

# **Decolonizing my Library**

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Libraries are not neutral spaces. They have long been instruments of power, shaping knowledge systems that reinforce colonial hierarchies and marginalize alternative epistemologies. This series critically examines how libraries, archives, and classification systems perpetuate colonial legacies—and explores how we can dismantle these structures to build more just, inclusive, and decolonial knowledge spaces. Through deep analysis and reflection, *Decolonizing my Library* challenges librarians, researchers, and readers alike to rethink what we preserve, how we categorize, and whose voices we center in our collections.

## **Decolonizing my Library #01**

# **Dismantling the Empire of Knowledge**

## **Understanding Decolonialism in Libraries**

### **Introduction**

What if the very institution meant to democratize knowledge is also silently upholding systems of oppression?

Libraries, often idealized as neutral spaces, have long been heralded as guardians of knowledge and memory. Yet neutrality is a myth. Libraries are inherently political — they reflect the values, hierarchies, and power dynamics of the societies they serve.

Or, more precisely, of the hegemonic powers in those societies.

Decolonialism offers a framework to confront this reality, urging us to dismantle structures that perpetuate historical injustices and inequities. Frantz Fanon's warning is a sobering reminder of this imperative: "Imperialism, which today is waging war against a genuine struggle for human liberation, sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds" (2004, 181). Libraries, as memory institutions, must engage in this introspection. The process of decolonization is not only about addressing the physical contents of libraries but also their underlying philosophies and practices.

### **Colonialism's Legacy in Knowledge Systems**

Colonialism was not merely a project of economic exploitation; it was (and, actually and sadly, still is) a profound reordering of how knowledge and memory were created, valued, managed, and disseminated. The empires of Europe sought to impose their

understanding of the world as universal while erasing or devaluing other epistemes — other ways of knowing.

This erasure is most evident in the sidelining of indigenous oral traditions — and other knowledge-related materials (pottery, basketry, body painting...). Knowledge that existed in song, ritual, artifacts, and memory was deemed ephemeral and "uncivilized" compared to the written word. Colonial administrations justified their dominance by framing their systems of thought —philosophy, science, literature, art— as superior.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes of this in *Decolonising the Mind*: "The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (1991, 3). The cultural bomb of colonialism is one that libraries still struggle to defuse, as their collections and practices often mirror these destructive hierarchies.

Additionally, objects, manuscripts, and knowledge systems were looted from colonized regions and "preserved" in imperial libraries and museums. While these institutions often claim they were rescuing these items, the reality is they were stripping them from their cultural contexts and communities. For without their own knowledge and social memory —the basis for identity and history—, subjugated societies can be kept that way.

### **Libraries' Role in Perpetuating Colonial Narratives**

Libraries, whether intentionally or not, became tools of empire. Their acquisition policies during the colonial era (and even today) followed the same extractive logic as resource plundering. Manuscripts and codices —some sacred, others deeply tied to cultural identity— were taken under the guise of protection. Many of these collections, now in major global institutions, still remain inaccessible to their communities of origin, perpetuating cycles of dispossession.

Cataloging systems like the Dewey Decimal Classification and Library of Congress Classification exemplify how these biases persist. Dewey's system, for example, prioritizes Christianity in the 200s section while relegating other religions to "Other." Similarly, knowledge from the Global South is often categorized as "regional" or "local," positioning Western perspectives as the default.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, critiques this imbalance: "The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the center of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge" (2008, 63). Libraries must actively confront and disrupt these embedded narratives.

### **Shifting the Lens: Why Decolonialism Matters for Libraries**

Decolonialism in librarianship is not about rejection but reinvention. It challenges us to rethink the very foundations of our practices: How do we define knowledge? Who decides what is valuable enough to collect and preserve? Whose voices are missing from our collections?

Walter D. Mignolo's concept of *delinking* offers a vision for this reinvention: "Decoloniality in the specific sense of delinking from the colonial matrix of power" (2011, 74). Libraries must delink from their colonial foundations and embrace alternative models of knowledge. This involves not only diversifying collections but also questioning the systems that define "diversity" in the first place.

Audre Lorde's assertion in *Sister Outsider* — "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" — reminds us that surface-level changes are insufficient, and that solutions to non-hegemonic problems are unlikely to arrive from the hegemonic powers.

Adding a few non-Western texts to a collection does little if the overarching structure continues to privilege Western epistemologies. True transformation demands a fundamental rethinking of how libraries operate.

### **A Step Towards Change**

Decolonizing libraries is not a quick fix but an ongoing process.

One that begins with critical self-reflection: Who owns the narrative? It is necessary to examine collections for dominant perspectives and ask ourselves which voices are marginalized or missing.

What biases shape cataloging systems? We need to advocate for classification reforms that prioritize equity.

And, finally, how are communities engaged? We have to move beyond tokenism (the practice of making a symbolic effort to include underrepresented groups, often without making meaningful changes or providing real opportunities for participation or equality) by collaborating with underrepresented groups in meaningful ways.

As custodians of memory, librarians must recognize our power —and our responsibility— to shape knowledge. Decolonialism challenges us to envision libraries not as static repositories but as dynamic spaces of resistance and transformation.

Decolonialism isn't just about what's on the shelves — it's about whose voices are heard, whose stories are centered, and whose knowledge is preserved for future generations.

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## **Decolonizing my Library #02**

# **Confronting Colonial Shadows in Our Collections**

## **The Impact of Colonial History on Library Collections**

### **Introduction**

Libraries are often considered to be neutral spaces of knowledge and memory management. Yet, neutrality is a myth, and many of our collections carry the weight of histories steeped in violence, domination, and erasure. These are the colonial shadows that inhabit our shelves. They manifest in the very origins of the books, manuscripts, and artifacts libraries hold, in the narratives they preserve, and in the voices they fail to include.

The act of decolonizing our collections is, at its heart, an act of reckoning. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us, "the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance is the cultural bomb" (1991: 3). Libraries have often been the delivery mechanism for this cultural bomb, embedding imperial narratives into the very structure of our knowledge systems.

But confronting this history is not a process of destruction; it is a process of reimagination. What could our collections look like if they prioritized justice, inclusion, and community empowerment? What if we used them to shine a light on the silenced, and amplify the perspectives that colonialism sought to obliterate?

### **A History Written by the Victors**

The colonial project was not just about exploiting land and labor — it was also about controlling knowledge. Colonizers sought to define the world, its histories, and its peoples through their own frameworks. Libraries ended up being tools in this effort,

repositories not of neutral knowledge but of knowledge curated to justify and sustain domination.

Consider the looting of Timbuktu's manuscripts, which represent centuries of African intellectual achievement, or the removal of codices from Mesoamerica, burned in acts of conquest or transported to European libraries where they were cataloged as curiosities rather than respected as intellectual treasures. The British Empire, for example, amassed a vast archive of Indian texts, not for preservation, but to reinterpret them through a Western lens that would assert British superiority.

This dynamic was not limited to textual artifacts. Oral histories, indigenous languages, and different epistemologies were actively suppressed, deemed "uncivilized" or irrelevant by colonial powers. Walter Rodney, in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, underscores this point, commenting that colonial powers sought to destroy cultural autonomy, embedding their dominance into the very way societies understood their own histories.

Libraries were key players in this process. They cataloged plundered knowledge, erased dissenting narratives, and solidified colonial perspectives in the minds of generations.

### **Colonial Legacies in Library Practices**

The influence of colonialism extends far beyond the physical collections housed in libraries; it is deeply embedded in the very systems and practices that guide their operations. From cataloging methods to acquisition policies, many aspects of library work are rooted in colonial structures, often with subtle yet pervasive effects.

One of the most significant manifestations of this legacy is in the very systems used to organize knowledge. Western cataloging systems like Dewey Decimal Classification, for instance, reflect a Eurocentric worldview that marginalizes Indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous histories, for example, are often categorized under terms such as "folklore," which serves to undermine their intellectual legitimacy and relegates them to the margins of academic and cultural discourse. This hierarchical structuring of knowledge does not just reflect biases in how information is organized — it actively contributes to the erasure of entire cultural and intellectual traditions.

The dominance of colonial languages further perpetuates these imbalances. Languages like English, Spanish, and French continue to dominate the global knowledge landscape, overshadowing Indigenous and minority languages. This linguistic hegemony not only alienates speakers of non-colonial languages but also reinforces global power imbalances, limiting access to knowledge and preserving narratives that reflect only a narrow slice of human experience. By privileging certain languages, libraries unintentionally diminish the value of other linguistic systems, contributing to the silencing of diverse voices.

Moreover, the scattering of cultural legacies due to colonial plunder has left many communities unable to reconnect with their own heritage. Stolen manuscripts, artifacts, and cultural objects remain dispersed across institutions and are often stored in inaccessible archives or exhibited in ways that lack the necessary contextual grounding. This dislocation and fragmentation of cultural heritage perpetuate a sense of disconnection, preventing many people from fully accessing the narratives that belong to them and their histories.

Colonial libraries were not merely places of accumulation — they were sites where the colonial order was written, rewritten, and perpetuated. Libraries, historically and even today, have functioned as instruments in the reproduction of colonial power structures. The legacies of colonialism continue to shape how libraries operate, often invisibly, in ways that benefit those who are aligned with the structures of power and disadvantage those who are not.

To begin the work of decolonization, libraries must recognize and confront these embedded structures. It is not enough to focus solely on the collections themselves; we must also challenge and transform the systems that govern their organization, acquisition, and access. Only by making these dynamics visible can we begin to dismantle the colonial legacies that still haunt libraries today.

### **Steps Toward Addressing Colonial Shadows**

Decolonizing library collections is a complex, multifaceted process that requires a balance of reflection and action. It's not about erasing history, but about re-centering marginalized voices, amplifying their narratives, and challenging the dominant frameworks that have historically silenced them.

The first and perhaps most foundational step in this process is acknowledging the violent histories through which many collections were built. Repatriation and restitution are essential to this effort. Libraries and institutions must take responsibility for the ways in which artifacts, manuscripts, and cultural materials were taken without consent, often through colonial violence. By prioritizing the return of stolen cultural property, as seen in the growing movement for restitution—for example, the return of the Benin Bronzes— institutions can begin to repair some of the damage done. These acts of restitution, while not solving all issues, can serve as important gestures of healing, fostering a sense of justice and reconciliation with the communities whose heritage was once violently erased.

Beyond the material return of objects, decolonization also requires libraries to center Indigenous epistemologies in their collections and practices. Indigenous knowledge systems, which often rely on oral traditions, collective memory, and holistic, relational perspectives, offer powerful alternatives to the Western-centric paradigms that dominate most libraries. Libraries must acknowledge that knowledge is not a neutral entity, but a living, evolving force tied to the land, culture, and lived experiences of the

people who create it. This means engaging deeply with Indigenous communities, amplifying their voices, and ensuring that their perspectives are represented in all areas of library practice — from acquisition to cataloging to public programming.

To make these shifts possible, it is crucial to transform the very systems that have historically marginalized these voices. The colonial biases inherent in traditional cataloging practices must be dismantled. Many of the world's most widely used classification systems, such as Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress Subject Headings, were designed from a Eurocentric perspective that excludes or misrepresents non-Western knowledge. Indigenous-centered frameworks, such as Mukurtu, offer valuable alternatives for organizing knowledge in a more inclusive and respectful manner. These frameworks prioritize cultural context, and emphasize the need to respect the intellectual property of Indigenous peoples. A decolonial approach to cataloging includes revisiting metadata, subject headings, and descriptive practices to ensure that they reflect and honor diverse cultural perspectives.

Equally important is creating space for community collaboration. Decolonization is not a solitary endeavor; it requires building partnerships with the communities whose histories, knowledge, and cultures have been marginalized. Community-driven projects allow libraries to better understand how Indigenous and other marginalized groups want their materials to be represented and shared. This collaboration must be rooted in mutual respect, with libraries actively listening to and learning from the communities they serve. Ensuring that community voices guide decisions about representation, preservation, and access is crucial to ensuring that decolonization is truly a shared and transformative process.

