

Spoken Word, Woven Word, Word Made Gesture: Other Supports in Libraries

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Summary

In a world where books have traditionally been considered the hegemonic support of knowledge and memory, it is urgent to question, decolonize, and open doors to other forms of transmitting and preserving knowledge and memories. This conference explores orality, graphic and visual documents, three-dimensional artifacts, and bodily gestures and discourses as legitimate supports of knowledge in libraries (and similar spaces), challenging established models and revealing the voices and narratives marginalized by cultural colonialism. It presents these forms as possible tools for collective and identity-based resistance. The goal of this talk is to invite a reflection on libraries (and archives and museums...) as spaces where not only written or printed words are handled but also sounds, artifacts, corporealities, and other (im)possible and (im)probable formats. Libraries that transform themselves into an act of rebellion, or a small trench where gestures, songs, stories, ceramics, weavings, or graffiti regain their value as tools of memory, and where decolonization is not just a discourse but an active practice.

Introduction

Challenging the Book as the Hegemonic Support

Why is the book considered the preferred —and even the legitimate— medium to preserve knowledge and memory? This question invites us to reflect on how the history of the book can be understood as a history of colonialism and exclusion. Over time, for reasons tied to elitism, literacy skills, the interests of the hegemonic powers of the moment, the control of discourse and narrative (and information and memory, which have always been synonymous with power), the policies of knowledge production and dissemination, and the often-nationalist processes of education, socialization, and acculturation, the book has been imposed and shown as the dominant / preferred object

for transmitting knowledge. Reading has become the dominant / preferred process for acquiring knowledge, silencing and rendering invisible other forms of expression and transmission.

This imposition is an exercise of power, a cultural imposition that determines which voices are heard and which remain in a sort of "limbo." The challenge lies in questioning the logic of these traditional supports (writing, printed documents, academic content, prestigious publishers, official discourses in dominant languages) and opening new and critical spaces to elaborate an epistemological reconfiguration that embraces diverse forms of transmission — forms that transcend print.

As the hegemony of the book is questioned, a fundamental question arises: in a world where the written word has monopolized not only knowledge but also the ways in which we remember, how many other sensory, oral, and material memories have we forgotten, scorned, or discarded? What forms of knowledge and memory have been, and continue to be, left out of traditional / hegemonic / standard libraries and archives simply because they don't fit the paradigm of the book or the written / printed contents?

This questioning not only challenges the preeminence of the written document, but also invites us to rethink the very concept of the library itself.

Let us then imagine a library as a physical or virtual space where communities can encounter their knowledge and memories in any format, in any language, of any type. A dynamic and critical space capable of housing and preserving not only printed words but also voices, sounds, textures, three-dimensional objects, corporealities, and movements. A space that revalues non-textual forms of knowledge — those that have traditionally been relegated to the margins.

In this way, the value of what is considered "marginal" is reclaimed: those things that have been left out of focus (and of policies and social, educational, and academic processes) by hegemonic narratives, as a potent tool for identity construction and ultimately for cultural resistance. Recovering these "peripheral" knowledges and memories —ways of saying, thinking, and doing— is not only an act of recognition but also of subversion against a system that has dictated what should be remembered and what can be forgotten.

This rethinking of the supports for knowledge has profound implications. It invites us not only to consider other forms of knowledge and memory management spaces (libraries,

but also archives, museums, documentation centers, community spaces, houses of knowledge...) but also to imagine alternative futures where the plurality of voices and experiences is kept alive in a multiplicity of formats and channels. In this sense, libraries must transform into dynamic knowledge nodes capable of adapting daily to new realities, reflecting the diversity of epistemic experiences that exist in our societies, and using all of this to promote social change.

Part 1

Orality as the Beginning of the Revolt

Orality emerges as the first and most fundamental support of human knowledge — a tradition that precedes writing and has been historically delegitimized.

From the earliest moments of humanity to our hyper-connected and digital present, oral transmission has been the primary vehicle for sharing knowledge, narratives, and collective memories. Yet the spoken word, precisely because of its "ephemeral" and "mutable" nature (and therefore "subjective" and "unreliable"), has been viewed with disdain by cultures that value the permanence of printed text over the fluidity of the voice. This disdain is not neutral; it is the result of colonial and cultural processes that imposed the supremacy of writing as the only valid form of knowledge, delegitimizing and even nullifying the rich oral traditions that were forcibly relegated to the margins.

