its most ethical, is not about obedience to a model but fidelity to a place.

Caring disobedience is therefore a decolonial methodology in everyday clothes. It dismantles hierarchies not through confrontation but through redirection — through the slow, quiet art of making global frameworks answer to local realities. It transforms the librarian from a passive implementer into a cultural strategist, and from a bureaucratic intermediary into a guardian of epistemic autonomy.

To practice it is to affirm that the library belongs first to its people, not to its protocol. It is to remember that the ultimate measure of success is not compliance with an external checklist, but resonance within the community.

Caring disobedience begins as a whisper: a gentle "perhaps not this way." But multiplied across a network of libraries, it becomes a chorus strong enough to reshape the policy itself. Through that quiet resistance, librarians reclaim their role as ethical agents of transformation — not servants of the system, but stewards of a living knowledge that no system can contain.

5. Memory as Commons, Not Property

Modern institutions tend to treat knowledge as a form of property, even as a commercial good: something to be owned, copyrighted, and controlled. Research projects, academic databases, and cultural industries all operate under the logic of intellectual capital: knowledge as a resource to be extracted, quantified, and sold. But for most local, rural, and Indigenous communities in Latin America, knowledge has never belonged to a single individual. It circulates as a commons: a living web of reciprocity sustained through use, not possession.

In Latin America, knowledge is often embedded in daily practices — farmers' planting calendars, traditional recipes, healing techniques, songs that mark the change of season, or the stories that explain the movement of stars. These are not "data sets"; they are shared

inheritances, collectively maintained. To write them down, digitize them, and market them as “cultural heritage products” without returning anything to the people who keep them alive is not preservation — it is privatization.

This process of knowledge capture has become one of the quiet forms of contemporary colonialism. A university researcher records the oral traditions of an Indigenous or campesino community, uploads them to a digital repository, and publishes an academic paper. The library of the institution gains a new collection; the researcher gains a career advancement. Meanwhile, the community is left with nothing but absence — its knowledge turned into a citation. The extraction is intellectual, not mineral, but the logic is the same.

Public libraries can act as guardians of the commons, resisting this extractive tendency and ensuring that knowledge flows remain reciprocal. The first step is simple: to acknowledge that the materials we collect are not ours to own. They are entrusted to us under conditions of care. Our task is not to accumulate but to return.

In practical terms, this means developing ethical protocols that place reciprocity at the center of every action. If a library records oral histories, it must provide the community with copies — digital or physical — before depositing them in any external repository. If it digitizes a set of photographs, it should create local exhibitions or printed albums that return the images to their place of origin. If it collaborates with researchers, it should ensure that their outputs — books, reports, audio — are accessible to those who made them possible.

The goal is not only open access, but open return. Openness without return still centers the institution; reciprocity recenters the community. A commons is not defined by technology but by relationships.

In such networks, e.g., librarians may work with local farmers and environmental collectives to document ancestral plant knowledge. Each entry — description, photo, or recording — is co-created with the person who shares it. The community decides which

elements are public, which are restricted, and where the copies are stored. The resulting database belongs simultaneously to the library and to the community: a shared archive of ecological memory that resists commodification.

Such collaborations also challenge conventional notions of authorship. In a commons-based model, attribution is collective. Knowledge is traced through lineages, not individuals. A recipe for herbal tea is credited to the *abuelas of the vereda*, not to the last person who wrote it down. This is not vagueness, it is accuracy in a relational system. It acknowledges that knowledge arises from the interdependence of people, plants, and time.

Defending memory as commons also requires legal and technical imagination. Libraries can adopt tools such as Traditional Knowledge (TK) Labels and community licenses that specify local rules of use: “For educational purposes only,” “For community members,” or “With elder permission.” These mechanisms, inspired by Indigenous data sovereignty movements, allow communities to articulate their own intellectual property norms within a framework of respect.

Equally important is the refusal to participate in extractive partnerships. Libraries must evaluate every proposed collaboration — especially with universities, NGOs, and digitization projects — through the lens of reciprocity. If a project offers digitization but no return, visibility but no recognition, it should be declined or renegotiated. The authority of a library lies not in the quantity of its collections but in the integrity of its relationships.

At a deeper level, treating memory as commons invites a spiritual shift in librarianship. It redefines the library not as a warehouse but as a trust, a space where knowledge circulates under the ethics of care. The librarian becomes less a manager of assets than a custodian of reciprocity. The measure of success is not how much knowledge the library stores, but how much it restores — to the land, to the people, to the future.

In this vision, every act of cataloguing becomes an act of redistribution. Every copy made is an offering. Every story recorded is a seed that must be replanted. To keep knowledge alive, we must let it return to where it breathes. That is the essence of a commons: not ownership, but shared continuity. Not preservation, but regeneration. And it is within the reach of every librarian who dares to say: this memory does not belong to us — it belongs with us.

