

# **The Taxonomy of Absence**

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This series examines how libraries, archives, and museums do more than classify knowledge — they define the boundaries of what is remembered and what is erased. Rooted in colonial and Eurocentric logic, these systems struggle to hold indigenous, oral, ecological, and relational ways of knowing, often reducing them to footnotes, anomalies, or outright absences. This series explores not just what is missing, but why it is missing, interrogating the structural biases of cataloging, metadata, and archival practices. Moving beyond the act of "filling gaps," it asks how we might dismantle and reimagine the architectures of knowledge itself.

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #01**

### **The Silence in the Catalogue**

#### **When Other Knowledge Systems Don't Fit the Index**

Libraries, archives and museums are built to organize knowledge and memory, to make it searchable, accessible, and preserved across time.

But they are not neutral spaces. They structure documents and contents in a certain way, determining what is recognized, who is cited, and which ways of knowing remain peripheral or entirely absent.

Scientific institutions have long shaped research in the tropics, yet the organization of this knowledge reflects deep asymmetries. The classification systems that libraries, archives and museums rely upon emerged from European intellectual traditions. These systems assume that knowledge is fixed, textual, and hierarchically arranged. And they struggle with (or just resist) epistemes, ways of knowing, that are dynamic, oral, and relational.

The result is that indigenous knowledge systems, ecological understandings embedded in stories, or biological taxonomies that reflect deep interconnections between species and landscapes often do not fit.

If knowledge is not indexed, it cannot be found. And if it cannot be found, it is often assumed to be absent.

#### **Classification as a System of Power**

Cataloging and classification are often seen as technical processes, yet they have profound epistemic consequences. The structure of a document collection reflects

assumptions about knowledge: what is fundamental, what is secondary, what is scientific, and what is folklore.

Histories that were transmitted orally are placed under mythology rather than history. Medicinal plant knowledge that has guided healing for centuries is categorized under ethnobotany rather than pharmacology. Indigenous land stewardship techniques that shape biodiversity conservation are not recognized as science but are framed as cultural traditions.

This is not an accidental oversight. The knowledge that does not conform to dominant classification models remains outside formal systems, treated as anecdotal, informal, or pre-scientific.

### **The Silences of Biodiversity Research**

Libraries, archives, museums and similar institutions hold the field notes of early scientific expeditions, the records that shaped taxonomies, and the maps that defined ecological research. These materials document biodiversity in the tropics (and elsewhere), yet they also reveal the structural omissions within the scientific narrative.

Many of these early materials contain references to local guides, unnamed informants, and indigenous experts whose contributions remain uncredited. Taxonomic descriptions provide Latin names but rarely acknowledge indigenous classifications. Scientific articles build upon ecological knowledge that was observed in local practice, yet they strip away the historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts from which that knowledge emerged.

Document collections are not just repositories — they constitute a mechanism that determines what is remembered and what is forgotten. Information that does not fit the scientific frameworks of the time is either left unrecorded or buried in marginal

annotations. These silences are not just gaps in the discourse; they reflect deeper patterns of epistemic exclusion.

### **Decolonizing the Catalogue: Rethinking Classification**

Expanding classification systems to accommodate indigenous or local knowledge is not enough. The structure itself must be rethought. Systems built on taxonomic separation struggle to incorporate data that is relational. If a plant's significance is tied not only to its species but to its role within an ecosystem, a healing tradition, or a cultural practice, where does it belong in a classification system that demands discrete categories?

Libraries, archives and museums have historically privileged written records over oral traditions, reinforcing the invisibility of knowledge that is transmitted through speech, ritual, artistic or embodied practice. Addressing this imbalance requires not just new metadata fields, but a deeper interrogation of why certain forms of knowledge are considered valid documents while others are not.

Attribution practices also require reconsideration. Indigenous and local knowledge is often extracted for research but is rarely cited as a legitimate source in itself. Scientific authorship models privilege individuals over communities, making it difficult to acknowledge collective and intergenerational ways of knowing. Recognizing non-Western contributions means moving beyond token acknowledgments toward a restructuring of how authority is defined.

### **In Search of Epistemic Justice**

Libraries, archives and museums shape the way knowledge and memory are structured, accessed, and legitimized. The challenge is not simply to include marginalized information, but to question the systems that have made it marginal in the first place.

Decolonizing libraries and equivalent spaces is not just about expanding collections or adding new subject headings. It requires asking deeper questions about how classification, access, and authority are constructed. If knowledge systems have been excluded because they do not fit within existing frameworks, then the frameworks themselves must be transformed.

The question is not just what needs to be added.

The question is whether libraries, archives and museums are ready to recognize knowledge on its own terms, rather than forcing it into systems that were never designed to hold it.

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #02**

### **What Counts as a Document?**

#### **Literocentrism and Limits**

##### **Introduction**

In the world of libraries and archives, the definition of a "document" has long been constrained by certain assumptions: that it is printed or digital, that it carries the seal of an academic institution or a recognized publishing house, that it has been formally authored, classified, and sanctioned.

In this framework, anything that does not fit these parameters —oral traditions, landscapes, embodied knowledge, collective memory— tends to be dismissed as unreliable, unstructured, or even nonexistent in terms of knowledge and memory management.

This is not just an oversight. It may be considered an act of epistemic violence.

The idea that knowledge must be written, stored, and institutionally recognized to be "valid" is a historical construction — one rooted in colonial power, in the expansion of state control, in the bureaucratic need to classify and contain. This bias is a direct result of literocentrism — a term I have coined to express the privileging of written text over other forms of knowledge transmission.

And yet, when we look beyond this rigid framework, we find that the world has always been filled with documents that do not fit within library shelves or digital repositories.

##### **A Library Without Shelves: The Forest as Archive**

In *The Forest as a Library: What Trees, Soils, and Rivers Remember*, I explored the idea that landscapes themselves are knowledge systems — holding memory in the rings of trees, the underground connections of mycelia, the layers of soil, the movement of rivers... These are not poetic metaphors; each organism in the rainforest is part of an actual archive of information, historical records encoded both in nature and in the cultures of the many peoples living among them.

And yet, because they are not formatted into books or digitized into databases, they remain invisible to the institutional, official, hegemonic structures that define what is worth preserving — and what is deemed to be forgotten.

The problem, however, goes beyond nature. Entire civilizations have preserved, stored, and transmitted knowledge through forms that libraries and archives continue to ignore. Maps traced into animal hides or in haircuts, histories built into architecture, cosmologies encoded into textiles and baskets, genealogies and legal systems passed down through oral governance and songs — each of these represents vast, intricate bodies of knowledge and memory.

Yet they are often treated as folklore, legend, or mere cultural artifacts rather than what they truly are.

### **The Tyranny of the Written Word**

For centuries, the written word has been privileged over all other forms of information transmission. The assumption that something is only real if it is documented in text has led to profound losses — not only of knowledge itself but of the communities and traditions that sustain it.

Orality, for example, is dismissed as unreliable or anecdotal. Yet it contains detailed scientific knowledge — about medicinal plants, ecological cycles, climate patterns— that

have been tested and refined for generations. A book on botany is considered valid; a healer's knowledge, passed through spoken word and embodied practice, is not. Why? Because one fits the hegemonic model, and the other does not.