In the context of colonialism, orality was relegated to the realm of the archaic, the primitive, as if it were a form of communication incapable of competing with the rigor and stability of writing. This displacement is, in fact, a form of epistemic violence — a socio-political and cultural imposition that denies the value of spoken memories and knowledge, subordinating non-written traditions to the dominance of colonizing cultures. Recognizing this act of exclusion is fundamental to understanding the deep marginalization of the spoken word and its impact on communities that have relied on the voice to keep their histories and knowledge alive.

Despite such imposed delegitimization, countless communities —even the most urban, "developed," and dominant ones— have preserved their knowledge and memories through orality, challenging the power structures that attempt to silence them. From the oral traditions of indigenous peoples, which transmit worldviews, genealogies, and knowledge of nature, to contemporary social movements where spoken discourse becomes a weapon of resistance and social transformation, the non-written word remains a bastion of living memory. These examples serve as powerful reminders that

orality is not only a form of communication but also an act of resistance against the hegemony of written text and official discourse.

The shout that reverberates in a marketplace, the whispered confession in the corner of a bar, the story told in the intimacy of a conversation — all these forms are manifestations of a memory that beats, that breathes, that refuses to be encapsulated on a page. They are in themselves forms of knowledge that intertwine with emotions, bodies, and spaces. Their systematic exclusion from knowledge institutions constitutes an epistemic violence that must be confronted. Every time a library closes its doors to these voices, it perpetuates a form of silencing that impacts not only cultural diversity but also the integrity and diversity of collective memory.

Reinforcing the legitimacy of orality does not simply mean creating audiobook collections or voice archives, although those are important steps. It means that libraries must reconfigure themselves as spaces where the spoken word and live storytelling hold a place as central as printed books. These spaces can become settings for storytelling, oral discussion, and community building through dialogue. In them, oral memory will not only be preserved but will flourish, demonstrating that the voice, in its immediacy and fragility, is an indispensable tool for knowledge.

This rescue of orality as a legitimate support is not just an act of epistemic justice and cultural equity; it is an invitation to rethink what we understand by knowledge and memory. It leads us to recognize that libraries, in their most radical form, should be spaces where all forms of knowledge transmission coexist and where the written and the spoken words are intertwined in a continuous dialogue that enriches our understanding of the world — and ourselves.

Part 2

The Gesture as Archive

The human body is, in its essence, a living support for memory — a moving archive that records and transmits knowledge not only through words but through gestures, postures, and actions. Memory is not limited to what is written; it also inhabits muscles, hair, reflexes, and skin. The body is a dynamic testimony of the traditions, emotions, and stories that resonate across generations. Every daily movement, like raising a hand or bowing one's head, can be imbued with cultural meaning, carrying with it traces of collective history.

Throughout history, societies have inscribed a rich variety of knowledge in the body, from rituals and dances to everyday gestures that structure social behavior. In many cultures, the body is understood as a sacred vehicle of knowledge, a tool to connect the past with the present, and a means to transmit values and norms across generations. Yet, Western modernity, with its emphasis on the written and the rational, has dismissed bodily knowledge as something secondary, subordinate to the written word. This approach has contributed to erasing the richness of bodily archives — those that are not found in books but endure in the bodies that perform them.

In various cultures, the body has been, and continues to be, a fundamental resource for the preservation and transmission of knowledge. Traditional dances, which in many communities function as cultural records, are not merely artistic expressions but also forms of communication that carry within them stories of resistance, identity, and spirituality. In indigenous communities, for example, specific dance movements can narrate an entire cosmogony, where each gesture or position holds a story of origin, a relationship with the land, and a way of understanding the universe. These dances thus become archives in themselves: the choreographed steps and movements preserve the knowledge and memory of the ancestors.

Religious rituals also rely on bodily memory. Repeated gestures, such as making the sign of the cross, bowing, or raising one's hands to the sky, are infused with centuries of symbolism and devotion. These acts allow practitioners to participate in a tradition that transcends the individual, connecting the present body with past generations. In religious ceremonies, the body acts as a mediator between the earthly and the divine, between the human and the transcendental, and each gesture, performed with precision, echoes the millions of bodies that have made the same movement throughout history.

The body is not just a passive archive; it is also an active participant in the creation and recreation of knowledge. Acts of bodily resistance, such as marches, sit-ins, or protest dances, are also ways of inscribing bodies into history. In these contexts, the body becomes a manifesto of collective memory, a medium for expressing what words alone cannot capture. Bodies moving together in the streets are a living archival force that records and transmits demands for justice, equality, and dignity.