Finally, decolonizing library collections is not just about making changes to resources — it's about transforming institutional culture. Training library staff in cultural competency, anti-racism, and decolonial practices is essential to fostering an environment that supports and sustains this work. Libraries must cultivate a mindset that recognizes the

need for continuous learning, humility, and active engagement with the communities they serve. Without this mindset shift, the work of decolonization cannot succeed.

### **Imagining Decolonial Futures**

The journey to decolonize library collections is complex and ongoing, but its potential is transformative. By exorcising colonial shadows, we open the door to a more equitable, diverse, and vibrant world of knowledge. These collections can become platforms for resistance, spaces for dialogue, and tools for reimagining what libraries can be.

As Walter Mignolo explores in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, decoloniality aims to unveil what the colonial order has concealed and to imagine alternative forms of being, thinking, and knowing. Libraries, at their best, have the power to nurture these possibilities — if we are brave enough to confront the ghosts of our past.

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## **Decolonizing my Library #03**

### **Decoding the Eurocentric Narrative Trap**

#### **Identifying and Challenging Eurocentric Narratives**

##### **Introduction**

At the heart of every library collection, there is a narrative.

These narratives shape how we understand history, identity, and culture, and too often, they are built on the distorted framework of Eurocentrism. Eurocentric narratives elevate the stories, perspectives, and achievements of Europe and its descendants, while diminishing or silencing those of the global majority. These narratives do not simply exist in textbooks or encyclopedias — they are embedded in the very structures of knowledge and authority that guide library (and archive, and museum) practices, from acquisitions to cataloging, from shelving to programming.

As libraries move toward decolonization, they must confront this reality head-on. We must ask ourselves: What stories are we telling? And whose stories are we leaving out? The act of decolonizing knowledge is not just about adding new voices to the conversation, but about radically rethinking the framework within which all stories are told. The process requires a fundamental shift, a move away from one-dimensional views of history and knowledge, and a commitment to creating space for stories that have been long excluded or marginalized.

##### **Eurocentrism: A Historical Imposition**

Eurocentrism, the belief that European culture and values are the defining standard for all of human civilization, has deep historical roots. It emerged from the expansion of European empires and the ideological justification for colonial domination. The so-called "Age of Discovery" was not about discovery at all — it was about European imperial

powers staking claims over "new" lands and peoples, reinterpreting them through their own narrow lens of superiority. This worldview saw Africa, Asia, and the Americas as blank slates, waiting to be "civilized" by Europe.

As historian Edward Said writes (2003, 1), "The Orient was almost a European invention ... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." In this framework, the "East" was portrayed as the opposite of the "West" — irrational, backwards, and in need of Western intervention and guidance. These distorted ideas permeated Western literature, academia, and even the library systems that were emerging at the time.

This cultural and intellectual colonialism didn't stop with the conquest of lands; it extended to the conquest of minds. The knowledge systems that emerged from Europe became the global standard, and the epistemologies of colonized peoples were relegated to the margins. Eurocentric narratives became the dominant framework within which history was written and knowledge was produced, shaping the way libraries collected, organized, and disseminated information.

Even today, colonial legacies continue to inform academic and library practices. While decolonization has been a focus in many academic fields, the task of confronting the pervasive Eurocentric narrative in libraries is often overlooked or underestimated. Libraries have historically been seen as neutral spaces, but neutrality itself is a position that often aligns with the status quo — one that has benefited colonial powers and left marginalized groups with limited access to the full range of their own histories and knowledge.

## The Subtle Power of Eurocentric Narratives in Libraries

Eurocentrism is not always explicit. It often operates in subtle ways, woven into the fabric of library systems, educational resources, and even everyday practices. A Eurocentric narrative can be found in:

- **Curricula and Texts:** Most history textbooks, for example, begin with European civilizations and only include non-Western histories in the context of European encounters with them. This ordering reinforces the idea that European history is the default, while the histories of indigenous and marginalized peoples are secondary. Non-European civilizations are often framed in terms of their relationship to the West rather than on their own terms, reinforcing their perceived inferiority.
- **Classifications and Cataloging:** Western systems of knowledge classification, such as the Dewey Decimal System or the Library of Congress Classification, categorize non-Western cultures and histories as "other" — if they are even included at all. Many libraries still rely on subject headings that position non-European cultures as exotic, primitive, or irrelevant to mainstream knowledge. This categorization is not neutral — it is a reflection of how knowledge has been controlled and filtered through a Eurocentric lens.
- **Cultural Representation:** The absence of non-Western authors in literary canons, the underrepresentation of indigenous scholars in academic databases, and the underfunding of libraries in marginalized communities, all reflect the continued dominance of Eurocentric narratives in the library world. Cultural representation is not just about presence; it's about how cultures are framed and positioned within a larger narrative of civilization and progress.

As Tuck and Yang point out in their famous article, "decolonization is not a metaphor." In the library context, this means that confronting Eurocentric narratives is not just about adding more books by non-Western authors to our shelves. It is about dismantling the systems that have privileged those narratives in the first place. We cannot simply add

diversity on top of the existing structures without reimagining and reshaping those structures themselves.

### **Decoding the Eurocentric Narrative Trap**

In order to confront the dominance of Eurocentric narratives, libraries must begin by recognizing the trap. Eurocentrism has shaped everything from the structure of knowledge to the way we teach and catalog. To dismantle it, we must decode its grip on the institutions and practices we inherit.

One of the most immediate actions libraries can take is to confront the notion of a "universal" canon of knowledge. The traditional Western canon is often seen as the highest standard of intellectual achievement. This canon, however, is deeply selective and exclusionary. To disrupt this, libraries must curate collections that prioritize a diversity of voices, perspectives, and intellectual traditions. It means recognizing that knowledge comes in many forms —oral traditions, indigenous philosophies, alternative epistemologies— and that these must be treated with the same respect as Western texts. Libraries should also consider the way they treat "classics." Rather than simply preserving the old canon, libraries must create spaces for these texts to be engaged with critically. What does it mean to teach Shakespeare or Homer alongside Indigenous oral traditions, or African philosophy? Can we read Plato without interrogating the ways in which these texts were used to justify colonial systems? This is the kind of work that will enable libraries to begin to break free of the Eurocentric narrative trap.

The language we use to categorize knowledge must be interrogated as well. A simple example of Eurocentric bias is found in subject headings that classify indigenous knowledge under terms like "folklore" or "mythology," reducing complex cultural knowledge systems to quaint, irrelevant stories. By revising classification standards to include non-Western ways of knowing and being, libraries can begin to create more inclusive, respectful systems of knowledge organization. These changes should not be

limited to adding terms to existing subject headings, but should also involve a thorough examination of the ways in which knowledge is conceptualized and ordered.

Another step? Libraries have a critical role to play in amplifying the voices of those who have been historically marginalized. This means not only collecting and preserving texts by indigenous authors, Black scholars, and writers from the Global South, but also prioritizing their visibility in catalog systems, reading lists, and library programs. Libraries must use their platforms to elevate non-Western perspectives, offering programs and resources that foster a deeper engagement with these communities.

Finally, libraries can also build international relationships with libraries and archives in the Global South. Collaborative efforts in collection development, resource sharing, and knowledge exchange can help disrupt the flow of knowledge that has traditionally been one-sided, from the West to the rest of the world. These relationships allow libraries to engage with knowledge systems that have been marginalized and offer a more holistic view of the world's intellectual heritage.

### **The Road Ahead**

Challenging Eurocentric narratives is no easy task, and it's a journey that will look different in every institution. But it is a necessary one. Decolonization demands a radical shift in how we think about knowledge, history, and power. Libraries, as repositories of knowledge, must not only reflect society but actively participate in reshaping it. By confronting the Eurocentric narrative trap, libraries can become spaces of liberation, not just information.

We should keep in mind the words of bell hooks (1994: 105): "Where are our books on race and feminism and other aspects of feminist theory, works which offer new approaches and understanding?" Let's make sure that the books we share reflect the full

range of human experience, that they invite us into a world that is diverse, just, and truly representative of all people's stories.

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## **Decolonizing my Library #04**

# **Libraries as the New Frontlines of Knowledge**

## **Engaging with Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

### **Introduction**

Indigenous knowledge systems have been thriving for thousands of years, passed down through generations, evolving alongside the land, cultures, and communities they belong to. These knowledge systems encompass not only practical knowledge of ecosystems, medicine, and agriculture but also deep philosophical understandings of the world, spirituality, and the human connection to the earth. Yet, for centuries, these knowledge systems have been marginalized, erased, or distorted by colonial forces, including European settler colonialism, missionary practices, and the imposition of Western education and science.

Today, as the world increasingly confronts the legacy of colonialism, libraries find themselves at the forefront of an urgent decolonial mission: to recognize, respect, and preserve Indigenous knowledge systems. This task is not just about integrating Indigenous perspectives into library collections but about fundamentally rethinking the role of libraries as agents of cultural resistance, revitalization, and transformation.

By embracing Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate and essential form of wisdom, libraries can help rebuild relationships that were severed by colonial histories, contributing to the ongoing process of healing and sovereignty. The act of decolonizing library collections is not just an intellectual pursuit — it is a political and cultural act of solidarity, one that requires a shift in how we understand knowledge and whose knowledge is valued in our institutions.

## **The Legacy of Colonialism on Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

Colonial powers sought to subjugate Indigenous peoples not only through violence and dispossession but also through intellectual domination. The destruction of oral traditions, the conversion of sacred practices into "primitive" rituals, and the suppression of Indigenous languages were all deliberate efforts to erase Indigenous knowledge. As Indigenous peoples were subjected to European legal, economic, and educational systems, their epistemologies were rendered invisible or framed as inferior.

This history continues to shape the way we interact with Indigenous knowledge today. In many cases, Western academic and library systems still hold the assumption that Indigenous knowledge is primitive, unscientific, or unreliable. And while some efforts have been made to recover and integrate Indigenous knowledge into mainstream systems, these efforts are often fraught with challenges, as the dominant Western framework remains in place.

As scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, for Indigenous peoples, the process of knowledge recovery is one of cultural survival. The work of decolonization is inextricably tied to the act of recovering our own histories, languages, and practices. This recovery is not merely academic — it is deeply rooted in cultural resurgence and political sovereignty. Libraries, as institutions that shape how knowledge is collected, classified, and disseminated, must grapple with the history and continuing impact of colonialism on Indigenous knowledge systems.

## **Why Libraries Must Engage with Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

Libraries have a unique position in society. They are not just repositories of books and data — they are spaces that help define and shape collective memory. As such, libraries must be proactive in engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems, not simply as objects

to be studied or archived, but as living, evolving bodies of knowledge that are integral to our collective understanding of the world. This engagement is vital for several reasons:

- **Respecting Indigenous Sovereignty and Self-Determination:** Engaging with Indigenous knowledge means recognizing the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples over their intellectual and cultural property. For too long, libraries have treated Indigenous knowledge as an academic resource to be extracted, classified, and stored in ways that serve colonial interests. Decolonizing this practice requires libraries to work collaboratively with Indigenous communities, respecting their control over their knowledge and intellectual traditions. This can take the form of repatriating cultural materials, co-curating collections with Indigenous communities, and supporting Indigenous-led initiatives that focus on the preservation and revitalization of knowledge systems.
- **Counteracting Epistemic Injustice:** Indigenous knowledge systems are often ignored or dismissed in academic and professional settings. This is a form of epistemic injustice, where certain ways of knowing are systematically excluded, silenced, or invalidated. Libraries play a crucial role in challenging this injustice by ensuring that Indigenous knowledge is treated with the same respect as Western knowledge systems. One concrete way to do this is by adopting inclusive cataloging practices that recognize Indigenous languages, concepts, and frameworks. For example, a library might work with Indigenous communities to develop culturally appropriate subject headings, or ensure that Indigenous authors and scholars are represented in their collections. Libraries should also consider how they classify and organize materials, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge is not relegated to the margins but placed at the center of knowledge production and dissemination.
- **Revitalizing Indigenous Languages and Oral Traditions:** A key component of Indigenous knowledge systems is language. Indigenous languages are deeply tied to worldview and knowledge transmission, and their revitalization is a vital part of the broader movement toward cultural sovereignty. Libraries must not only collect materials in Indigenous languages but also actively support language revitalization

efforts through resources such as language learning programs, digital archives, and community events. In this way, libraries can become hubs for the revitalization of oral traditions, ensuring that stories, teachings, and histories that have been passed down through generations are preserved and shared in ways that honor their origins. The challenge is to move beyond the written word, recognizing the value of oral knowledge and non-textual forms of expression, such as songs, performances, and rituals.