This is literocentrism at work.

### **Who Gets to Decide What Counts?**

Librarians, archivists, and information professionals play a crucial role in defining and enforcing what is considered a document — and by extension, what is considered knowledge.

Such power is not neutral, no matter how often "neutrality" is claimed by those who manage knowledge and memory.

By recognizing only written, system-sanctioned, academic texts as valid, the field of librarianship has historically reinforced systems of colonialism and exclusion. It has sidelined the experiences of Indigenous communities, the wisdom of local historians, the legitimacy of non-Western epistemologies. It has treated knowledge as something that must be stored in books, in databases, in institutional repositories, rather than something lived, practiced, and passed on beyond the constraints of the written record.

### **Breaking the Boundaries of Documentation**

We must begin to expand what we consider to be a document.

We must reject the notion that only certain kinds of knowledge are worth preserving.

We must recognize that stories carried in bodies, in ceremonies, in landscapes, in languages on the verge of extinction, are just as vital as any book in our collections.

This means expanding cataloging systems to recognize non-written, non-digitized knowledge. It means creating ethical frameworks that respect the sovereignty of knowledge holders. It means supporting community-driven archiving practices, rather than extractive models that take knowledge without giving back. It means advocating for policy changes that challenge the colonial structures still embedded in information science.

If knowledge can be stored in roots and leaves, in oral speeches, in traditions that predate the printing press, then why are we still pretending that only books and servers matter?

If librarianship is truly about preserving knowledge, then what will it take to finally recognize the knowledge that has been here all along?

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #03**

### **Archiving the Occupied**

#### **Colonialism and Knowledge Management**

##### **Introduction**

The legacy of scientific fieldwork in tropical regions is not confined to the specimens collected or the papers published. It extends into the very archives that house these materials, where knowledge is shaped, framed, and often distorted by the politics of its collection. For archivists, librarians, and memory workers, the question of how to document and organize colonial scientific materials requires a reckoning with the power structures that shaped their creation and dissemination.

When we look at scientific expeditions in the tropics, we must ask: How were the voices of the people who facilitated those expeditions —and whose knowledge made them possible— omitted from the record? How do we address the fact that the archive itself, in its very formation, reinforced colonial structures of power?

##### **Cataloguing Through a Colonial Lens**

The first step in addressing the colonial roots of scientific fieldwork is understanding the archives themselves.

Many of the specimens, journals, and field notes housed in scientific institutions around the world were collected under colonial conditions. Yet, when these materials were catalogued, they were organized under frameworks that often excluded the contributions of Indigenous knowledge keepers, local guides, and other collaborators.

The classification systems used in these archives —whether biological taxonomy, geographic descriptors, or anthropological categories— were shaped by colonial

agendas. The names that appeared in these records were rarely those of the Indigenous people who guided the expeditions or identified the specimens; instead, it was the names of European explorers, scientists, and institutions that were preserved. Scientific documentation became, in essence, a tool for further colonization, reinforcing the notion that knowledge could only be valid if it conformed to Western epistemologies.

For librarians and archivists working with these collections today, the question becomes: How do we catalog knowledge that has been extracted, misclassified, or erased? How do we reconcile the data within the archives with the ethical imperative to make these materials accessible, accountable, and restorative?

### **The Ethics of Authorship and Attribution**

One of the primary challenges in decolonizing scientific archives is the issue of authorship. Scientific records, from field journals to specimen lists, often cite the names of European scientists, but rarely acknowledge the local contributors who made the fieldwork possible. The role of local guides, interpreters, and knowledge keepers is often relegated to the margins, if mentioned at all.

As librarians, we have a responsibility not only to maintain these records but also to question their integrity. Authorship in scientific archives should reflect the collaborative nature of knowledge production. This includes adding attribution for local contributors and knowledge keepers, when possible, and providing metadata that recognizes their intellectual labor. Further, it requires questioning existing cataloguing systems that prioritize Western methodologies and frameworks, and instead seeking to incorporate Indigenous and local knowledge systems and epistemologies.

Ethical cataloguing means expanding the scope of authorship beyond the traditional "lead researcher" and recognizing the collective labor that underpins scientific discovery. This may involve creating alternative indexing systems, linking scientific collections with

oral histories, and working with local communities to ensure that knowledge is represented and credited appropriately.

### **Reframing the Archive: Linking Knowledge Systems**

A critical part of the work of decolonizing archives is recognizing the limitations of traditional classification systems. Western systems of cataloguing and classification — whether in libraries, archives, or museums— are based on epistemologies that often exclude non-Western ways of knowing. Indigenous knowledge systems, for instance, are often oral, experiential, and relational, rather than text-based and fixed in time.

In the context of tropical scientific fieldwork, this presents a unique challenge. Specimens may be classified according to Western taxonomies, but the knowledge embedded in these specimens —knowledge about their cultural significance, ecological roles, and traditional uses— often remains invisible. This gap in classification not only distorts the historical record but also perpetuates the erasure of Indigenous epistemologies.

To address this, archivists and librarians must embrace a more flexible approach to classification. This could include incorporating Indigenous and local names, meanings, and uses into the metadata of scientific specimens. It could involve cross-referencing botanical or zoological specimens with Indigenous and local knowledge systems and oral histories. Such practices not only enrich the record but also provide a more accurate, holistic representation of the knowledge that has been transmitted through generations.

### **Practical Steps for Decolonizing Archives**

Decolonizing scientific archives is not just about adding new metadata or acknowledging omissions; it is about rethinking the entire process of knowledge production, documentation, and access. To truly restore the record, archivists and librarians must

engage with the communities from which the knowledge originated, ensuring that their voices are not only heard but integrated into the ongoing documentation process.

Decolonizing scientific archives requires addressing several key issues, starting with the need for consultation with local communities. By collaborating with Indigenous and local knowledge holders, we can ensure that their contributions are properly recognized and integrated into the archive. This collaborative process helps build a more complete record that reflects the diverse voices that shaped the knowledge we now hold.

Another important aspect is the reassessment of existing cataloguing systems. These systems, which have traditionally been built on Western epistemologies, often fail to represent the full spectrum of knowledge present in the scientific record. To decolonize the archive, these systems must be critically reviewed and adjusted to be more inclusive of diverse epistemologies, particularly Indigenous and local systems of knowledge that were historically marginalized or erased.

The process of creating collaborative archives is also crucial in moving towards a decolonized space. Archives should reflect the collaborative nature of knowledge production, where the contributions of local knowledge keepers are given equal value alongside those of the "official" scientists. This means not only acknowledging the roles of local guides and informants but also ensuring their voices are preserved in the records.

Lastly, we must address the issue of provenance and metadata. Scientific collections often carry a colonial legacy in their documentation, and it's vital to ensure that the provenance of these materials is fully documented. Metadata should reflect the colonial context in which these collections were made, acknowledging the power dynamics that shaped the creation and use of the materials. By doing so, we begin to correct the historical narrative and make the archive a more accurate reflection of the past.

## **Moving Toward a More Inclusive Archive**

The work of decolonizing scientific archives requires more than just a superficial change in how materials are catalogued or presented. It demands a fundamental shift in how we understand knowledge itself. The collaborative and often contested nature of knowledge production must be recognized for us to be able to create more inclusive archives — archives that respect all contributors and acknowledge the power dynamics that shaped the records we hold today.