The body and the voice remember what books cannot. This statement not only underscores the limitations of the written text in capturing the full breadth of human experience, but also highlights the unique value of oral and bodily memory. Written

documents, although certainly powerful, cannot encompass everything that a human being knows. Both the voice and the body are flexible, constantly evolving archives capable of adapting to new contexts without losing their connection to the past. In every word spoken, in every movement, in every gesture, the body carries the history not just of an individual but of a community or a culture.

If we accept that the body is a repository of knowledge, then all spaces of knowledge and memory management must open their doors to this type of information. Libraries should not be limited to spaces for preserving the written word, but should transform into places where the body also has its place. Spaces where not only printed materials are consulted but where performances are celebrated, where people can learn through physical and sensory experience. Places that offer opportunities for dance, spoken word, song, and story, the recreation of rituals, or the exploration of the body as a medium of knowledge.

All of these are understood as valid documents.

This does not mean replacing the written with the bodily, but integrating both. In a library that embraces bodily memory, the written word, the voice, and the gesture would meet in continuous interaction, enriching each other's understanding of knowledge and memory. Each book would be a door to a bodily interpretation, and each movement would be a living reading of what cannot be captured in words.

Part 3

Objects as Memory

In the vast landscape of knowledge and memory, three-dimensional objects have played a fundamental role as supports for knowledge and experiences that transcend the written, spoken, and gestural facets. From time immemorial, human societies have used materials such as ceramics, textiles, wood carvings, or basketry to narrate their stories and preserve information that finds no place in supports like the pages of books. These artifacts, despite not containing words, carry a clear message. Every fold, every line, every texture is a sign, a code that tells us about the hands that created them, the transmitted knowledge, and the memories they hold. They are material testimonies that allow us to access forms of knowledge deeply rooted in the tangible, in the physical, and which have long been ignored or delegitimized by dominant forms of knowledge.

Indigenous cultures, for example, have long used materials as a way to preserve and transmit their stories. The Latin American textiles, crafted with specific colors and patterns, are not just aesthetic products but also archives of identity, markers of history and lineage, and maps of worldviews. Each knot, each combination of colors and shapes has a meaning that connects communities with their environment, their ancestors, and the natural cycle of life. The musical instruments, sculpted and tuned with great precision, are much more than tools of artistic expression: they are cultural artifacts that, through sound, evoke past times and connect us to deep histories. However, these forms of material knowledge have been systematically marginalized, relegated to the status of "crafts" or "curiosities," stripped of their value as legitimate archives of cultural memory.

Cultural colonialism not only imposed its dominance through language and the written word but also through the subjugation of artifacts. What did not fit into Western textual molds was labeled as "primitive" or "inferior," thus denying the legitimacy of the knowledge expressed through matter. Traditional academia, with its insistence on the authority of text, has sidelined these alternative forms of knowledge, imposing silence on the memories contained within objects. The exclusion of these artifacts from the canon of knowledge is yet another form of epistemic violence: one that prevents a more complete and diverse understanding of human knowledge.

It is urgent to revalue the materiality of knowledge. Objects carry a symbolic, emotional, and cultural weight that makes them true alternative archives. It is not only the object itself but also its creation process, its use, and its transformation over time that offers us a unique window into the world of material memories.

Knowledge and memory management spaces have the opportunity to expand their traditional function and focus, creating spaces where the material also has its place. Incorporating collections of three-dimensional artifacts, from textiles to ceramics, could open new pathways for accessing knowledge that has been sidelined. Libraries could become centers where history is not only read but also touched, seen, heard, and felt. Materiality offers a direct connection to the hands that worked these objects and to the ancestral techniques that have been passed down through generations.

Moreover, objects have the power to speak for themselves without the need for textual mediation. They are "books that can be touched" (if we momentarily adopt the colonial comparison of all informative elements with the book). The clay that turns into ceramics carries within it the history of its origin, of the people who shaped it, and of the fires that hardened it. A textile, no matter how worn, continues to tell the stories of its creators

centuries after they have disappeared, narrating the connections between people and the environment in which they lived. These elements, though susceptible to change and reinterpretation, are no less powerful in their ability to transmit knowledge.

By integrating these objects into their collections, libraries can challenge traditional knowledge hierarchies and pave the way for a more inclusive and holistic understanding of what it means to preserve and transmit knowledge and memory. Rather than seeing artifacts as mere complements to books, they could recognize them as complete archives in their own right, with their own logic and capacity to tell stories and convey ideas and discourses.