- **Facilitating Community Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing:** Libraries have long been seen as neutral spaces for research and education. However, when it comes to Indigenous knowledge, neutrality must give way to collaboration. Engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems requires a commitment to deep, respectful partnerships with Indigenous communities. Libraries must be places where Indigenous people can share their knowledge on their own terms — whether through community archives, oral histories, or workshops. This engagement is not a one-time event or a token gesture — it must be an ongoing process of collaboration, one that builds trust, shared understanding, and mutual respect. Librarians can serve as facilitators, helping to create space for knowledge exchange, while also learning from Indigenous perspectives and wisdom.

### **Libraries as Agents of Transformation**

Libraries can play a transformative role in the decolonial movement, but only if they actively engage with Indigenous knowledge systems and adopt practices that reflect a commitment to decolonization. This means shifting away from a model of knowledge that prioritizes Western frameworks and instead embracing a pluralistic, inclusive approach that values the full spectrum of human wisdom.

In doing so, libraries do not just preserve knowledge — they help to reframe the narratives that have shaped our collective past. By embracing Indigenous knowledge as

a living, evolving practice, libraries can contribute to the ongoing process of healing, rebuilding, and decolonizing.

As author and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson says in *As We Have Always Done*, decolonization is not a metaphor: it is a way of life, a way of being in the world, a reawakening to the land, to the ancestors, to the ceremonies, to the stories, to the wisdom that has been here since time immemorial. Libraries have the power to help awaken this wisdom, to bring it into the present, and to ensure that it is not lost for future generations.

## **Conclusion**

As libraries stand at the crossroads of cultural transformation, the imperative to engage deeply with Indigenous knowledge systems has never been clearer. The decolonial journey is not a passing trend — it is an essential and ongoing process of reimagining the role of libraries in a world where historical power dynamics continue to shape our understanding of knowledge. By actively engaging with Indigenous knowledge, libraries are not only preserving and protecting cultural heritage but also contributing to the resurgence of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

However, the task is not an easy one. It requires libraries to rethink deeply ingrained practices, such as collection development, cataloging, and community engagement. It asks librarians to be humble, to learn from Indigenous communities, and to center Indigenous voices in the spaces we have long dominated. This transformation is not simply about inclusion — it is about reconfiguring the very foundations of how knowledge is curated and disseminated. Libraries must become places where Indigenous epistemologies are respected and given space to flourish, rather than simply being "added on" to existing collections.

In this era of decolonial awakening, libraries have a critical role to play as the new frontlines of knowledge. The path to decolonization requires effort, humility, and collaboration, but it also promises a richer, more diverse intellectual landscape where all knowledge is honored equally. As libraries shift toward these principles, they not only dismantle the colonial systems that have historically oppressed Indigenous knowledge — they also lay the groundwork for a truly inclusive future where knowledge is shared, celebrated, and co-created across cultures and communities.

Libraries have the power to redefine the world of knowledge, and in doing so, they can become powerful sites of cultural resurgence, healing, and empowerment for Indigenous communities and the global society alike.

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## **Decolonizing my Library #05**

### **Are Our Collections Part of the Problem?**

#### **Assessing Existing Collections for Colonial Bias**

##### **Introduction**

As libraries, we have an important role in shaping how knowledge and memory are collected, managed, shared, accessed, and preserved. However, this responsibility extends beyond simply organizing documents or making information available — it requires an ongoing commitment to critically assess the systems that influence the way knowledge is classified, stored, and disseminated. Are our collections part of the problem?

In this post, I'll examine how the legacy of colonialism still subtly —and sometimes not so subtly— permeates our library collections, and the crucial role libraries must play in identifying and dismantling these colonial biases. Colonialism's influence on libraries is not always immediately visible, but the framework that underpins the materials we collect, the knowledge we prioritize, and the perspectives we elevate reflects centuries of cultural dominance and marginalization.

How colonial history continues to shape library collections? What steps librarians can take to challenge and correct these enduring biases?

##### **The Silent Legacy of Colonialism in Library Collections**

Colonialism wasn't just about territorial conquest — it was also about the control and manipulation of knowledge. European colonial powers did not only seize land and resources; they also imposed their own worldview, which was seen as superior and more "civilized," on the colonized peoples. Central to this imperial project was the imposition

of European systems of knowledge and categorization — whether that be in terms of science, literature, history, or culture.

Libraries, historically rooted in Western traditions, have often unwittingly perpetuated this colonial legacy. The Eurocentric lens through which we organize, classify, and preserve knowledge continues to shape the resources we provide. These biases are not only visible in the content of collections but also in the systems we use to categorize and label materials, often disregarding the diverse ways that knowledge is created, understood, and transmitted in different cultures.

Colonialism in libraries is not confined to a past event — it is an ongoing process, sustained by the systems and structures that continue to uphold Western dominance in the field of knowledge. Libraries that were built on colonial foundations reflect these biases by prioritizing certain worldviews while erasing others.

### **Unpacking Colonial Bias: What Does It Look Like in Your Collections?**

Recognizing colonial bias is the first step in addressing it, and this requires us to question what we often take for granted as "normal" or "neutral." When we think about library collections, we generally consider them as repositories of knowledge. But what if that knowledge has been shaped by and reflects a history of colonial power dynamics?

In assessing our library collections, here are some key indicators that colonial bias may be present:

- **Lack of Representation:** How many works by Indigenous, Black, or other marginalized authors do you have? Is there a fair balance between Western and non-Western knowledge? The absence of diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences is often a direct result of colonial imbalances in what is considered "valuable" knowledge.

- Eurocentric Narratives: Do our collections prioritize European or Western worldviews, presenting them as the default or universal truth? Non-Western perspectives are often presented as "other," relegated to special sections or marked as exceptions. This reinforces the idea that European or Western thought is the center of all intellectual inquiry.
- Misrepresentation and Stereotyping: When non-Western authors or subjects are included, are they reduced to simplistic or stereotypical representations that fail to reflect the complexity of their cultures and histories? This form of misrepresentation perpetuates damaging colonial narratives, casting non-Western people and cultures as inferior or lesser.
- Colonial Language and Terminology: Language plays a powerful role in shaping how we understand the world. Colonial terms like "primitive," "savage," or "uncivilized" still linger in many cataloging systems and book descriptions, reflecting outdated and harmful worldviews that devalue non-Western knowledge systems. Are these terms still part of our libraries' lexicon?
- Silencing Indigenous and Local Knowledge: One of the most enduring effects of colonialism in libraries is the erasure or marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems. These systems of knowing, often oral or experiential, are systematically excluded from academic institutions, which have historically privileged written, Western forms of knowledge. How many resources in our libraries give space to Indigenous knowledge on equal terms with Western scholarship?

Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), showed how the Western academic world constructed an image of the "Orient" as the exotic, backward "Other," framing it as a place needing control and civilizing. This framework of categorization continues to influence how knowledge is organized today. Libraries, as "gatekeepers" of knowledge, have been complicit in perpetuating these colonial constructs by organizing, storing, and disseminating information in ways that reflect these biased narratives.

## Steps to Assess Colonial Bias in Our Collections

Once we've recognized the signs of colonial bias, we can begin to take concrete steps to assess and address these biases in our own collections. This process requires careful evaluation of the materials we hold, the ways they are categorized, and how they are made accessible to library users. Here are some steps to start with:

- **Review Collection Development Policies:** Do our policies explicitly reflect a commitment to inclusivity and decolonization? A strong decolonial approach should prioritize materials that challenge traditional knowledge systems, amplify marginalized voices, and bring diverse perspectives into the mainstream.
- **Audit our Collections for Diversity:** A collection audit is a critical tool in identifying gaps in representation. How much representation do non-Western, Indigenous, and marginalized voices receive in our collections? Consider this audit not just in specialized areas like Indigenous Studies or Post-Colonial Studies, but across all subject areas, including the arts, sciences, and history.
- **Engage with Community Stakeholders:** True inclusivity cannot be achieved without listening to those whose voices have been silenced. Engaging with Indigenous communities and other marginalized groups represented in our collections will help us understand whether our materials serve their needs and if they accurately represent their knowledge systems.
- **Challenge our Classification Systems:** How are materials categorized in our libraries? Do classification systems like Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress reflect a Eurocentric worldview? Reassess our classification schemes and consider incorporating systems that reflect Indigenous, local, or non-Western knowledge.
- **Make Room for Indigenous and other marginalized Knowledge:** Decolonizing our collections also means actively seeking out Indigenous knowledge sources. This may include oral traditions, indigenous research methodologies, and local historical narratives that are often overlooked in mainstream scholarship.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on the subaltern (1988) provides a vital perspective for understanding the way colonialism silenced the voices of marginalized people. Spivak explores how intellectual and cultural systems have rendered the voices of Indigenous peoples and other colonized groups invisible, leaving their knowledge untold and unheard. Libraries can play a key role in rectifying this by amplifying the voices of those once silenced.

### **Why This Matters: The Path to Healing and Repair**

Libraries are more than just repositories of knowledge; they are powerful cultural institutions that shape how societies view and value knowledge itself. By confronting colonial bias in our collections, we not only correct historical wrongs but also engage in an act of social repair. This work is an essential part of decolonization — a process that extends far beyond libraries and involves rethinking how power is distributed in the creation, validation, and dissemination of knowledge.

This process requires patience, dedication, and a willingness to engage in uncomfortable self-reflection. But it also opens up the potential for transformative change in how libraries serve their communities, allowing marginalized voices to be heard and valued on equal footing.

### **Conclusion**

The question of whether our collections are part of the problem may be uncomfortable, but it is a question that libraries must confront head-on if we are to live up to our mission of serving all people. By auditing and revising our collections, we take a crucial step toward creating libraries that are inclusive, equitable, and just. This process is not just about shifting the contents of our shelves but about transforming the very foundation of our knowledge systems — creating a more just and representative future for all.

Libraries have the power to heal, to educate, and to disrupt the status quo. The work of decolonizing our collections is one important step in creating libraries that serve as equitable spaces where knowledge from all corners of the world is valued equally.

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## **Decolonizing my Library #06**

### **Libraries as Allies in Marginalized Narratives**

#### **Collaborating with Underrepresented Communities**

##### **Introduction**

Libraries have been considered (and have been, in most cases) spaces for information, education and community outreach. But what happens when such spaces truly engage with the communities they serve, particularly those that have been historically marginalized or underrepresented? As stewards of knowledge and memory, libraries have a unique responsibility to ensure that those voices are not only heard, but also protected and amplified.

In this post, I explore the importance of libraries as allies in marginalized communities' struggles for representation, and how we can actively engage with underrepresented voices to ensure our collections reflect the richness and diversity of the societies we serve. Collaboration is key in this effort — by partnering with those on the margins, libraries can challenge exclusionary practices and contribute to creating a more inclusive knowledge ecosystem.