6. Practices of Access and Refusal

In the contemporary rhetoric of librarianship, open access has become a sacred phrase. We are told that knowledge must be free, information universal, repositories transparent. It is a noble aspiration: one born from the Enlightenment ideal that learning belongs to all humanity. Yet, like many universalist ideals, it hides a dangerous simplicity. Not all knowledge is meant to circulate without limits. In many Indigenous and rural contexts, to know is also to be responsible, and certain forms of knowledge carry obligations, rituals, or prohibitions that define who may receive them and when.

For many Latin American communities, a story is not just data: it is relationship. A song sung at a planting ceremony cannot be detached from the season or the soil that gives it meaning. A healing recipe belongs to a lineage, not to the public domain. To record and publish such elements without context is to strip them of their ethical and cosmological coordinates. In that sense, unrestricted access can be a new form of dispossession.

This is why libraries must learn not only to open doors, but also to close them wisely. Refusal is not censorship; it is care. The right to opacity — to keep certain things unseen or unshared — is part of a community's sovereignty. It acknowledges that knowledge is not neutral property but a living bond between persons, territories, and spirits. To protect that bond is to protect life itself. Inclusion is also to take care of the secret, when the secret takes care of the community.

Such practices redefine what transparency means. In a colonial logic, transparency is always virtuous, secrecy always suspect. But from a decolonial perspective, opacity is

dignity. It is the right of a people to control their own visibility. The demand that everything be open, legible, and downloadable often serves institutional and academic interests more than communal ones. A critical librarianship must therefore balance openness with protection, curiosity with respect, sharing with silence.

In practice, this balance can be achieved through community-defined access protocols. Instead of deciding alone, librarians can invite the community to determine levels of access:

- Public materials: freely accessible to all visitors.
- Local access: available only within the town or for educational use.
- Restricted materials: stored under community custody, accessed only with prior permission or ritual preparation.

These categories do not need to be codified in legal jargon. They can exist as handwritten notes, colored labels, or oral agreements. What matters is the clarity of intention and the shared understanding that some forms of knowledge require protection.

Equally vital is the librarian's ability to say *no* — politely but firmly — when external actors demand unrestricted access. When a university requests copies of oral histories for research, the librarian can ask: Has the community approved this? Will they receive copies of the results? How will their rights be protected? Each question is a small act of resistance against the extractive habits of academia.

Refusal also reshapes the library's internal ethics. It teaches staff that care sometimes means abstaining, that absence can be a form of presence. A blank space in a catalogue, a password-protected folder, a missing recording — all can signify respect, not loss. The silence of the repository becomes a testimony to relational ethics.

These practices of access and refusal do not isolate libraries; they connect them more deeply to their territories. They position librarians as mediators between openness and

protection, between global ideals and local cosmologies. In doing so, they broaden the meaning of access itself: no longer the opposite of exclusion, but the art of consent**.**

To practice this art is to acknowledge that true inclusion cannot be coerced; it must be negotiated. It requires humility, slowness, and continuous dialogue. It transforms the library into a space where sharing is sacred precisely because it is not automatic. By protecting the right to silence, librarians ensure that when knowledge is spoken, it speaks with full consent, with dignity, and with life still intact.

7. Innovation as Listening, Not Tech

The word “innovation” has become a banner waved by ministries, NGOs, and cultural institutions alike. It conjures images of 3D printers, drones, digital kiosks, makerspaces, and augmented reality exhibits — symbols of progress imported from global development narratives. But in the Indigenous and rural libraries, these symbols often arrive like seeds from another climate: they do not take root. The equipment sits unused, the software expires, and the promise of modernization dissolves into dust.

What remains, however, is something far more enduring and subtle: listening. The most transformative innovation a library can practice in a rural context is not technological but relational. It begins not with a new device, but with old questions: How do people live here? What do they need from us? What rhythms shape their days and their silences?

When librarians tune their work to the pulse of their communities, everything changes. Innovation becomes a matter of timing and tone, not machinery. It is about adjusting the institution’s heartbeat to that of the territory. A library that closes early during harvest season so farmers can rest, or that stays open late during the rains when the fields are quiet, is practicing design thinking in its purest form. A library that complements digital literacy workshops with sessions on how to record birdsongs, ancestral words, or seed exchanges is not rejecting technology — it is humanizing it.

This is innovation as humility: the willingness to let the context lead. Instead of imposing imported models of service, the librarian observes, asks, and adapts. This act of observation — patient, relational, slow — is itself a sophisticated epistemic technology. It reveals patterns invisible to external consultants: when people gather, how stories are shared, where conversations begin. From this sensory map, new programs emerge organically, grounded in local intelligence rather than global trend.