As librarians, archivists, and memory workers, we have the unique opportunity —and the ethical responsibility— to transform how knowledge is documented, stored, and shared. We can contribute to the creation of an archive that is not just a reflection of history, but a space for restitution, repair, and justice.

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #04**

### **Cataloging the Reef**

#### **What Libraries Can Learn from Coral Governance**

##### **Memory Without Metadata**

In many parts of the world, coral reefs are read as libraries: This coral belonged to that ancestor, that lagoon held the memory of a ritual, and another reef would not be touched until the moon signaled the right time. There is no catalog, no barcode, no metadata schema. Yet everyone in the human communities interacting with the reefs know exactly how to read that submerged world. The sea, in that context, is not an object to be observed or a resource to be extracted — it is a living system of memory, performed and sustained through relationship.

What if librarianship had been built on this kind of logic? What would it mean to understand knowledge not as fixed information stored in institutional containers, but as relational, cyclical, and held collectively through ritual, oral transmission, and ecological intuition?

##### **The Rhythmic Governance of the Sea**

Libraries, as we know them, are not neutral spaces. They are infrastructures of epistemic authority, shaped by the conventions of print culture, colonial legacies, and literate privilege. Most of us were trained to value what is written, to trust what is fixed, and to preserve what fits predetermined criteria. But reef governance —like many traditional and local knowledge systems— operates according to a different logic. It is not grounded in permanence or universality, but in rhythm, community, and ecological responsiveness.

Across the Pacific, the Caribbean, and the Coral Triangle, systems such as *sasi* (in Maluku), *ra'ui* (in the Cook Islands), and Afro-Caribbean ceremonial practices have

governed marine conservation for generations. These were not informal customs or romanticized traditions, but structured methodologies grounded in collective observation and time-tested ecological insight. They regulated when and where to fish, which species to avoid during reproduction, and how to engage with marine territories as living entities rather than extractive zones. Importantly, these systems were enforced not through state sanctions or property rights, but through social consensus, ritual authority, and ancestral responsibility. Knowledge was transmitted not through journals or databases, but through chants, ceremonies, and intergenerational stewardship.

### **Classification as Erasure**

This mode of governance is radically different from the epistemological assumptions underpinning modern librarianship. While libraries tend to treat knowledge as discrete, ownable, and extractable, reef governance treats it as embedded, contextual, and emergent. The "archive" of the sea is not a static collection of documents, but a rhythmic system where memory is enacted in time — in seasons, in cycles, in ritual closures and reopenings. Access is not determined by credentials or infrastructure, but by community position, ethical readiness, and ecological signals.

This contrast highlights a fundamental problem with the way libraries and archives have been built: they rely on classification systems —such as Dewey Decimal, Library of Congress Subject Headings, or MARC records— that reduce the complexity of knowledge into hierarchical taxonomies shaped by Eurocentric worldviews. These systems flatten meaning, erase cultural specificity, and reframe plural ontologies through the lens of legibility, rather than respect.

Just as colonial marine science reclassified reef species and erased local names in the process, our metadata infrastructures rename and misrepresent entire knowledge systems. Local plant uses, oral cosmologies, and community memory practices are often

miscategorized or excluded entirely because they don't conform to Western notions of authorship, documentation, or evidence.

### **Epistemic Violence in the Archive**

This is not just an issue of semantics. It is an issue of epistemic violence. When libraries adopt universalist classification systems, they are not simply organizing information — they are participating in the erasure of other ways of knowing. The result is an archive that preserves certain voices while structurally silencing others. It becomes, like many marine scientific records, a memory system built on forgetting.

So what might it look like to build libraries that operate more like coral reefs — not in metaphor, but in method? Reefs are not collections in the conventional sense. They are ecosystems of interdependence, where every element is connected to the others and where the health of the whole depends on relational balance. In a reef, knowledge is not stored — it is regenerated. It is enacted in migration patterns, in seasonal fish returns, in coral spawning timed to moon cycles. It is lived, not archived.

### **Libraries that Adapt Like Reefs**

Translating this into librarianship means rethinking everything from acquisition to access. What if collections were shaped not by quantity or prestige, but by relational ethics — what the community needs, what the ecosystem allows, what the context demands? What if access policies were guided not by neutrality, but by accountability — who has the right to engage with this knowledge, and under what conditions? What if metadata systems were designed to reflect multiple ontologies, allowing for layered naming, narrative context, and cyclical associations, rather than fixed labels?

It also means accepting that not all knowledge can —or should— be digitized or stored. Just as you cannot extract a coral polyp and expect it to regenerate a reef, you cannot

isolate a chant, a plant name, or a ritual protocol and expect it to carry its full meaning outside its relational setting. Some knowledge systems require presence, participation, and reciprocity. They require trust, not just citation.

### **The Reef's Memories**

The truth is, the reef remembers. It remembers the periods of silence when no one fished. It remembers the names it was given before colonial renaming. It remembers the ceremonies that governed its rhythms and the people who respected its logic. And it also remembers the disruptions: the trawlers, the tourists, the data collectors, the zoning laws that never consulted those who knew the sea best.

As librarians, we have a choice. We can continue to build memory systems that reflect the logic of extraction and control. Or we can begin to design infrastructures of care, reciprocity, and rhythm.

And we can recognize that knowledge is not just a commodity to be preserved, but a living system to be nurtured.

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #05**

### **Broken Taxonomies**

#### **Toward a Botanical and Decolonial Librarianship**

##### **When Knowledge Is Pressed Flat**

To catalog is to frame. To label is to delimit. And to systematize is often —too often— to extract.

Herbaria are not so different from libraries. Both are memory institutions. Both preserve traces of worlds. And both operate under the guise of neutrality while enacting systems of deep epistemic control. A pressed plant is not unlike a bound book: removed from its native soil, dried, contained, classified, and stored for consultation — often by those far removed from the contexts that gave it meaning.

In librarianship, we are trained to trust classification. To believe in metadata. To structure. To order. But what if the very act of ordering is part of the violence?

##### **Metadata as Mistranslation**

In the taxonomic traditions inherited from European natural history, naming is an exercise in domination. Linnaean binomials are touted as universal — yet they silence thousands of local ontologies, each with their own systems of classification, use, and significance. When a plant known through ritual, cosmology, and relational knowledge becomes merely *Nicotiana tabacum*, we have not translated. We have amputated.

The same happens in libraries. Controlled vocabularies erase multiplicity. Subject headings reduce living knowledge to bureaucratic descriptors. A cosmology becomes "Mythology — Indigenous." A healing chant becomes "Medicine, Traditional." A territory

becomes "Developing regions." What is framed as organization is often misrepresentation. What is called legibility is frequently erasure.

Metadata —like taxonomy— is never neutral. It is always authored. And in both herbaria and libraries, that authorship has historically served colonial, extractive, and universalist agendas.

### **Annotations That Never Made It**

In the margins of scientific field notes —and in the catalog cards and MARC fields of libraries— there are absences. Ghosts of voices that were never allowed full entry. Indigenous informants appear unnamed. Ritual knowledge appears as "superstition" or disappears entirely. Multisensory, oral, and embodied epistemologies are translated into flat prose or omitted altogether.