##### **The Marginalization of Certain Narratives**

Historically, libraries have often been complicit in reinforcing dominant narratives that have sidelined the experiences, cultures, and histories of marginalized groups. These groups include, but are not limited to, Indigenous peoples, communities "of color", LGBTQ+ populations, and the economically disadvantaged. A combination of systemic barriers and historical exclusion has meant that the contributions and lived experiences of these and many other communities have been either underrepresented or misrepresented in library collections and systems.

For instance, in many traditional Western libraries, Indigenous knowledge and perspectives have been either overlooked or framed through a colonial lens. Indigenous knowledge —often oral, relational, and deeply rooted in specific geographies and worldviews— has historically been excluded from library cataloging systems dominated by written Western forms of knowledge. As a result, communities that hold and pass on this knowledge are frequently denied access to their own histories, voices, and intellectual heritage.

The rise of social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and Indigenous rights movements has highlighted the urgent need to reconsider whose voices are prioritized in cultural institutions, including libraries. It's crucial for libraries to acknowledge that everybody must be allowed to tell their own stories, and that libraries are more than mere repositories — they are platforms for knowledge creation, exchange, and validation.

### **The Role of Libraries as Allies**

The concept of the library as an ally in marginalized communities means that we need to shift our perspective from passive information providers to active collaborators in the fight for equity and representation. The question for librarians and cultural institutions is no longer just "What can we do for these communities?" but "How can we work with them to amplify their voices and ensure their narratives are not only included but are central to the story we tell?"

Libraries are increasingly being called to decolonize their practices — not only in terms of collections but in the relationships they build with communities. This involves creating space for dialogue, sharing power, and building trust with those who have been systematically excluded from knowledge systems.

Active engagement with marginalized groups is a crucial first step. This may involve outreach initiatives, community-driven programming, and partnerships with local organizations that serve underrepresented communities. Libraries should facilitate spaces where these groups can share their stories, whether through oral histories, storytelling events, or collaborative research projects.

Additionally, one of the most effective ways libraries can collaborate with marginalized communities is through the co-creation of resources. Instead of simply curating content that speaks to these communities' experiences, libraries should invite community members to create content that represents their lived realities. This includes the digitization of local knowledge, archives, and personal narratives that have traditionally been overlooked.

Finally, libraries can also be powerful platforms for marginalized voices by providing access to space, technology, and tools that allow community members to tell their own stories. Digital storytelling workshops, podcasting spaces, and video production resources can empower communities to produce their own content in their own terms, which can then be shared and preserved by the library.

To truly empower marginalized communities, libraries must recognize that working within traditional Western systems is not enough — they need to help develop new tools, new structures, and new ways of engaging that center the voices and needs of the communities they serve.

### **Challenges and Opportunities in Allyship**

Despite the progress libraries have made in recent years, significant challenges remain when it comes to engaging with underrepresented communities. Many libraries still operate within frameworks that were designed by and for dominant, often white, Western cultures. These frameworks may not always be conducive to the needs of

marginalized groups, and libraries may struggle to build trust or engage meaningfully with communities that have been historically harmed by cultural institutions.

One of the most significant challenges libraries face is building trust with communities that have been excluded from or harmed by dominant institutions. The historical legacy of exploitation, misrepresentation, and systemic discrimination has created a wariness of institutional spaces like libraries. For many marginalized communities, the library may represent another iteration of colonial power structures, so it is essential for libraries to demonstrate genuine commitment to listening, collaborating, and co-creating knowledge.

Libraries that embrace the role of ally can become hubs of community empowerment, transformation, and healing. By working with marginalized communities, libraries have the chance to break down the walls that have traditionally separated "institutions" from "communities," building bridges of solidarity that can transform not only the library's collections and services but also the community's relationship to knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries, at their best, are places of inclusivity, connection, and empowerment. But this potential can only be realized if libraries are proactive in working alongside underrepresented communities to decolonize their practices and embrace new, more equitable ways of serving all patrons. Libraries must go beyond tokenism and actively engage with marginalized groups to make their voices a central part of the narrative. As allies in the struggle for representation, libraries can help shape a more just and inclusive society: one where the knowledge of all people is valued, preserved, and shared on equal footing.

If libraries are to truly fulfill their role as institutions of knowledge and education, they must commit to centering the margins — because the future of knowledge belongs to everyone, not just the privileged few.

## **Decolonizing my Library #07**

### **Revolt Against the Norm**

#### **Designing Inclusive / Disruptive Acquisition Policies**

##### **Introduction**

Acquisition policies are at the heart of library collections. They determine what knowledge is considered worthy of preservation and dissemination, and they can shape the cultural and intellectual landscape for generations.

However, these policies have often been designed within narrow frameworks, historically reinforcing colonial and Eurocentric power structures. By reevaluating and challenging these frameworks, libraries have the potential to become revolutionary spaces where diverse narratives, particularly those of marginalized communities, are given the attention and respect they deserve. Designing inclusive acquisition policies is not only a matter of ethics but also a critical step in dismantling centuries of colonial legacy in libraries and archives.

##### **The Power of Acquisition Policies**

Acquisition policies are the silent architects of library collections. While often treated as administrative tools, these policies reflect deeply embedded societal values. What materials are chosen for inclusion and what are excluded? Which authors are celebrated, and which are ignored? These decisions influence not just the content of collections but the very framework of knowledge that libraries offer their communities.

Historically, acquisition policies have largely prioritized works that align with Eurocentric, Western values and traditions, marginalizing other ways of knowing. Colonialism has played a significant role in this process, with colonial powers systematically collecting, controlling, and often misrepresenting knowledge produced by Indigenous, Black, and

non-Western communities. Even today, libraries continue to follow frameworks that have been shaped by this colonial history, inadvertently perpetuating these power imbalances.

The books we don't have tell us just as much about who we are as the books we do have. What libraries choose to collect, and what they don't, says a lot about their institutional priorities and their stance on whose knowledge is valuable.

By actively changing the structures of acquisition, libraries can offer a fuller, more inclusive picture of the world, honoring the intellectual contributions of marginalized communities while dismantling the colonial framework that has shaped so much of our intellectual heritage.

### **Breaking Away from Colonial Frameworks**

For much of history, libraries and archives have been governed by Western epistemological frameworks, which have often served to silence or misrepresent non-Western forms of knowledge. These frameworks were influenced by colonial powers that defined what was considered "valuable" knowledge and excluded alternative worldviews. Many acquisition policies still reflect these colonial biases, underrepresenting the rich diversity of human thought and experience.

Decolonizing acquisition policies requires a radical shift in perspective. It's about questioning longstanding assumptions and making space for materials that have been historically marginalized. It's essential to:

- Actively seek materials that come from underrepresented communities, ensuring that works by Indigenous, Black, and other historically marginalized groups are included.

- Challenge the dominance of Western narratives in favor of knowledge that reflects diverse experiences, ideologies, and histories.
- Recognize the value of non-traditional formats, including oral histories, visual arts, and community-produced materials, which may not fit into the rigid structures of traditional publishing.

In addition to these actions, libraries must consider their role in reinforcing or dismantling colonial structures. This means not just reviewing what is added to collections, but also how materials are acquired, processed, and made accessible.

### **The Role of Librarians as Disruptors**

Librarians are more than neutral custodians of information: they are stewards of cultural and intellectual heritage. The very act of acquiring materials is a political one. Librarians must challenge conventional approaches to collection development and take an active role in decolonizing acquisition practices. This means pushing back against institutional biases, examining their own assumptions, and working towards the inclusion of voices and histories that have been systematically excluded.

The process of acquiring materials should be seen as an opportunity to disrupt the status quo. Librarians, through their acquisition practices, can help shift societal norms, moving beyond the confines of traditional frameworks to support inclusive, equitable, and representative collections. This requires an intentional effort to:

- Collaborate with diverse communities, both locally and globally, to ensure that the materials they produce are recognized and included.
- Rethink what constitutes "quality" knowledge, and acknowledge that excellence does not always align with traditional publishing or Eurocentric standards.

- Foster partnerships with community groups, scholars, and activists who represent marginalized perspectives, ensuring that their knowledge is preserved and shared in libraries.

The work of challenging acquisition policies is ongoing. It requires sustained commitment, education, and the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about library practices and their role in perpetuating systemic inequalities.

### **The Impact of Inclusive Acquisition**

By designing inclusive acquisition policies, libraries have the potential to create more diverse, inclusive, and representative collections. These policies can result in:

- **Empowerment of Marginalized Communities:** Ensuring that the works of underrepresented groups are included in library collections not only validates their contributions but empowers those communities. For instance, the inclusion of Indigenous literature, history, and knowledge helps reclaim and strengthen cultural identities that have been systematically oppressed.
- **A More Holistic Understanding of the World:** Collections that reflect a range of perspectives offer users a more nuanced, multifaceted understanding of history, culture, and society. By incorporating diverse viewpoints, libraries create opportunities for dialogue and engagement that challenge dominant narratives and encourage critical thinking.
- **Creation of Dynamic Learning Spaces:** Inclusive acquisition policies help create library spaces where learning is dynamic, relevant, and reflective of the world we live in. These libraries can serve as hubs for social change, challenging users to reconsider inherited ideas and actively engage with knowledge that has historically been marginalized.

## **Conclusion**

The design and implementation of inclusive acquisition policies are crucial for libraries that aspire to be agents of social change. By breaking traditional acquisition frameworks, libraries can create collections that reflect the diverse, multifaceted world we live in. This process requires librarians to act as disruptors — challenging established norms and pushing for the inclusion of marginalized voices.

Only by embracing these changes can libraries move toward becoming truly inclusive spaces, where knowledge is liberated from the constraints of colonial power dynamics and where all users are invited to engage with the fullness of human thought and culture.

## **Decolonizing my Library #08**

### **Raising Non-Western Voices and Formats in Libraries**

#### **Highlighting Non-Western Perspectives**

##### **Introduction**

Libraries have historically been shaped by Western paradigms, presenting knowledge through the lens of dominant cultures. The colonial legacy that permeates library collections has often led to the silencing of voices and perspectives from the Global South, Indigenous communities, and other marginalized groups. As part of the decolonial movement, libraries must actively work to shift this dynamic by raising non-Western voices and formats that have been pushed to the margins for centuries.

This post will explore why it is vital to highlight non-Western perspectives and materials in libraries, how to identify gaps in collections, and ways to create spaces where these voices and documents can not only exist but thrive.

##### **The Colonial Legacy in Libraries**

Colonialism did not only impact borders, economies, and cultures; it also reshaped knowledge systems. Western institutions, including libraries, have long operated as instruments of colonialism, where knowledge was collected, cataloged, and often distorted through a Eurocentric framework. This resulted in the marginalization of knowledge from cultures across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Indigenous communities (and even rural, traditional European societies). When we think about library collections, we must acknowledge that non-Western knowledge systems were often either ignored, misrepresented, or reduced to secondary status.

The colonial era brought with it the widespread dissemination of Western ideas and the suppression of different knowledge structures. Libraries, like many other institutions,

were complicit in this process, often collecting and preserving Western-produced materials while neglecting or discrediting non-Western sources. For example, while many library collections feature extensive volumes (books and other printed materials) on European history, philosophy, and literature, they may lack materials on Indigenous worldviews, African epistemologies, or Asian traditions of knowledge. When these perspectives are present, they are often filtered through a Western lens, perpetuating a distorted view of non-Western cultures.

To undo this damage, libraries must first recognize this legacy and actively work to diversify their collections, ensuring that they reflect the full spectrum of human knowledge and experience. By doing so, libraries can challenge the global dominance of Western ideals and instead celebrate the rich diversity of intellectual traditions that have often been excluded.