Redefining innovation also means rethinking failure. In the logic of grants and reports, success is measured by outputs: how many people attended, or how many workshops were offered. But in the relational logic of a rural library, success can be the opposite: a smaller circle, deeper conversations, a silence that signals reflection. To innovate through listening is to value depth over scale**,** continuity over novelty, and relationship over metrics**.**

Practically, this approach can take many forms:

- Monthly listening sessions: no agenda, just open questions. What is needed? What is unnecessary? What are your dreams?
- Sensitive mapping of the territory: a map made by the community, with landmarks of memory — not just streets, but stones, trees, springs, sports fields, mounds, gardens.
- Informed consent that does not humiliate or confuse: clear text, oral versions, possibility of saying “yes, but...”.
- Recognition: visible names, acknowledgments, local certificates, bartering.
- Security: local backups (external drives) before the cloud; duplicate copies in trusted homes; note where they are.
- Body care: humane schedules, breaks, water, shade, silence. An exhausted library cannot take care of anyone.

Listening-based innovation is profoundly decolonial. It refuses the colonial equation of progress with imitation. Instead, it roots development in dialogue. It acknowledges that knowledge flows both ways: the community teaches the institution how to adapt, and the

institution amplifies the community's capacity to dream. The cycle is regenerative, not extractive.

At its heart, innovation as listening is part of an ethics of attention. It is the recognition that transformation begins not with invention but with relation. To listen is to slow down enough to hear what the world is already inventing. It is to accept that the most advanced technology in a library may be the human ear, attuned to the shifting frequencies of the land and the people it serves.

When a library learns to listen — to the rain, to the market, to the laughter in the square — it becomes a resonant instrument, finely tuned to its surroundings. Its relevance no longer depends on imported devices but on its capacity to echo what matters locally. And in that resonance, the word "innovation" regains its original sense: not disruption for its own sake, but renewal through care.

Closing: Libraries That May Not Be

Across Latin America, long before any ministry built a library or printed a reading plan, there already existed powerful systems of memory. The *cabildos*, the *resguardos*, the *mingas* — these are the living repositories of the territory. They store knowledge not in books but in gestures, rituals, and collective labor. In many cases, they still function more effectively than our institutions at transmitting belonging, ethics, and continuity. Which raises an unsettling question for modern librarianship: What if some communities do not need another library at all?

This is not a call for disappearance, but for humility. To recognize that the library may not always be the protagonist is to honor the diversity of memory practices that coexist around it. When a community already knows how to preserve and transmit its wisdom, the library's task is not to replace that system but to stand beside it, quietly amplifying what already works.

Sometimes the most ethical form of presence is partial invisibility. The library that steps back can still provide material support — a space, chairs, recording devices, connectivity, even a safe archive — but it allows the community to lead. It becomes a companion rather than a director. Its success lies not in visibility or branding, but in the endurance of the relationships it enables.

This notion of the "library that may not be" challenges the Western ideal of permanence. It suggests that sometimes a library fulfills its mission by dissolving into the community that sustains it — becoming less a building than a set of relationships, less a catalog than a choreography of care. A library can exist as a rhythm, a gathering, or a recurring conversation. It can live in the laughter of a storytelling circle, in the shared silence of remembrance, or in the act of replanting a forgotten seed.

To accept this fluidity is not to abandon the profession; it is to expand it. It allows librarianship to adapt to contexts where stability and visibility are privileges, not preconditions. It aligns the institution with the organic movements of the people it serves. The library ceases to be a monument of order and becomes a process of accompaniment — a structure that appears and disappears according to need, like the fog over the *páramo* that nourishes even as it fades.

This closing, then, is both a challenge and an invitation. It asks public librarians to measure their impact not by how much they own, digitize, or control, but by how deeply they listen, and by how willingly they let others lead. It reframes success as relevance without centrality. It reminds us that to empower communities is not to make them depend on us, but to strengthen their autonomy until our presence becomes unnecessary.

From this perspective, the library that "may not be" is not an absence: it is a form of completion. It represents the moment when a community has reclaimed full stewardship over its memory, and the library's role shifts from director to witness. Such moments are rare, but they define the ethical horizon of our work.

To bring these ideas back to practice, five principles can guide librarians in their daily efforts toward more just and living libraries:

1. A rural library is not a miniature urban one. It must speak the language of its landscape, its crops, its seasons, and its silences. Local relevance is the first form of justice.
2. Critical librarianship exposes power and creates space for local voices. Neutrality is a myth. Every shelf, every subject heading, every partnership is political. Choose your side: maybe with the silenced, the forgotten, the emerging?
3. Alternative models are survival strategies. Flexibility, improvisation, and adaptation are not signs of weakness but expressions of resilience. Libraries that bend with the wind endure where rigid ones break.
4. Memory is commons, not property. Knowledge belongs with people, not to them. Reciprocity and return are more important than possession and prestige. The true value of a repository is the strength of its relationships.
5. Real innovation means listening and adapting. Technology can assist, but it cannot replace the art of listening. The library of the future will not be defined by its devices but by its ears — by its capacity to resonate with the pulse of the territory.

If these principles take root, rural and Indigenous libraries may not only preserve the past; they may participate in the making of a different future — one where knowledge grows like a crop, shared and replanted season after season. And perhaps, in that future, when we look back, we will see that the libraries that mattered most were not those with the largest buildings or collections, but those that dared to be invisible — present only as the echo of community voices continuing to tell their own story.