Library science has mirrored this flattening. We privilege the written over the spoken. The codified over the performed. The fixed over the fluid. As a result, libraries —like herbaria— become archives of partial memory. What is preserved is what fits. The rest is either footnoted or forgotten.

### **The Epistemic Press**

A herbarium sheet is an infrastructure. So is a library catalog. Both shape what counts as knowledge. Both determine who gets to speak — and who is cited, indexed, retrieved, remembered.

But what if we took seriously the call to unpress these sheets? To rehydrate the stories? To rebuild taxonomies not around universality, but around relationality?

What would it mean to build library systems where a plant could be indexed not just by genus and species, but by taste, by season, by ceremony, by name-in-song? Where catalog entries could hold chants, where metadata fields could accommodate multiple cosmologies — not as add-ons, but as central structuring logics?

### **Decolonizing the Herbarium... and the Library**

Several radical projects —community archives, Indigenous cataloging initiatives, epistemic justice frameworks— are already pointing the way. But the real shift will not come from including more terms or "diversifying" authority records. It will come from dismantling the structures that require flattening in the first place.

Libraries, like scientific archives, must move from storage to stewardship. From extraction to reciprocity. From classification to relation.

That shift requires a different kind of librarian: one who listens to absences, who questions the label, who reads between the lines of what the catalog doesn't say.

### **The Language Was Never Lost**

The leaves still speak. The herbarium still remembers. And so does the library — if we are willing to unlearn how we were taught to listen.

To build a librarianship worthy of the knowledge it claims to preserve, we must first admit how much it has erased. And then, with care and courage, begin the slow, necessary work of re-annotation.

Not to "recover" the past — but to allow the future to grow in richer soil.

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #06**

### **When the Archive Doesn't Breathe**

#### **On Scent, Silence, and the Sensory Limits of Librarianship**

##### **Memory Without a Nose**

Libraries are built for paper. For text. For words on surfaces. And when they stretch, they stretch toward sound and image — podcasts, video, oral history, digitized film. But smell? Scent has no shelf. No metadata field. No preservation protocol. No classification number. Within the architecture of our institutions, it barely registers.

And so, it vanishes.

We speak of preserving knowledge, safeguarding memory, ensuring long-term access to information. But we rarely ask: what kinds of knowledge can we not even perceive? What epistemologies get left outside our collections — not because they're not valuable, but because they're not printable?

There is a bias here. A deep, sensory bias that runs beneath our entire profession. We have built literate, ocular, textual repositories to hold the world. But the world is also aromatic, fermented, breathed, and burned. And we do not know how to hold that.

##### **Cataloging Absence**

Take a ritual. A cleansing. A prayer. The leaves are listed. The words transcribed. Maybe a video is archived. But the smell of the resin? The way it coils into the room and settles in the bones? That doesn't get saved. It escapes the system.

This is not an accident. It's a design flaw — and a colonial one.

Western epistemology has long elevated what can be seen, recorded, and stabilized. The archive was born as a visual regime: paper in files, ink on parchment, type on screen. Even the "modern" embrace of sensory knowledge rarely gets beyond audio and image. Smell, touch, taste — they are treated as ephemeral, too subjective, untrustworthy.

In cataloging practices, there are no standard fields for olfactory descriptors. In metadata schemas, there are no tags for scent as knowledge. In preservation labs, there is no plan for aromatic longevity — unless it's the smell of mold, which must be eliminated. Everything that cannot be extracted, named, and stored gets marked as "not information."

We have built our systems to reflect what we already believe counts. Everything else is noise.

### **The Sanitization of the Library**

Librarianship is obsessed with cleanliness — of data, of air, of smell. The ideal reading room is silent, still, climate-controlled. Paper is protected from humidity, bodies from sweat, collections from time. But this impulse toward sterility has epistemic consequences. It conditions us to distrust what is volatile, fugitive, or difficult to standardize.

In many Indigenous and rural knowledge systems, scent is not decorative. It is diagnostic. Ritual. Communicative. The smell of a plant, the fermentation of a drink, the smoke of a ceremony — these are not atmosphere. They are archive.

To erase them is not just to lose a detail. It is to sever the logic that connects knowledge to breath, body, and place. It is to render illegible a whole category of memory practice — and then to pretend it never existed.

## **Can a Library Learn to Smell?**

What would it mean for libraries to reckon with scent?

Not just by hosting exhibits on "aromatic plants" or placing scratch-and-sniff panels on the wall. But by treating smell as epistemic infrastructure. As something that carries memory and meaning in its own right — volatile, yes, but no less real.

Could we catalog scent as presence? Include olfactory notes in field recordings, community archives, food histories, rituals, and ethnographies? Could we document the smell of land after rain, of ancestral remedies, of burned offerings? Not perfectly. Not permanently. But intentionally.

Could a metadata schema evolve to hold a note that says "this plant smelled like sweat"? Could a collection development policy make space for fermented knowledge, for the invisible cloud that once surrounded an object?

Could a library... breathe?

## **Toward a Sensory Ethics of Memory Work**

When we dismiss smell as too unstable to be archived, we are not just making a technical decision. We are continuing a historical one — the same logic that marked Indigenous practices as superstition, that sanitized ceremonial spaces, that replaced the scent of the healer's room with antiseptic glare.

To expand our memory work is not just to include "more voices." It is to include more senses. To acknowledge that some forms of knowledge cannot be fully represented — and that our job is not to force them to fit, but to make space for their difference. To learn to dwell in what escapes us.

Not all archives can be touched. Some can only be inhaled. And when we lose those? When the land no longer smells like itself? When the palosanto wood no longer burns in the ritual? When no one remembers the scent that meant "healing" or "mourning" or "home"?

That, too, is a form of memory loss. And we ought to call it by its name.

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #07**

### **When a Tool Is a Document**

#### **On Libraries, Material Literacy, and the Epistemology of Craft**

#### **The Archives We Can't Read**

Libraries, archives, and museums have long privileged knowledge that can be written, recorded, or visually fixed. Their infrastructures are built around inscription and stabilization — designed to preserve that which can be stored and retrieved through text, image, or sound.

But there exists a class of knowledge that resists this capture: the one embedded in material practice. These are not inert objects but tools — artifacts designed not only to act, but to think with. They hold hypotheses, encode ecological insight, structure relationships, and transmit intergenerational practice.

In many Indigenous, rural, and local epistemic systems, tools are more than means to an end. A net is not simply for fishing; it's a working model of local taxonomy and hydrodynamics. A trap is behavioral logic in form. A paddle is a kinetic philosophy. These tools are not symbols, but literacies — functional epistemic devices expressed through form, use, and adaptation.

They are archives that live. Their knowledge is enacted, not described. And yet our institutions, grounded in literate epistemologies, lack the frameworks to recognize or preserve them as such. The knowledge they carry remains unread — not because it is obscure, but because we have not learned to read with our hands.

## **Literate Bias and the Epistemic Frame**

Modern librarianship assumes that knowledge can be transcribed, stored, and classified. But this belief is not epistemically neutral. It reflects a specific worldview: that knowledge is stable, universalizable, and best managed through text-based abstraction.