### **The Importance of Non-Western Perspectives**

Highlighting non-Western perspectives is not merely an exercise in diversity but a necessary step toward intellectual justice. Non-Western epistemes (knowledge systems) offer unique ways of thinking, being, and knowing that have been suppressed or overlooked. In contrast to the individualistic, capitalist-driven narratives often promoted in the West, many non-Western systems of thought prioritize community, the environment, and holistic understandings of life.

For example, many Indigenous knowledge systems, such as those practiced by Native American and Aboriginal Australian communities, focus on cyclical understandings of time, land stewardship, and relational knowledge. These systems place significant emphasis on oral traditions and pictorial materials, where stories, teachings, and ceremonies are passed down through generations. In many cases, this knowledge is not just informational but relational, interconnected with spiritual, ecological, and social systems.

Furthermore, African epistemologies offer rich traditions of communal learning, oral history, and cosmologies that stand in stark contrast to Western individualism and scientific rationalism. For example, the (now widely known) concept of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness, compassion, and humanity, offers a profound counter-narrative to Western capitalist ideals of competition and self-interest. By elevating these perspectives, libraries can provide the public with tools to challenge unsustainable systems and empower new solutions to global challenges.

In today's world, where the sustainability of both human societies and the natural environment is under threat, the knowledge held by these non-Western communities has never been more relevant. Non-Western knowledge systems often emphasize harmony with nature, social responsibility, and long-term environmental sustainability—concepts that could guide solutions to contemporary global crises, such as climate change and inequality.

By raising non-Western voices, libraries contribute to creating a more inclusive, rich, and diverse intellectual landscape. These voices provide alternative ways of understanding the world, offering invaluable insights into human existence and society. It's essential that libraries not only present these perspectives but also advocate for their centrality in global discussions on knowledge and development.

### **Actions Libraries Can Take**

To raise non-Western voices, libraries first need to identify where the gaps in their collections lie. Are the books, articles, and media available representative of diverse global perspectives? Are Indigenous or African authors marginalized in favor of Western authors? Do archives and collections contain materials from formerly colonized countries? Do they include different materials, like baskets, textiles, sculptures or other kind of documents? Undertaking this audit is essential for librarians who seek to diversify the narratives present within their institutions. Additionally, such audits should go

beyond content and examine how these voices are represented within library cataloging systems. Are Indigenous perspectives categorized as "folklore" or "ethnography," which can devalue the significance of these cultures and traditions? Are traditional narratives and stories still labelled as "myths"? Librarians should work to correct these gaps by actively seeking out and acquiring materials that represent underrepresented regions and cultures. This could involve collaborating with local and international organizations that focus on Indigenous, African, and other non-Western knowledge production.

One of the most direct ways libraries can raise non-Western voices is through acquisition policies that intentionally include texts from underrepresented regions and cultures. Librarians must also be conscious of the intersectionality within these communities — acknowledging that the experiences of women, queer individuals, and other marginalized groups within non-Western cultures are often neglected. For example, acquiring works by Black women authors from the Global South or Indigenous authors writing in native languages can help to ensure that more nuanced and diverse perspectives are included in the collection. While Western publishers and academic presses still dominate the global book market, libraries can take active steps to support publishers from non-Western countries or small independent presses that focus on global narratives outside of the Western canon. Partnerships with local community organizations, publishers, and international bodies can also expand the breadth of materials available.

Libraries can also create partnerships with community organizations, cultural institutions, and international networks to amplify non-Western voices. This could involve working with cultural centers to co-curate exhibitions or partnering with local immigrant and refugee groups to create content that reflects their stories and histories. Furthermore, promoting open-access resources and digital archives from non-Western perspectives can democratize access to knowledge and support international collaboration.

They can also hold events and programs that highlight non-Western traditions, from literature readings and art exhibitions to film screenings and lectures. These events should not just showcase non-Western art, but also allow for discussions that contextualize the significance of these works within their cultural framework. Advocacy for these initiatives within and outside of the library community is essential for shifting public perceptions and influencing library policy.

Finally, one significant barrier to presenting non-Western voices is the way in which collections are organized. Many cataloging and classification systems, such as Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress Subject Headings, are deeply rooted in Western epistemology. Classifications of African or Indigenous knowledge have often been limited to stereotypical or colonial lenses. Libraries must experiment with alternatives, revising classification schemes to reflect a more diverse and culturally appropriate approach to organizing knowledge. Additionally, librarians should actively engage with non-Western scholars, knowledge keepers, and community leaders to develop culturally sensitive metadata, cataloging practices, and new forms of indexing that reflect diverse worldviews.

### **Raising Non-Western Voices for the Future**

In raising non-Western voices and materials from the ashes of colonialism, libraries are not just rectifying historical wrongs but shaping a future where diverse perspectives can lead the charge in solving humanity's most pressing challenges. By highlighting the voices and knowledge systems that were once suppressed, libraries contribute to the creation of a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable world. These efforts are not simply academic; they are deeply connected to the ongoing struggle for justice, reconciliation, and respect for all cultures. The decolonization of libraries is an essential part of the global effort to build a more just and inclusive world.

Libraries, as cultural institutions, have a responsibility not only to reflect but to amplify the voices of those who have been historically marginalized. Through intentional collection strategies, advocacy, and collaboration with underrepresented communities, libraries can lead the way in fostering a world where knowledge is truly shared and inclusive.

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## **Decolonizing my Library #09**

# **Redefining Cataloging Standards for a Diverse World**

## **Culturally Relevant Cataloging Practices**

### **Introduction**

Cataloging is more than just a technical process — it's an act of shaping how we understand and interact with knowledge. As the backbone of library systems, cataloging determines how resources are organized, accessed, and ultimately interpreted by users.

For decades, cataloging standards such as Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) and Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) have been essential in organizing knowledge. However, these systems have often been developed and structured within a Eurocentric framework, reflecting Western ideologies and ignoring the richness and complexity of non-Western, Indigenous, and marginalized knowledge systems.

While these traditional standards have served libraries well in the past, the global landscape of knowledge is rapidly evolving, and the need for inclusive practices in cataloging has never been more urgent. By rethinking cataloging from a decolonial perspective, libraries have the opportunity to build systems that not only reflect the diversity of global knowledge but also affirm the value of all cultures and traditions.

Culturally relevant cataloging practices are not just a matter of adding diverse resources to a collection; they are about ensuring that these resources are properly categorized, accessible, and treated with the respect they deserve. This post will explore the importance of culturally relevant cataloging, the biases inherent in traditional systems, and the steps libraries can take to create more inclusive, equitable knowledge structures.

## **The Colonial Impact on Cataloging**

Historically, cataloging practices have been shaped by Western academic and cultural norms, which have dominated knowledge systems for centuries. Schemes like DDC and LCSH were designed with a Eurocentric view of knowledge, categorizing and classifying resources based on Western concepts, ideologies, and epistemologies. This bias is embedded in their very structure. An example: non-Western and Indigenous knowledge systems are often categorized as "mythology," "folklore," or even "primitive cultures," reinforcing the notion that these knowledge systems are inferior or secondary to Western scientific or historical information.

Such classifications have a profound impact on how knowledge is perceived and treated. By relegating non-Western perspectives to marginal categories, these cataloging systems perpetuate a hierarchy that privileges Western views while silencing others. The colonial legacy of this structure continues to shape how libraries collect, organize, and present materials, often leaving Indigenous, African, Asian, and Latin American knowledge unrepresented, misunderstood, or miscategorized.

This colonial influence is not merely a historical artifact; it is still present today in many libraries. And while libraries in general have made strides toward diversifying their collections, the cataloging of those materials often still follows outdated and biased practices, limiting access to authentic, self-represented materials from non-Western and Indigenous cultures.

## **The Need for Culturally Relevant Cataloging**

Culturally relevant cataloging is critical for libraries that aim to be inclusive, equitable, and representative of the global diversity of knowledge. When cataloging practices are rooted in cultural sensitivity, they not only provide more accurate representation of global knowledge but also empower marginalized communities to see their cultures and

histories reflected in library collections. More than a technical adjustment, it's a fundamental shift in how libraries understand and value knowledge.

A central component of culturally relevant cataloging is challenging the historical dominance of Western narratives. By revisiting the terms, categories, and systems used to classify knowledge, libraries can dismantle the Eurocentric biases that have long shaped library practices. This includes not only reevaluating the categories in which non-Western and Indigenous materials are placed but also rethinking the language used in cataloging. For instance, terms like "myth," "folklore," or "superstition" can be replaced with more respectful and accurate descriptors such as "Indigenous traditions" or "traditional knowledge."

Adopting culturally relevant cataloging practices also enhances the accessibility of collections for diverse users. When materials are categorized in a way that respects the cultural and intellectual contexts from which they originate, users are more likely to engage with these resources in meaningful ways. This also ensures that all users — regardless of their background— can find knowledge that speaks to their own experiences and histories. For example, instead of labeling African oral traditions as "oral literature," cataloging them as "African storytelling traditions" allows for a more respectful and accurate representation of these rich cultural practices.

### **Challenges in Implementing Culturally Relevant Cataloging**

Despite the clear need for reform, there are several challenges to implementing culturally relevant cataloging practices. The biggest hurdle is the dominance of existing cataloging systems. The Dewey Decimal Classification system and Library of Congress Subject Headings are so deeply ingrained in library practice that any attempt to revise or replace them is met with resistance. Librarians may feel constrained by institutional budgets, training, and a lack of sufficient alternatives.

One challenge in particular is the lack of standardized, globally recognized systems that can replace the Western-centric ones. While some initiatives, such as the Indigenous Classification System, have been proposed to provide more culturally sensitive alternatives, they are not widely adopted. Moreover, many libraries may feel the cost and complexity of transitioning to new systems is too high, especially when faced with budget cuts or limited resources.

Another significant challenge is the inherent difficulty in reconciling the universal nature of library classification systems with the specific, localized knowledge that they often overlook. Many non-Western cultures do not adhere to the Western conception of knowledge, which is typically organized in hierarchical, linear categories. Non-Western systems of knowledge tend to be more fluid, holistic, and interconnected, which can make it difficult to categorize using standardized systems like DDC or LCSH. As a result, catalogers must navigate the tension between the universality of cataloging systems and the diversity of knowledge that exists around the world.

### **Steps Toward Culturally Relevant Cataloging Practices**

Libraries should begin by evaluating the subject headings used in their cataloging systems, particularly those that deal with non-Western or marginalized knowledge. For example, resources on Indigenous cultures should not be relegated to categories like "primitive" or "mythology." Instead, libraries can use more respectful and contextually appropriate terms like "Indigenous cultures" or "Native wisdom." This kind of rethinking and reclassification helps to recognize the value of non-Western knowledge on its own terms, rather than through a Eurocentric lens.

One plausible option is to develop localized classification systems that reflect the specific cultures and traditions of the communities being served. Libraries working with Indigenous populations could develop a classification schedule that accounts for local wisdom, spiritual practices, and ecological understanding. These systems could then be

integrated into broader cataloging schemes like DDC or LCSH, allowing librarians to respect cultural specificity while still maintaining consistency across collections.

Libraries must prioritize collaboration with the communities they serve. Engaging with Indigenous groups, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized communities ensures that their perspectives are accurately represented in the cataloging process. This might involve working with community leaders and knowledge keepers to ensure that the library's classification practices align with local cultural values — a collaboration aimed at ensuring that knowledge is not imposed upon these communities but is understood and interpreted within its cultural context.

When appropriate, librarians and catalogers should receive training in cultural competency and decolonial practices. This training should address the history of colonization in library science, provide insights into the epistemologies of non-Western cultures, and help catalogers navigate the complexities of decolonizing knowledge systems. It should be an ongoing process, as cultural knowledge is always evolving, and cataloging practices must be dynamic in order to adapt to new understandings.

Libraries can also use technology to enhance culturally relevant cataloging practices. Digital resources, metadata standards, and online classification tools can help to create more adaptable and inclusive cataloging frameworks. Through technology, libraries can enhance the ability to categorize knowledge from diverse cultural contexts without losing the integrity of the knowledge itself.

Cataloging reform should also be accompanied by changes in collection development policies. Librarians should prioritize the inclusion of diverse materials and ensure that they are appropriately categorized. Libraries, for example, could focus on collecting Indigenous literature, art, and historical resources, and then ensuring that these materials are cataloged in ways that reflect their cultural significance. This practice not

only amplifies marginalized voices but also challenges the colonial legacy embedded in library collections.

## **Conclusion**

Redefining cataloging standards is an essential aspect of creating libraries that are reflective of the world's intellectual diversity. As we move forward, libraries must rethink traditional cataloging systems and adopt culturally relevant practices that honor the knowledge systems of all cultures, especially those that have been historically marginalized.

The act of cataloging is not a neutral or purely technical process; it is a powerful form of knowledge management that shapes how the world sees different cultures and traditions. Through the reevaluation and the decolonization of cataloging practices, libraries can affirm the worth of diverse knowledge systems and contribute to the creation of more equitable and inclusive information environments. The journey to redefine knowledge begins with the catalog, and libraries are well-positioned to lead the way.

## **Decolonizing my Library #10**

# **Disruptive Formats: Unleashing the Power of Non-Traditional Media**

## **Promoting Diverse Formats and Media**

### **Introduction**

The way we define and transmit knowledge and memory has long been dictated by dominant structures — first through written text, then through digital media.

Libraries, archives, and academic institutions have historically privileged these formats, reinforcing a narrow view of what constitutes valid knowledge. Yet, outside of these institutions, societies have preserved and shared wisdom through radically different, often marginalized, means. Oral traditions, murals, graffiti, textiles, body paintings, pottery, and even landscapes themselves hold knowledge as rich and complex as any printed book or digital database.

This post explores the power of these formats — those that challenge the established paradigms of knowledge transmission and reclaim spaces for marginalized voices. Unlike so-called "alternative" media like graphic novels or podcasts, which have already been integrated into mainstream library discourse, these truly disruptive formats remain largely ignored, dismissed, or tokenized. Yet, they represent some of the most enduring, subversive, and community-driven forms of knowledge preservation and storytelling.

### **The Persistence of Oral Tradition**

Long before written language, human societies developed complex oral traditions to pass down history, laws, cosmologies, and identities. Oral storytelling is not just a means of preserving the past; it is a living, evolving practice that fosters collective memory and identity. For many Indigenous communities, the spoken word is not secondary to written text — it is the primary mode of knowledge transmission. Yet, libraries and archives

struggle to accommodate oral knowledge beyond transcriptions, reducing dynamic, performative traditions to static words on a page.

To embrace oral traditions as legitimate knowledge, institutions must rethink their role. Recording and archiving oral narratives is not enough — these traditions must be kept alive through performance, community engagement, and respect for the relational ways in which knowledge is transmitted. The voice, the act of storytelling, the context in which it is shared — all of these elements matter just as much as the content itself.

### **Graffiti, Murals, and the Politics of Public Knowledge**

Walls speak. From the murals of Diego Rivera to the resistance graffiti of occupied Palestine, public art has long served as an act of counter-memory, defying official histories and reclaiming spaces of oppression. Unlike books stored in climate-controlled rooms, graffiti and murals exist in public, accessible to all, subject to the elements, erasure, and renewal. They challenge the notion that knowledge belongs to institutions and instead assert that it belongs to the people.

Libraries and archives often treat these visual expressions as ephemera — valuable only when preserved in photographs or scholarly analysis. But to honor these forms as true disruptive knowledge, institutions must move beyond documentation and actively engage with the communities that produce them. Supporting local artists, recognizing street art as historical testimony, and creating spaces where public visual storytelling can thrive are all ways to break the cycle of institutional erasure.

### **Weaving Knowledge: Baskets, Textiles, and Pottery as Living Archives**

In many cultures, weaving is more than craft — it is a form of knowledge encoding. Patterns, materials, and techniques carry histories, spiritual beliefs, and social structures. A woven basket can be a map of ancestral territories; a textile, a lineage of generations;

a piece of pottery, a narrative of migration and adaptation. Yet, in the dominant knowledge paradigm, these objects are relegated to museum displays, their stories severed from the hands that created them.

To recognize these formats as knowledge systems, we must reject the idea that they are simply artifacts to be collected. Instead, libraries and cultural institutions should support living traditions, collaborating with artisans, hosting weaving and pottery workshops, and treating these practices as ongoing acts of storytelling rather than relics of the past. Only then can these formats disrupt the colonial archive and assert their rightful place in the world of knowledge.

### **The Body as a Library: Tattoos, Scarification, and Embodied Memory**

For many cultures, the body itself is an archive. Tattoos, scarification, and other forms of body modification serve as records of identity, belonging, and resistance. Polynesian tatau, Amazonian facial markings, and Berber tattoos are not simply decorative — they are historical texts inscribed on flesh. These traditions defy Western notions of documentation by embedding knowledge directly onto the human body, rather than externalizing it onto paper or screens.

Yet, mainstream libraries and archives ignore or even stigmatize these embodied histories, failing to acknowledge the intellectual traditions they represent. To embrace this form of knowledge, institutions must shift their focus from preservation to participation — recognizing tattoo artists and body practitioners as knowledge keepers, hosting exhibitions that explore these traditions, and challenging the written word's monopoly on legitimacy.

## **The Land as a Knowledge System**

Perhaps the most radical disruption to dominant knowledge structures comes from recognizing that the land itself is an archive. Indigenous, ancestral, and rural epistemes often treat landscapes as living texts, where rivers, mountains, and forests hold stories, histories, and lessons encoded over generations. This challenges the idea that knowledge is something to be contained within books or digital databases. Instead, it insists that knowledge is spatial, dynamic, and deeply tied to the physical world.

Libraries and archives, built on the logic of categorization and containment, struggle with this idea. But true engagement with disruptive knowledge means breaking down walls —literally and figuratively— to embrace the land as a primary source. Decolonizing knowledge means moving beyond shelves and servers to listen to the earth itself and to those who have read its stories for millennia.

## **Conclusion**

If libraries and archives are to truly decolonize, they must go beyond merely adding "diverse" formats to their collections. Graphic novels and digital media, while valuable, no longer represent a fundamental disruption to the dominant paradigm. The real disruption lies in the formats that challenge the very nature of how knowledge is recognized and valued: oral traditions, murals, graffiti, weaving, pottery, tattoos, and the land itself.

These formats are not just alternatives to written text — they are acts of defiance against epistemic erasure. They remind us that knowledge is not owned by institutions but lived, shared, and embodied by communities. To embrace these disruptive formats is to reject the idea that knowledge must be contained, categorized, and controlled. It is to recognize that the most powerful knowledge cannot always be found on a page — but

rather in the stories we tell, the marks we inscribe, the landscapes we honor, and the bodies we carry through the world.

## Decolonizing my Library #11

# Transforming Libraries into Insurgent, Collective Powerhouses

## Building Community-Centered Collections

### Introduction

Within the field of knowledge and memory management, a notion has been steadily gaining ground — one that involves not only a methodological shift but a profound reconfiguration of the political role of libraries: *community-centered collections*.

This idea goes beyond changing the types of materials preserved or the way they are catalogued; it proposes a transformation in the relationship between library institutions and the territories they inhabit. Instead of being spaces that deliver services in a top-down manner, libraries become horizontal platforms where collaboration is activated, silenced voices are heard, and collective processes of resistance, memory, and action are nurtured.

This shift finds its momentum in what could be called a *community insurgency*: a stance that challenges and interrogates the traditional frameworks —often hierarchical, Eurocentric, and colonial— on which libraries as institutions have historically been built. Rather than replicating institutional logics that prioritize knowledge legitimized by power, community insurgency seeks to dismantle those structures and make way for practices of cultural co-creation, where knowledge and memory are built with, from, and for the communities.

This text explores the implications of such a displacement: how a library can activate situated memory processes, what forms that collaboration can take, and what transformative potential lies —not only for collections, but for social relations— in embracing the library as a collective space of power.

## **From Passive Repositories to Engaged Agents**

For a long time, libraries were conceived as neutral guardians of knowledge, operating under the assumption that open access to information was enough to democratize knowledge. However, that model —privileging "authorized" voices and formal systems of validation— has proven insufficient and, in many cases, exclusionary. Decisions about what gets preserved, how it's organized, what is exhibited and what is omitted, have historically been shaped by institutional criteria, often driven by academic, political, or corporate agendas that reinforce hegemonic worldviews.

In contrast, community-centered collections propose to reverse that logic. They begin with the recognition that knowledge is not neutral, and that every act of preservation is also an act of power. A library truly committed to its territory cannot limit itself to safeguarding materials — it must become actively involved in constructing them alongside those who live, resist, create, and dream within that same space. Librarianship ceases to be a purely technical task and becomes a situated practice, one that acknowledges the need to open itself to other ways of knowing — often made invisible or delegitimized by traditional institutional frameworks.

From this perspective, libraries are no longer intermediaries between knowledge and the public. They become strategic allies in processes of community memory. For example, building a collection alongside social movements, local activists, or Indigenous communities involves more than simply documenting or collecting objects. It means participating in the creation of collective narratives that break away from the silences imposed by official archives. Such practices not only expand the boundaries of what is preserved but also strengthen the sense of belonging and agency of communities in defining their own histories.

## **Co-Creation as a Political Practice**

Co-creation should not be understood as a one-off gesture of community participation, but as a reconfiguration of the power relations that shape the institutional life of libraries. It means inviting collectives, neighbors, Indigenous peoples, workers, students, or artists not just to suggest materials, but to participate actively in decisions about what is preserved, how it is named, what is displayed, and under what criteria the collection is organized.

This demands a genuine willingness on the part of libraries to yield power and to de-hierarchize internal processes. It means recognizing that traditional methods of classification, description, or curation often impose an external gaze that can distort or reduce the complexities of local memories. Therefore, co-creation also entails a critical review of the technical tools used in knowledge organization, allowing communities themselves to define how they wish to be named, represented, and narrated.

Likewise, co-creation requires expanding the notion of what counts as knowledge. Community-centered libraries must be open to incorporating oral traditions, ephemeral materials, and non-conventional formats such as zines, posters, audio recordings, textiles, podcasts, or collective journals. Far from being "lesser" or "alternative," these expressions are vital vehicles for preserving and sharing experiences that would otherwise continue to be ignored by traditional archival structures.

## **The Library as a Space of Collective Power**

When a library adopts a logic of community co-creation, it does more than transform its holdings: it redefines its place within the social ecosystem. It becomes an active node from which communities can connect, organize, and produce meaning. The library space is no longer designed solely for consultation or reading — it becomes a site of gathering, learning, conspiring, and resisting.

This new role entails enabling concrete material conditions: offering spaces for assemblies, workshops, screenings, or cultural events that respond to local concerns. It also involves facilitating access to resources that allow communities to drive their own projects: from technical support and digital training to assistance in building independent archives or producing their own content.

In this framework, the library becomes a strategic ally in processes of social transformation, capable of leveraging its infrastructure and expertise to strengthen the autonomy and organizational capacity of local collectives. It becomes, at its best, an institution that no longer speaks for the community, but with it — through ethical, political, and affective engagement.

### **Building a Sustainable Framework**

Implementing a community-centered collection is not a symbolic gesture or a one-time project. It is a process that requires continuity, commitment, and a clear structure. First and foremost, it means building strong, long-term alliances with community organizations, territorial leaders, activists, and grassroots collectives. These alliances should not be framed as service relationships, but as forms of co-producing knowledge, grounded in dialogue and mutual respect.