This model privileges semantic fixity over embodied variation. Within it, knowledge becomes that which can be extracted and made legible through standardized vocabularies. But tools resist that logic. They don't describe knowledge — they perform it. Their grammar is procedural, their meaning contingent on skilled use.

As such, they fall outside our metadata schemas. Lacking inscription, they are often cataloged as mere objects — illustrative, not epistemic. The result is not just misclassification. It is an epistemological failure: a blindness to forms of knowing that exceed inscription.

## **A Basket Is Not Just a Basket**

Take the example of a fishing basket, accessioned into a museum collection. It may be described as "woven basket; palm fiber; used for fish capture; Colombia; c.1900." Nothing in this description is false — yet everything that matters is missing.

The spacing of the weave, the selection of fiber, the timing of harvest, the species of fish targeted — each encodes sophisticated ecological knowledge. But none of this fits institutional metadata fields. There is no place for the ethics of seasonal gathering, the role of gendered labor, or the cosmological resonance of the design.

So what enters the archive is not a knowledge system, but a shell. We extract the basket from its world of relations and render it mute. Its knowledge is not lost — but we have built no systems capable of hearing it.

## **Tools as Grammar, Not Illustration**

In dominant academic paradigms, tools are treated as outputs of thought, not sites of thinking themselves. But in many Indigenous, rural, and local systems, tools are arguments in material form. A net, a trap, a paddle — these are epistemic propositions. They encode environmental prediction, mediate ethical relations, and carry theory across generations.

Crucially, they are pedagogical. A child learns not through textual instruction, but by watching her grandmother split reeds, weave patterns, and test resilience. This is learning through material engagement — situated, sensorial, and precise. It is no less rigorous for being embodied.

Yet our institutional infrastructure cannot hold this kind of rigor. Our metadata lacks space for procedural knowledge. A seed sorter may be a taxonomic system; a blowpipe, an ethical proposition. But we have no way to describe them as such. Entire epistemologies remain invisible — not because they are gone, but because we've never learned to name them.

## **Preservation Is Not Understanding**

Preservation is often framed as a technical process: ensuring physical or digital survival. But when the tool is the knowledge, survival of form is insufficient. To preserve a paddle without preserving the movement, the relation, the ritual — is to stabilize the husk and lose the grammar.

A mounted net, no longer in use, becomes epistemically frozen. What we preserve may endure materially, but its meaning vanishes if severed from use. In these cases, preservation becomes a kind of silencing.

True preservation means sustaining practice: enabling the gestures, communities, and contexts that give meaning to the form. It demands recognition of tools as knowledge-bearing agents, not inert residues.

### **Repair as Continuity**

In many Indigenous traditions, repair is not degradation — it is knowledge in motion. To mend a tool is to reaffirm its logic, adapt it to present needs, and extend its teaching life. Each fix encodes new insight: about material shifts, environmental change, or social transformation.

By contrast, institutional preservation treats repair as contamination. Once accessioned, objects are frozen. To intervene is to compromise "authenticity." But this reverses the logic of living knowledge. A tool that cannot be repaired is one that can no longer teach.

When institutions deny the legitimacy of repair, they deny the epistemic systems that rely on it. They conserve the shell while allowing the theory to disappear.

### **Can a Library Learn to Hold Tools as Documents?**

To take tools seriously as epistemic forms requires rethinking our infrastructures. Classification systems, descriptive vocabularies, metadata schemas — all must shift from abstraction to relation, from fixity to practice.

This means developing frameworks that can hold procedural, contingent, and nontextual knowledge. It means building space for annotation, community correction, layered commentary, and performative reenactment.

Above all, it requires epistemic humility: the recognition that categories like "document," "record," or "resource" are not universal. They are products of literate

traditions. In other systems, the archive is not a shelf but a gesture. Not a page, but a hand in motion.

### **Memory Beyond the Page**

This is not about representational diversity — adding more "cultural" objects to our collections. It is about epistemic justice: the right of knowledge systems to be preserved on their own terms.

Tools are not curiosities. They are philosophies in form — expressing theories of ecology, seasonality, material ethics, and relational sufficiency. To mistake them for artifacts is to erase the thinking they contain.

Until we learn to read a basket as a text, a trap as a proposition, a paddle as a grammar, we will keep walking past living archives — not because they are gone, but because we have not learned to see.

## The Taxonomy of Absence #08

### When Memory Lives

#### On Living Archives, Community Sovereignty, and the Limits of Archival Logic

#### Rethinking the Foundations of the Archive

Modern archival infrastructure has been built around certain epistemic assumptions: that knowledge is best stabilized through inscription; that memory requires fixity to endure; that authority is derived from provenance, completeness, and retrievability. These assumptions are rarely questioned, yet they underpin most of what memory institutions do — from classification and metadata design to digitization and preservation.

They also delimit what counts as an archive. Objects that cannot be filed, texts that cannot be fixed, and systems that resist standardization tend to be excluded — or else domesticated into forms that fit institutional protocols. What results is a narrowed view of memory — one that privileges the document over the gesture, the record over the relationship, and the frozen artifact over the living process.

But across many Indigenous, rural, and community contexts, archives do not behave this way. They are not places or platforms. They are systems of embodied memory that operate through repetition, performance, reciprocity, and responsiveness. They are what might be called *living archives* — not metaphorically, but functionally.

#### Living Archives as Memory Infrastructure

A living archive is not defined by shelves or servers, but by circulation and enactment. Knowledge is not stored; it is activated under the right conditions — a chant sung at a specific moon phase, a medicinal recipe shared in the presence of a particular tree, a

story told only during mourning. These are not "oral traditions" in the folkloric sense. They are procedural protocols for knowledge governance.

In such systems, memory is not passive. It is situational, embodied, and negotiated. The archive is not a container but a choreography. Authority does not come from documentation but from alignment: between the teller and the told, the season and the practice, the speaker and the land.

There is no fixed version — only contingent instantiations. Each act of remembering is a renewal of memory, not a retrieval of it. In this model, the binary between record and use collapses. Knowledge survives not by being stabilized but by being made relevant again and again.

### **Why Archival Standards Fall Short**

Conventional archival tools — taxonomies, metadata schemas, descriptive standards— are largely unequipped to accommodate such epistemologies. These tools are built on the idea that knowledge can be separated from context and made legible through standardized terms.

But living archives resist that abstraction.

They depend on *relational indexing*: knowing who told the story, when, where, why, and under what ethical or cosmological terms it can be shared. These dimensions cannot be captured by MARC fields or Dublin Core elements. And they cannot be forced into ISO categories without collapsing the logic that sustains them.

Attempts to do so — however well-meaning— often reproduce extractive structures: converting living memory into "resources," reformatting community protocols into datasets, and subjecting dynamic practices to static preservation logic.

The problem is not technological. It is epistemological.

### **The Politics of Memory Infrastructure**

Living archives challenge not only the tools of the profession, but its power structures. Who gets to define what counts as knowledge? Who controls access? Who decides when a memory is valid, and in what form?

These questions require a shift from custodianship to *co-stewardship*. Memory institutions cannot continue to hold unilateral authority over classification, framing, and access policy. Community memory systems are not incomplete versions of institutional archives — they are autonomous infrastructures with their own logics of legitimacy.

Recognizing this means relinquishing control. It means accepting archival authority as relational rather than custodial — negotiated through trust, reciprocity, and mutual intelligibility. It also means allowing knowledge to remain partial, contingent, and sometimes opaque — not because it is deficient, but because that opacity is part of its ethical structure.

### **Preservation Without Freezing**

Preservation has long been framed as the prevention of loss. But in living archives, memory is not preserved by freezing it in place. It is preserved by keeping it usable, meaningful, and aligned with the community's present. Continuity is maintained not through stability, but through responsiveness.

This demands new preservation models: ones that allow for re-annotation, reinterpretation, seasonal variation, and situated correction. Instead of privileging a definitive version, these models recognize memory as layered and iterative — shaped by shifting relationships and evolving conditions.

Preserving a chant means preserving the conditions under which it can be sung. Preserving a ritual means preserving the social and ecological relationships that give it coherence. Without these, what remains is not memory — it is artifact without function.

### **Learning to Move With the Archive**

The challenge for memory professionals is not to expand their categories or digitize more comprehensively. It is to reorient their frameworks. To accept that not all knowledge systems aspire to inscription. That some archives breathe, adapt, and refuse to stand still. And that these forms of memory do not need institutional validation to be legitimate — only space, respect, and the right to remain in motion.

A library or archive committed to epistemic justice must be able to support memory systems that do not look like its own. It must learn to move — not to mimic the forms of living archives, but to hold space for their difference. To design infrastructures that are flexible, relational, and accountable to the communities they serve.

Ultimately, the future of archives will not be built solely through protocols or platforms. It will be built through humility — and through partnerships with those who have kept knowledge alive without needing to be remembered by us.

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #09**

### **To Curate Is to Govern**

#### **Biodiversity Archives and the Politics of Epistemic Territory**

##### **Archival Infrastructure as Territorial Technology**

In the age of global conservation, biodiversity archives have become crucial instruments for organizing ecological knowledge. But beneath their technical veneer lies a deeper function: governance. Archives do not merely record species — they enact jurisdiction. They decide which knowledges count, under what terms they circulate, and who gains the authority to speak for life on Earth. In this sense, to curate biodiversity is to govern it.

While this has long been true of colonial-era cabinets and herbaria, today's infrastructure —digital, distributed, and metadata-driven— is more insidious. It operates under the guise of neutrality, often obscuring its entanglement with political economies, funding regimes, and institutional control. Librarians, archivists, and data stewards are not external to this dynamic. We are its facilitators.

Or its saboteurs.

##### **The Long Archive of Extraction**

The (colonial) archive of nature (and of everything else, actually) did not begin with spreadsheets. It began with voyages. With pressed specimens, numbered notebooks, and the taxonomic dreams of empire. From Carl Linnaeus to Joseph Banks, classification served a clear purpose: to translate unfamiliar ecologies (and epistemologies) into manageable, nameable, ownable forms. The archive was a way of enclosing the wild — of making it legible for extraction.

Modern biodiversity databases continue this trajectory. Platforms like GBIF (Global Biodiversity Information Facility) or iDigBio aggregate millions of records: names, coordinates, collection dates, institutional codes. The architecture is distributed, but the logic is centralized. Knowledge flows upward. Metadata standards — Darwin Core, ABCD, TDWG vocabularies— become the lingua franca of global interoperability.

What is obscured is how these systems disembed knowledge from its original ecological, cultural, and epistemic contexts. The archive no longer looks like a glass cabinet. But its function remains enclosure. It governs with the same imperatives: stabilize, sort, extract, control, translate.

### **Standardization and the Suppression of Plural Ontologies**

Standardization is the foundation of modern archival practice. It enables integration, cross-referencing, and reuse. But it also imposes a single epistemic frame.

In biodiversity curation, for example, standardization flattens ontological diversity. It converts seasonal, spiritual, or kin-based taxonomies into static morphological descriptors. A plant known locally as a "rain-bringer," used only in ritual after the second full moon of the rainy season, becomes a simple Latin binomial. Its metadata may be specimen number, herbarium code, or GPS point. Nothing of its original meaning remains.

This is not accidental. As Bowker and Star noted in *Sorting Things Out*, classification systems encode the priorities of the institutions that build them. What cannot be sorted gets left out. And what gets left out cannot be governed — at least not on its own terms.

This is not merely an issue of "cultural sensitivity." It is a form of epistemic suppression. Ontologies that center relation, obligation, or cosmology are not merely different

worldviews: they are different worlds. And they cannot be mapped through Darwin Core fields.

### **Participation Without Power: The Crisis of Co-Curation**

Faced with critiques of top-down, vertical science, many institutions now promote "participatory", horizontal approaches: citizen science, community monitoring, or Indigenous observation networks. These are often framed as inclusive innovations: ways of democratizing data collection.

But participation without control is not co-curation. It is *epistemic laundering*.

In most cases, local actors feed observations into centralized platforms. But the interpretive architecture remains untouched. Categories are fixed. Vocabularies are locked. Communities may collect data, but they do not define what counts as data, or what meanings it is allowed to carry.

This asymmetry is rarely acknowledged. Participation is measured by metrics — number of contributors, volume of data points— not by authority over framing. Yet framing is where meaning is made. And meaning is what determines ecological policy, funding priorities, and legal designations.

In biodiversity governance (but not only), the power to name is the power to act. Without that power, participation becomes a mechanism for extracting local knowledge under the illusion of collaboration.

### **Curation as a Sovereign Act**

In institutional contexts, curation is often defined as a technical practice: metadata assignment, digital preservation, quality control.

But in community contexts, curation is a sovereign act. It is the process through which a group determines how its knowledge is stored, activated, and transformed across generations.

Such curation does not aim for universal legibility. It aims for continuity. It is embedded in responsibility, not interoperability. And it often resists the logics of acceleration, openness, and permanent availability that define platform-based infrastructures.

To curate, in this context, is not to digitize. It is to decide what may be shared, when, with whom, and why. It is to hold knowledge in trust. Sometimes through silence. Sometimes through opacity. Sometimes through refusal.

This mode of curation cannot be always outsourced. It cannot be always captured by controlled vocabularies or metadata schemas. It requires librarians and archivists to relinquish their role as custodians and adopt a different posture: that of relational stewards operating under epistemic consent.

### **The Archive as Biopolitical Border**

The archive is often treated as a neutral space: a storehouse, a repository, a memory aid. But it is, in fact, a biopolitical machine.

The categories it establishes in terms of biodiversity —endangered, invasive, endemic— are not mere descriptions. They are designations that affect land use policy, conservation funding, and bioprospecting permissions. They draw lines between life that must be protected and life that must be managed. Or extinguished.

Same thing with other areas and epistemes beyond biodiversity.

As Achille Mbembe has argued, modern regimes of power operate through the differential valuation of life. Archives actively participate in this process. They determine which species knowledges, and memories matter, which spaces merit preservation, and which information is admissible in policy discourse.

These decisions are rarely framed as political. But they are. They shape social, cultural, and territorial futures. And they do so through the backend architecture of metadata, not the front-facing rhetoric of inclusion.