It is also crucial to establish stable mechanisms for consultation and participation. Libraries can organize working groups, editorial committees, or curatorial teams composed of community members who participate in decisions about selection, cataloguing, and dissemination of materials. This structure ensures that participation is not reduced to token consultation, but meaningfully shapes the construction of the collections.

Another essential aspect is ensuring accessibility. This means thinking in diverse formats, considering the literacy levels within the community, translating content into local or

Indigenous languages, and making sure physical spaces are navigable and welcoming for all. Finally, it is important to publicly recognize community contributions — give credit, celebrate their input, and create ways of giving back that nourish the relationship and build trust.

## **Conclusion**

Undertaking the construction of community-centered collections is not merely a way to update acquisition policies or diversify the holdings. It is, above all, a political act that questions the historical frameworks of knowledge validation and proposes reimagining the library as a space of contestation, creation, and collective care. It is a recognition that memory is not a pile of objects, but a living, situated, and contested process — one that can only be sustained if it is built with those who inhabit the territory and with those who have been systematically silenced.

If libraries take on this challenge, they can become true centers of community power: spaces where the memories that matter are protected, where marginalized voices are amplified, and where knowledge once again becomes a common good in the service of dignified life, social justice, and political imagination.

## **Decolonizing my Library #12**

# **Libraries as Guardians of the Dispossessed**

## **Ethical Stewardship of Cultural Heritage**

### **Introduction**

Cultural heritage is under siege, not only from the forces of colonialism and globalization but also from the rapid and unchecked advancements of technology and the commercialization of history. As custodians of knowledge and memory, libraries face increasing pressure to preserve cultural artifacts, traditions, and histories that are constantly threatened by erasure. In such a context, the ethical stewardship of cultural heritage becomes not just a professional responsibility but a profound moral mission for libraries.

At the heart of this stewardship lies the understanding that cultural heritage is not a static artifact to be stored away for future consumption, but a living, breathing representation of the identities, values, and struggles of communities. Libraries, as institutions that collect, preserve, and share knowledge, are uniquely positioned to act as guardians of these treasures, particularly for marginalized and dispossessed communities. In this post I explore the ethical imperatives for libraries in the stewardship of cultural heritage, with a focus on the role of libraries in protecting the stories of the oppressed and ensuring that these narratives are not forgotten or silenced.

### **The Ethical Responsibility of Preservation**

Ethical stewardship of cultural heritage demands a commitment to preserving materials in a way that respects the communities from which they originated. This preservation process must go beyond mere physical conservation and extend to the preservation of cultural meaning, historical context, and the integrity of the knowledge itself. Libraries must take care not only to safeguard the tangible items but also to consider the

intangible aspects of heritage —such as oral traditions, rituals, and beliefs— that are often difficult to preserve through conventional archival means.

Preserving cultural heritage requires libraries to navigate complex ethical considerations, especially when dealing with materials that belong to marginalized communities. The appropriation of indigenous knowledge or the collection of culturally sensitive materials, for example, raises questions about ownership, access, and the potential for exploitation. In some cases, materials may have been taken from these communities without consent or under duress, and their continued existence in institutional collections can perpetuate the historical injustice of their removal.

To ethically steward cultural heritage, libraries must prioritize the rights of the communities to whom these materials belong. This includes working with those collectives to ensure their voices are heard in decisions about the care, access, and use of their cultural property. In some cases, this may mean returning materials to their rightful owners or providing human groups with the means to control how their heritage is shared with the world.

### **Libraries as Guardians of the Dispossessed**

For communities that have experienced dispossession —whether through colonization, war, forced migration, or economic displacement— libraries are more than just passive stewards of their heritage. They are active guardians, entrusted with the responsibility to protect and amplify the voices of the dispossessed. This role comes with a deep commitment to social justice and a responsibility to challenge the structures that have caused harm.

Libraries are often the only institutions with the resources and infrastructure to safeguard the historical and cultural artifacts of displaced or marginalized peoples. In conflict zones, for example, libraries have played a critical role in preserving manuscripts,

photographs, and recordings that document the experiences of displaced groups. Similarly, in post-colonial contexts, libraries can serve as repositories for indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring that these traditions are not lost to history.

However, this role as guardians of the dispossessed also involves confronting difficult questions about the ethics of collecting and the potential harms of archival work. The act of collecting materials from marginalized communities often involves the library in questions of power — who decides what is collected, who has access to these materials, and what happens when these materials are removed from their context? Libraries must be vigilant in addressing the power dynamics inherent in their work and take steps to ensure that their practices do not perpetuate further harm or exploitation.

### **Community-Led Stewardship**

A critical part of ethical stewardship is the recognition that communities themselves are the most qualified to decide what aspects of their cultural heritage should be preserved and how that heritage should be shared. Libraries can support community-led stewardship efforts by providing resources, training, and infrastructure to help people document and protect their own heritage.

Community-led stewardship involves empowering local groups to take the lead in preserving their own stories. In indigenous societies, for example, libraries can collaborate with local elders and knowledge keepers to ensure that oral histories are captured and preserved in culturally appropriate formats. In refugee camps, libraries might work with displaced people to preserve their cultural narratives through written, digital, or audiovisual records. By prioritizing collective voices and expertise, libraries can ensure that preservation efforts are meaningful and respectful of the communities they aim to serve.

One example of this approach is the creation of community archives, where individuals and groups are invited to contribute materials to the library's collection. These archives may focus on local histories, oral traditions, or social movements, and the materials are often kept in the people's own language and context. Archives are especially valuable because they reflect the lived experiences of persons who may not otherwise have access to mainstream archival resources.

### **Protecting Heritage in the Digital Age**

The digital age has brought both opportunities and challenges for the stewardship of cultural heritage. On the one hand, the digitization of materials makes it possible to share knowledge across vast distances and ensure the preservation of fragile or deteriorating items. On the other hand, the digitalization of heritage raises concerns about accessibility, privacy, and the potential for exploitation. Digitization allows for wide dissemination, but it also opens up questions about who controls these digital versions of cultural materials, how they are used, and whether they can be accessed without proper contextual understanding.

For example, when indigenous knowledge or cultural artifacts are digitized and made accessible online, there is the risk of these materials being misused, taken out of context, or even exploited by commercial entities. Libraries, as ethical stewards, must carefully consider these risks and work with communities to ensure that digitization is done in a way that honors cultural sensitivities and respects the wishes of the community. This might involve setting up access restrictions, creating rights management frameworks, or working with community members to decide what materials are made publicly available and in what format.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries are more than just institutions for storing books and documents — they are vital guardians of cultural heritage. As such, they have an ethical responsibility to preserve not only the tangible artifacts of culture but also the intangible traditions, knowledge, and histories that give those artifacts meaning. By acting as guardians of the dispossessed, libraries can help ensure that marginalized communities have control over their cultural heritage.

The stewardship of cultural heritage is not a passive act — it is a profound ethical commitment to social justice and the empowerment of communities. In a world where culture is constantly under threat, libraries must stand as vigilant protectors of the past, the present, and the future. They must resist the pressures to commodify or erase the histories of the marginalized, and instead, champion the stories, traditions, and knowledge that belong to those who have been silenced for too long.

## **Decolonizing my Library #13**

### **Not Neutral, Not Safe**

#### **What Diverse Collections Actually Do in a Library**

##### **The Myth of Neutrality and the Politics of Collection**

Libraries are often imagined as neutral spaces — quiet, orderly, universal in their access to knowledge. But neutrality in libraries has always been a myth, one that conveniently masks the ideological nature of every decision made about what to collect, preserve, and circulate. A library's collection is not just a reflection of its budget or user base; it is a cultural map of whose voices are deemed worthy of record, and whose are not.

This curation of memory is not passive — it is a form of power.

When a library chooses to include materials that reflect a wide range of lived experiences, especially those of historically marginalized communities, it is not simply offering "perspectives." It is challenging inherited hierarchies of knowledge. A diverse collection unsettles assumptions about whose narratives are central and whose are peripheral. And in doing so, it invites friction — not just among users, but within the institution itself.

These are not decorative additions to a shelf. They are interventions in the epistemic landscape.

##### **From Representation to Disruption**

There is a common tendency in institutional discourse to treat diverse collections as gestures of inclusion — symbolic acts of visibility during heritage months or moments of public controversy. But representation, when reduced to symbolic performance, has little lasting impact. A few high-profile titles on display do not constitute a systemic

commitment to equity. True transformation begins when diversity in collections is understood not as aesthetic variety but as a shift in the boundaries of what is considered legitimate knowledge.

Diverse collections that matter do not simply mirror existing identities — they introduce new tensions. They bring unfamiliar histories into dialogue with mainstream narratives and force uncomfortable questions. What happens when Indigenous science challenges Western ecological models? When prison abolitionist texts sit beside law enforcement manuals? When anti-colonial histories occupy the same shelf as state-sanctioned textbooks?

These moments of coexistence are not harmonious — they are productive ruptures. And they are essential to any library that claims to serve a democratic public.

### **The Library as Infrastructure for Movements**

Social movements are often powered not only by protest and organizing, but by the preservation and transmission of memory. In this regard, libraries play a crucial —if often invisible— role. When collections include the intellectual and documentary foundations of resistance movements, they act as repositories of tactical knowledge, collective history, and political imagination. And unlike social media or news cycles, they can hold onto this knowledge over time.

This function becomes especially vital when the communities involved are systematically erased from dominant archives. Feminist collectives, Indigenous councils, migrant organizations, and abolitionist networks frequently produce materials —pamphlets, newsletters, oral testimonies, self-published books— that have no place in conventional publishing channels. When libraries choose to collect and preserve these materials, they are not simply supporting access. They are participating in the survival of memory that

would otherwise disappear. And when those collections are activated —read, taught, cited, shared— they extend the lifespan and reach of the movements themselves.

### **Structural Barriers: Discovery, Access, and Silencing**

Collecting diverse materials is only the beginning. How those materials are described, catalogued, and made discoverable is just as important — and often just as political. If a book on Black radical thought is buried under euphemistic subject headings, or if an oral history in a minority language has no metadata that makes it findable, then the collection fails. Visibility without access is a hollow gesture.

Libraries have inherited a metadata infrastructure built largely on Eurocentric, male, and Anglophone assumptions. Correcting this requires more than tweaking keywords. It requires deep engagement with community knowledge systems and a willingness to reimagine classification itself. Without this, the most progressive acquisitions remain effectively invisible. And when marginalized users can't find themselves in the catalog — or when they find themselves misrepresented— they receive a clear message: this space is not for you.

### **Measuring Impact Beyond Numbers**

Evaluating the impact of diverse collections cannot rely solely on usage metrics. Circulation data, event attendance, or database clicks provide only a partial and often misleading view. Some of the most powerful encounters with a collection leave no statistical trace. A teenager finding a queer graphic novel that shifts their sense of identity. A teacher integrating an anti-racist text into the classroom. A migrant worker reading a pamphlet in their own language for the first time in years. These moments matter, even if they're unquantifiable.

Qualitative methods —community feedback, focus groups, oral testimonies— offer richer insights into how collections resonate. So do partnerships with grassroots organizations, who can help libraries understand what is missing or misrepresented. In these cases, the library becomes not just a distributor of resources, but a co-creator of meaning with its community. That kind of relational accountability cannot be measured by numbers alone. It must be listened for.

### **Toward a Library That Takes Sides**

To build a truly diverse collection is not to strive for balance — it is to take a stand. Not against people, but against systems of erasure. This does not mean turning the library into a political campaign. It means acknowledging that the act of collecting, describing, and sharing knowledge has always been political, whether we name it or not. Libraries that pretend otherwise are not neutral — they are complicit in upholding dominant structures.

A library that takes sides does so by aligning itself with the communities whose voices have been historically excluded. It centers their knowledge not as supplemental, but as foundational. It doesn't wait for a publishing trend or a funding initiative — it acts. And when those actions provoke discomfort, it doesn't retreat into platitudes about "both sides." It holds the line.