Those managing knowledge, memory and biodiversity repositories must confront this reality. We are not just facilitating access. We are helping to draw the borders of the ecological and epistemic world — and deciding who gets to cross them.

### **Toward a Counter-Archival Practice**

If curation is governance, then *counter-curation* is resistance. And it must begin with a rejection of infrastructural inevitability.

There is nothing natural about the current architecture of data (including biodiversity data). It reflects decisions —epistemic, political, and technical— made by institutions with specific agendas. Challenging these structures requires more than critique; it demands the articulation of fundamentally different archival practices.

This means recognizing plural ontologies not as supplemental "local knowledge fields," but as legitimate organizing principles in their own right. It means developing *relational indexing* models where authority is distributed, and where knowledge is always contextualized by its conditions of use. It requires abandoning the fetish for clean, decontextualized data, and instead embracing forms of documentation that are layered, partial, iterative, and accountable to their origins — even when they resist coherence.

And it entails designing archival infrastructures that make space for refusal: where communities can withhold, redact, reframe, or silence their data on their own terms.

None of this is about making existing systems more inclusive. It is about enabling different systems, governed by different logics, serving different ends.

### **If You Cannot Surrender Control, You Are Not a Steward**

The work of librarianship cannot be reduced to information management. It is a political, ethical, and ontological responsibility. If we accept that libraries, archives, and museums (among others) structure the future —that they determine what life is seen, protected, and acted upon— then our metadata fields, taxonomies, and cataloging choices are acts of worldmaking.

And if we are serious about epistemic justice, we must ask ourselves: Whose world are we making?

Curation is not neutral. To curate is to govern. And if we cannot surrender control over the knowledge we hold —to those who live it, carry it, and care for it— then we are not stewards.

We are simple administrators (and accomplices) of extraction.

## The Taxonomy of Absence #10

### Libraries of Echoes, Archives of Silences

#### Reimagining Memory Through Sound

##### Resonance, Not Emptiness

Libraries (but also archives and museums) have long been imagined as temples of silence: places where texts could be read, studied, and controlled in quiet.

That silence, however, was never neutral. It was the acoustic correlate of dominant *literocentrism* — the one designed to privilege reading and writing, and to make the printed page the only valid vehicle of knowledge.

But sounds are documents. And libraries (and associates) can no longer remain mute. They must become *polyphonic commons* — spaces where resonance is curated, layered, and restituted. Not "listening booths" hidden in a corner, but resonance chambers at the institutional core, where visitors immerse themselves in forest soundscapes, urban noise histories, or ritual chants under community-defined protocols. In such a model, libraries and others cease to be guardians of silent texts and become mediators of auditory memory — places where listening itself is recognized as a way of knowing.

Resonance is always braided with silence. A pause in ritual, the disappearance of a cicada from the dawn chorus, the sudden hush in a marketplace — all of these are documents too, charged with meaning. To recognize the sonic archive is also to recognize that silences are never empty: they are presences, relations, and warnings that must be read — or better, listened to — on their own terms.

But when the door is open to resonances and silences, the next question follows immediately: how does librarianship (and other disciplines of knowledge and memory) handle such sounds once they enter its systems?

## **Metadata, Violence, and Care**

The answer is troubling. Once captured, sound is usually reduced to metrics: frequency, duration, amplitude. Librarianship has inherited and reproduced this "violence". MARC fields, Dublin Core elements, MODS descriptors — all flatten sonic memory into format, carrier, and subject headings. The richness of a chant, a frog call, a grandmother's gossip, or the steps in a procession collapses into a handful of technical parameters.

A critical librarianship must resist this flattening by creating *layered sonic metadata*: descriptors that register, among others, a sound's role (omen, treaty, alarm, joke), its cosmological significance if any, the conditions of its activation, or the permissions required for its circulation. Cataloging ceases to be a neutral, technical task and becomes a political act — a declaration of solidarity with the communities that generate sonic knowledge.

Yet description alone is insufficient. Opacity must also be normalized. Open access — one of the most cherished values of LIS— cannot be applied uncritically. Some sounds must remain restricted, inaudible, or ephemeral. This is not censorship but *acoustic sovereignty*: the right of communities and territories to govern their own soundscapes. A future catalog would therefore embed not only access points but also ethical rationales for non-access. Silence, too, must be indexed.

If metadata can wound, then infrastructures built upon it must be rethought. Catalogs and servers are not neutral containers — they decide how resonances and silences circulates, who hears, and who is silenced.

## **Decolonial Sonic Infrastructures**

The colonial archive extracted sounds and recoded them in northern vaults. A decolonial librarianship must therefore imagine infrastructures that remain with the territory. This

means decentralized repositories that are managed locally rather than by remote global servers; participatory cataloging processes that are shaped by the categories of listening defined with knowledge holders; or hybrid systems capable of holding together different epistemic logics —bioacoustic data, ritual protocols, ecological calendars— without collapsing them into a single universal frame.

The outcome is not a bibliographic record but an acoustic map — a relational constellation linking ecological, social, and ethical contexts. Users navigate not by author-title-subject but by echo, timbre, or silence, discovering knowledge as a web of resonances rather than as isolated objects.

But infrastructures are never only technical. They materialize in institutions. To imagine their implications, we must ask: what might a library or a museum look like if it truly listened?

### **Libraries as Sonic Laboratories**

Those knowledge & memory institutions that decide to listen would not restrict themselves to preservation. They would become sonic laboratories: community-controlled spaces where listening is method. These labs might reconstruct disappearing sound textures, design participatory soundwalks, keep alive the noise of a marketplace, or reconstitute archival fragments that were stolen or silenced.

Parallel to this, museums might evolve into museums of events rather than museums of objects. Instead of vitrines, carefully curated soundscapes would envelop visitors: the murmurs of an ecosystem, the echoes of a protest, the pulse of a festival, the softness of a whispered confession. Authority shifts accordingly: curators cease to explain objects and begin to mediate listening protocols established by the communities of origin.

And yet, even these reimagined institutions risk reproducing the archival obsession with permanence. To go further, librarianship must confront the unthinkable: that some sounds should never be archived at all.

### **Archives That Refuse Capture**

One of the most radical challenges to archival imagination is the recognition that certain sounds are not meant to be stored. A future LIS must embrace opacity and *curated impermanence*: records that expire after a time, vanish entirely, or reappear only in ritual contexts.

This proposal strikes at the core of archival ideology. It suggests that value may lie not in endless preservation but in *responsible disappearance and incompleteness* — a refusal to strip sonic memory of its temporal, situated character. Silence here is not the residue of what was lost but the form in which some knowledge insists on being remembered. By institutionalizing impermanence, libraries and archives would accept that listening is not only about capture but also about letting go.

Such a refusal does not weaken librarianship; it transforms it. If memory can include absence, then the profession itself must change its ethics and its identity.

### **Toward a Librarianship of Echoes**

The future library will not only manage "big data" but also big resonance: ecological recordings, citizen audio diaries, machine-listening archives. But unlike raw data lakes, these sonic collections must be structured around vibrational relations, and around care: deciding which sounds circulate, which remain opaque, and which must vanish.

This requires a new professional identity. Librarians cannot remain mere catalogers or technologists. They must become *resonance mediators*: stewards of sonic ecologies,

guardians of opacity, facilitators of echo. Their task is not completeness but responsible incompleteness — ensuring that sonic memory reverberates ethically across generations, without severing its ties to place, protocol, or silence.

In the end, to speak of libraries of echoes and archives of silences is not a metaphor but a design principle. Echoes remind us that knowledge travels, mutates, and resounds beyond its point of origin. Silences remind us that some knowledge survives precisely by withholding itself. Together they sketch the contours of an institution no longer built on the page alone, but on the vibrational, ephemeral, and relational substance of memory itself.

## **The Taxonomy of Absence #11**

### **From Growth to Degrowth**

#### **Rethinking Libraries and Archives as Ecological Infrastructures**

##### **Introduction**

For more than a century, growth has functioned as both a metric of success and a guiding ethos in Library and Information Science (LIS). Institutions have measured their prestige by the size of their collections, the scale of their facilities, and the sophistication of their technological infrastructures. Expansion has been synonymous with progress, signaling professional achievement and institutional relevance. Yet in the context of climate crisis and resource scarcity, this growth paradigm raises pressing questions about sustainability. The energy-intensive and resource-heavy infrastructures of libraries and archives cannot remain detached from the ecological realities that define the present century.

This post argues for the introduction of *degrowth epistemologies* into LIS discourse. Degrowth, a framework emerging from ecological economics and critical social theory, does not denote decline but proposes alternative measures of value based on sufficiency, repair, and resilience. By reorienting library and archival practices away from accumulation and toward ecological integration, LIS can begin to address both its material dependencies and its broader social responsibilities.

##### **The Growth Imperative in LIS**

The imperative of growth has deep roots in LIS history. From the Carnegie-funded public libraries of the early twentieth century to the construction of vast archival repositories, professional identity has often been tied to accumulation. Collection size, measured in linear meters or digital terabytes, has served as a primary indicator of institutional worth.

Similarly, the construction of large-scale, climate-controlled facilities has symbolized professional modernity and authority.

However, these growth-oriented models come at significant ecological cost. Expanding collections require increasingly energy-intensive preservation strategies, from high-capacity HVAC systems to specialized digital storage servers. The global supply chains that support these technologies are vulnerable to disruption and often rely on extractive industries. In a period of escalating climate instability, these infrastructures risk becoming both unsustainable and inequitable.

### **Degrowth as a Framework for LIS**

Degrowth offers an alternative framework that challenges the centrality of accumulation. In ecological thought, degrowth emphasizes sufficiency over excess, repair over replacement, and adaptability over standardization. Translated into LIS, these principles suggest that professional success might be measured not by growth in holdings or square footage, but by the institution's ability to remain materially sustainable and socially relevant under ecological constraint.

Unlike "efficiency" discourses, which often frame sustainability as a technical optimization within existing systems, degrowth calls for a redefinition of institutional goals. It asks not how libraries and archives can grow more sustainably, but whether growth itself should remain the central objective. This shift reframes the LIS field within broader ecological and political struggles, positioning knowledge and memory work as part of the infrastructures that sustain life rather than as neutral containers of information.

### **Real-World Examples of Degrowth**

Although still emergent, several initiatives illustrate how degrowth principles are already shaping library and archival practice.

One example is the Anythink Library District in Colorado (USA), which has incorporated LEED-certified facilities designed with renewable energy systems and locally sourced materials. While embedded in a growth-oriented economy, Anythink's design demonstrates how ecological considerations can reshape institutional form, privileging sufficiency and reduced environmental impact.

In professional discourse, the recognition that "degrowth is coming" is slowly entered mainstream LIS debates. I published a 2023 text in *American Libraries Magazine* where I explicitly argued that libraries must begin planning for scenarios of reduced energy availability and scaled-back operations. Such reflections propose new evaluative criteria, suggesting that resilience and ecological responsibility should replace collection size or service expansion as dominant metrics of institutional achievement.

At the international level, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has engaged directly with degrowth in its sessions on environmental sustainability. Drawing on Indigenous methodologies and "true cost accounting," these discussions highlight the need for libraries to measure their ecological and social impact alongside conventional bibliometric indicators. Such interventions represent important steps toward embedding ecological accountability within professional standards.

### **Localism, Commoning, and Library Practices**

Degrowth theory emphasizes localism and commoning as strategies for reducing dependence on extractive systems. Applied to LIS, these principles suggest a shift from centralized accumulation toward distributed, community-rooted practices.

One manifestation of this approach can be observed in the proliferation of Little Free Libraries across diverse regions. While modest in scale, these community-driven initiatives embody principles of sufficiency, circulation, and shared stewardship. They challenge the idea that legitimate library work must always be large, centralized, and professionally administered.

At a more formal level, libraries that experiment with localized service provision — through resource-sharing consortia, community archives, or participatory governance structures— illustrate how LIS can adopt models of open localism. These approaches reduce dependence on long supply chains and reinforce the resilience of local knowledge infrastructures.

### **Collections Reconsidered: Sufficiency and Relevance**

Rethinking growth also requires reconsidering what it means to build collections. Traditional models often valorize expansion without sufficient regard for ecological cost or long-term relevance. A degrowth perspective suggests privileging sufficiency and contextual relevance over accumulation.

This entails curating collections that directly support ecological resilience and local knowledge practices, rather than indiscriminately expanding holdings. It also requires rethinking metadata and classification systems to adequately represent temporality, seasonality, and relational knowledge forms. Such adjustments move LIS toward a practice that values depth and context, rather than scale, as indicators of professional success.

### **Repair, Maintenance, and Resilience in LIS**

Degrowth prioritizes cultures of maintenance and repair. For LIS, this implies a professional identity centered not on continuous expansion but on sustaining

infrastructures over time. Staff roles could shift toward caretaking functions: repairing digital repositories, maintaining community archives, and ensuring that existing collections remain accessible and usable under ecological constraint.

This orientation also foregrounds resilience as a key professional value. Rather than striving for permanent preservation through resource-intensive means, institutions might emphasize adaptive strategies that accept impermanence, redundancy, and repair as integral to archival and library practice.

### **Implications for LIS Theory, Education, and Policy**

Embedding degrowth into LIS has significant implications for theory, education, and policy. Conceptually, it reframes libraries and archives as ecological infrastructures, inseparable from the material conditions in which they operate. Professionally, it suggests new metrics of success: for example, carbon footprint reduction, community integration, and resilience to disruption.

For LIS education, this requires integrating *ecological literacy* and degrowth frameworks into curricula, preparing future professionals to manage institutions under conditions of scarcity rather than abundance. For policy, it calls for standards that account not only for informational value but also for ecological responsibility and social justice.

### **Conclusion**

The growth paradigm has long shaped the trajectory of LIS, but it is increasingly unsustainable in the context of ecological crisis. Degrowth offers an alternative: a framework that prioritizes sufficiency, repair, and resilience over accumulation and expansion.

By reorienting their infrastructures, collections, and professional practices around ecological responsibility, libraries and archives can redefine their role for the twenty-first century. They need not be measured by quantitative parameters, but by their capacity to sustain communities, support local knowledge practices, and remain viable under ecological constraint.

In this sense, libraries and archives become spaces of care — ecological, social, and political actors embedded in the struggles that will define the future of knowledge and memory.