Because the question is not whether diverse collections spark social change. The question is whether we build collections bold enough to try.

## **Decolonizing my Library #14**

### **Untraining the Colonial Librarian**

#### **Training Staff in Decolonial Practices**

##### **Introduction**

Librarianship is often seen as a neutral and objective profession. However, it's actually a tool of power and potential transformation.

Libraries are custodians of knowledge, and as such, they have a responsibility to interrogate the sources of that knowledge. Since colonial legacies continue to shape access to information, training library staff in decolonial practices is not just a necessity but an urgent act of resistance.

This post explores how librarians, as key players in the fight for equitable access to information, can be trained to challenge the colonial structures that permeate library work, and promote practices that empower marginalized communities.

##### **Understanding the Colonial Legacy in Libraries**

Colonialism has shaped libraries and information systems for centuries, influencing everything from the way knowledge is categorized and disseminated to the types of materials that are valued and preserved. Libraries were historically aligned with colonial power structures, often serving as instruments of control and cultural domination. The very way libraries organize knowledge —through classification systems like the Dewey Decimal System, which reflects Western cultural biases— remains a reflection of a Eurocentric worldview. These systems impose particular ways of seeing the world while marginalizing others.

To address these embedded biases, it is crucial that libraries engage in critical self-reflection. It is essential to examine library practices that might unconsciously perpetuate colonial structures, such as prioritizing Western sources and narratives while overlooking indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western perspectives. Training staff in decolonial practices involves more than simply diversifying collections or offering programs on cultural sensitivity — it requires a deep transformation in how libraries think about knowledge, authority, and the relationship between libraries and the communities they serve.

### **Decolonial Training: Moving Beyond Tokenism**

Decolonial training for library staff cannot be limited to a one-off workshop or an occasional training session. It must be an ongoing, critical practice that challenges the assumptions and biases librarians hold, both individually and institutionally. Decolonial thought requires a complete overhaul of how knowledge is perceived and valued. In the context of libraries, this means moving beyond tokenistic diversity initiatives and towards a fundamental reshaping of how libraries engage with and represent knowledge.

Many libraries have made efforts to add more diverse books to their collections, but these actions are often superficial if they do not address the underlying systems of power that shape how books and information are created, valued, and accessed. Librarians must be trained to understand and critique the power dynamics that shape knowledge production and dissemination, and be equipped to challenge them. This involves moving from merely collecting diverse materials to actively interrogating whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in the library's collections, programs, and services.

Training must also include a focus on understanding and addressing the historical erasure of marginalized communities. Decolonial librarianship involves not only the addition of materials from these communities but also ensuring that their histories, languages, and

ways of knowing are respected and celebrated. Librarians need to be trained to see themselves as active agents in this process — workers not just in a system of knowledge but in the ongoing process of knowledge-making itself.

### **Key Elements of Decolonial Training for Librarians**

To equip librarians with the tools to engage in decolonial practices, training programs should include several core components:

- **Critical Awareness of Colonial Structures:** Staff must be educated about the history and ongoing effects of colonialism in libraries and beyond. This means understanding how colonial power is embedded in library systems, including cataloging, classification, and the archiving of materials. A thorough analysis is necessary of how Western-centered systems of knowledge influence library practices and, by extension, the communities they serve.
- **Reclaiming Knowledge:** Librarians should be trained to value and incorporate indigenous and local knowledge systems into their collections. This means not only collecting materials that represent these traditions but also collaborating with communities to ensure their voices are heard and respected in the library's practices. Collaboration between libraries and indigenous / local groups is important to ensure that knowledge is not only preserved but also integrated into the broader narrative of the community.
- **Critical Cataloging and Classification:** One of the most visible ways that libraries perpetuate colonial structures is through their cataloging and classification systems. Training must encourage librarians to critically examine classification schemes like Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress Subject Headings, and to explore alternative systems that might better represent marginalized communities' experiences. Decolonial librarianship involves the creation of cataloging systems that reflect diverse worldviews, not just Eurocentric paradigms.

- **Community Engagement and Empowerment:** A crucial part of decolonial training involves fostering community engagement. Libraries should not be passive recipients of collections but active partners in the creation and sharing of knowledge. Librarians should be trained to work closely with underrepresented communities to identify their needs and to build collections and programs that reflect those communities' values, interests, and histories. Knowledge must be liberated from colonial structures, and librarians can play an active role in this process by engaging with the communities they serve.
- **Building Allyship Across Professions:** Decolonial librarianship requires collaboration across sectors. Librarians should be trained to work alongside educators, archivists, community leaders, and activists to build holistic, community-centered approaches to decolonization. Forming networks of solidarity is vital to ensure that decolonial efforts in libraries are part of broader movements for social justice and equity.

### **Challenges to Implementing Decolonial Training**

While the need for decolonial training is clear, implementing it can be challenging. Libraries are not neutral institutions — they are embedded within social, political, and economic systems that uphold inequality. As a result, decolonial training can meet resistance from staff, administrators, and even library patrons who are uncomfortable with the idea of challenging long-standing practices. In such cases, training must be approached as a process of long-term transformation, not a quick fix.

There are also practical challenges to consider. Decolonial training requires a significant investment in time and resources, and libraries must be committed to providing ongoing support and training for staff. Library leaders must create spaces for continuous reflection and professional development that go beyond surface-level initiatives. These spaces can serve as platforms for discussing the challenges and successes of decolonial work, allowing librarians to collectively reflect on how they can improve their practice.

## **Conclusion**

Decolonial training for library staff is essential to dismantling the colonial structures that still permeate library practices today. By developing a deeper understanding of the colonial legacy, reclaiming indigenous knowledge, and challenging Western-centered classification systems, librarians can become powerful agents of change. Libraries can either reinforce colonial power or serve as sites of resistance and empowerment. The key to transforming libraries into spaces of justice and equity lies in the training and ongoing support of library staff to challenge the status quo and embrace decolonial practices.

Decolonial librarianship is a revolutionary act, one that asks librarians to confront their own biases and assumptions and to engage in the work of healing and reconciliation with the communities they serve. In doing so, librarians can truly become revolutionaries — part of a vanguard movement that seeks to undo the legacy of colonialism and create libraries that are inclusive, equitable, and transformative for all.

## **Decolonizing my Library #15**

### **A Line in the Shelves**

#### **Transitioning to Revolutionary Collection Praxis**

##### **The End of the Shelf as We Knew It**

The time has come to reassess the foundational assumptions that underpin library collection development.

For too long, this practice has been framed as a neutral, benevolent endeavor: selecting materials, preserving them, and making them available in the service of a shared public good. Yet, when placed under critical scrutiny, it becomes clear that collection development is not —and has never been— neutral. It is shaped by historical power asymmetries, by institutional imperatives, and by the classificatory logics of the Western epistemological tradition.

Reformist interventions have attempted to soften these structures through inclusion initiatives and representational audits. However, such efforts, while well-intentioned, often leave the core architecture of exclusion intact. They diversify the occupants of the shelf but rarely question the logic of the shelf itself. A deeper transformation is needed — not cosmetic, but structural. Not additive, but interrogative. This transformation begins by naming what the field has historically refused to name: that collection development, as traditionally practiced, is a system of epistemic governance, not simply one of care.

##### **Extraction by Another Name**

Preservation, in the professional language of librarianship, is commonly understood as a moral imperative. But the idea of preservation must be disentangled from its historical entanglements with imperial control. When preservation becomes indistinguishable

from possession —when materials are collected without context, consent, or return— the act ceases to be protective and becomes extractive.

This extractivism is not merely historical. It continues in contemporary acquisition practices, particularly when materials from Indigenous, marginalized, or displaced communities are added to institutional holdings without relational accountability. Even when framed as inclusive or diverse, these acquisitions often function as symbolic gestures that reinforce institutional legitimacy while failing to address the power differentials embedded in the process. To archive Indigenous oral knowledge using frameworks that erase its performative and communal dimensions is not preservation; it is transformation into something legible to the institution, often at the cost of its epistemic integrity.

### **Relational Ethics Beyond Representational Tactics**

Reimagining collection development as a decolonial practice requires a move from representational politics to relational ethics. The goal cannot be the mere diversification of collections. Rather, it must involve a fundamental rethinking of what it means to hold, to describe, and to give access to knowledge. This shift demands that libraries begin their work not with the question of what should be acquired, but with more difficult questions: On whose terms? With what right? And in service of whom?

Relational ethics calls for a deep accountability to the communities whose knowledges are held —or sought— by libraries. This accountability is not procedural; it is not fulfilled through consent forms or advisory committees alone. It is epistemological and ongoing. It entails ceding control over descriptive practices, access protocols, and even decisions about whether certain materials should be housed in the library at all. It also demands recognition of the limits of institutional authority — and a willingness to respect non-circulation, non-disclosure, or repatriation as legitimate outcomes.

## **Dismantling the Infrastructure of Legibility**

One of the most pervasive, yet least examined, assumptions in library work is that access is inherently good. The promise of access is predicated on the belief that knowledge becomes valuable through its availability. However, this belief rests on a very particular epistemology — one that privileges legibility, circulation, and individual retrieval over situated, relational, and sometimes sacred forms of engagement.

Cataloging systems and classification schemes enforce legibility by making knowledge intelligible according to institutional norms. In doing so, they often flatten, distort, or erase those elements of knowledge that refuse to conform. Revolutionary collection practices must therefore interrogate the very infrastructure of visibility. What forms of knowledge are rendered invisible by cataloging logics? What meanings are lost when ritual, seasonality, or oral transmission are forced into static subject headings? And crucially, how can libraries develop practices that respect opacity, that allow for the protection —rather than the exposure— of vulnerable knowledges?

## **Naming Complicity and Reframing Stewardship**

Librarianship has long relied on the narrative of stewardship: the idea that libraries preserve, protect, and make available knowledge in the service of cultural continuity and democratic access. While this narrative holds some truth, it also masks the extent to which libraries have operated within —and often upheld— the structures of colonial knowledge production. What is preserved, what is described, and what is made available has historically aligned with dominant systems of value, classification, and legitimacy. Knowledge that fell outside those systems was often ignored, misrepresented, or forcibly translated.

To move forward, librarians must be willing to name this complicity. Doing so is not an act of self-recrimination, but a necessary step toward transformation. By confronting the

systems we have inherited and sustained, we make space for alternatives. We begin to understand that stewardship cannot be defined solely by preservation and access, but must also include relational repair, epistemic humility, and a recognition of past and present harms.

### **From Inclusion to Structural Refusal**

There is a growing recognition within critical librarianship that inclusion, while necessary, is not sufficient. Inclusion efforts that operate within the existing logics of collection and classification risk reinforcing the very systems they aim to challenge. True transformation requires structural refusal: a refusal to continue business as usual, a refusal to classify that which resists classification, and a refusal to acquire that which cannot be held responsibly.

This is not to advocate for chaos or abandonment of professional rigor. Rather, it is a call to reorient rigor toward a different set of principles: those rooted in relational accountability, cultural specificity, and epistemic justice. It is a call to recognize that not all knowledge should be archived, that not all memory is meant for public access, and that sometimes, the most ethical act a library can perform is to step back.

### **The Threshold of Praxis**

What lies ahead is not a technical upgrade or a refinement of existing tools. It is not a new workflow, nor a better taxonomy. What lies ahead is the opportunity —and the obligation— to reimagine collection development as a form of cultural praxis. A praxis that does not seek to improve the archive, but to liberate it from the assumptions that have long governed it.

The transition to culturally responsible, revolutionary collection work begins with a reckoning: with what we hold, how we hold it, and whether we should hold it at all. It

continues with the development of new methods, grounded in refusal, reciprocity, and relation. And it culminates not in a universal model, but in a plurality of practices — each responsive to place, people, and purpose.

This is not the end of collection development. It is the beginning of something else entirely.