From this perspective, information resides not only in the written or spoken word but also in physical matter. Memory expands beyond text and voice to include what can be held in one's hands, what is inscribed in time through shapes and textures. And in this expansion, we recognize that the material world also has a voice — and that this voice, though silenced for a long time, deserves to be heard.

Part 4

Graffiti and Textiles: Insurgent Narratives

In the plural and vast universe of cultural expressions, graffiti and textiles, though seemingly very different, share a profoundly subversive nature. Both are mediums that, in their own way, challenge hegemonic power structures and serve as vehicles of cultural resistance. Graffiti, on one hand, is the art of the street — a form of insurgent knowledge that does not ask permission to exist. It is the result of direct action on the environment, transforming public spaces into canvases that tell stories, protest, claim, and remember. Its ephemeral nature (graffiti can be erased or covered at any moment) makes it a living archive that is constantly renewed, reflecting the pulse of social tensions and struggles.

Graffiti is immediate, disruptive, and laden with meaning. Every stroke, every word, every image stamped on a public wall becomes a statement of presence and intention, a demand to be heard. It is a form of knowledge that challenges traditional notions of authorship, legitimacy, and permanence. While books remain within the margins of what is accepted, graffiti arises in the physical and symbolic margins of society, reclaiming spaces that theoretically do not belong to it. In its rejection of conventions, graffiti positions itself as a collective archive / discourse that transforms the urban landscape into a canvas where memories and knowledge are shared openly and freely, without institutional mediations.

In recent history, graffiti has been used as a political tool in contexts as diverse as the Berlin Wall, the walls of Latin American neighborhoods, or the urban landscapes of Western metropolises. It is not just a form of art, but an act of vindication, a gesture of insurgency in the face of the invisibilization of marginalized voices and memories. Graffiti shows that knowledge does not always need formal structures to be transmitted; sometimes all it takes is a wall and a spray can for memory to inscribe itself in the collective space. This graphic art, far from being merely rebellious expression, becomes a pedagogical tool — a medium that libraries and archives could consider not only as objects of documentation but as living and dynamic manifestations of cultural memory.

If graffiti is the shout, textile is the silent whisper — no less powerful. Throughout the centuries, weaving has been a way of subtly recording stories and knowledge in the interwoven threads and patterns that, though not expressed in words, communicate deep knowledge. Ancestral cultures have found in weaving a space for memory — a medium in which each color, figure, and texture carries meaning. It is a form of narration that overflows the written, connecting people with their history, beliefs, and environment.

Weaving is also a manual act, an activity intimately linked to the body and time. Each stitch is a repetition, a gesture learned and passed down from generation to generation, and in that process, memory is inscribed in the materiality of the object. Yet the work of weaving has historically been feminized and devalued, relegated to the domestic and artisanal sphere, away from the "legitimate" notions of knowledge. Patriarchal and colonial societies have relegated weaving to the background, underestimating its capacity as a support for knowledge and its richness as an archive of daily life.

However, weaving in many ways is the archive of the everyday: a material narrative that challenges hegemonic notions of what is considered knowledge. It is a form of storytelling that defies patriarchal and colonial concepts of knowledge. Every blanket, every garment, every tapestry is a memory inscribed in the texture of the weave, a story that unfolds with each knot. In many communities, weaving is a marker of identity: a way to express belonging and resistance, to claim the continuity of traditional stories in a world that has often tried to erase them.

Textiles have also been political and resistance tools in multiple contexts. From the works that preserve the history of Indigenous peoples in Latin America to the protest quilts in feminist and anti-colonial movements, weaving has been a way to say what cannot

always be expressed in words. It is a silent but relentless support that inevitably records the thoughts, actions, and struggles of those who create it.

Both graffiti and weaving offer narratives that have traditionally been marginalized but possess immense value as sources of cultural and political knowledge. Libraries could welcome collections of textiles, not as anthropological or ethnographic curiosities, but as legitimate documents that tell real stories. Each one is a testimony of resistance, identity, and insurgent memory.

Graffiti could be documented as part of a visual archive of social struggles, recognizing its ability to encapsulate moments of upheaval and change. The walls speak, and libraries have the possibility of transforming their practices by embracing these visual supports. These mediums not only expand the horizon of what is considered "information" but also offer communities the opportunity to see themselves reflected in collections, to reclaim their history, and to feel that their knowledge and memories are validated and respected.

Incorporating graffiti and textiles into libraries and archives is a way to dismantle knowledge hierarchies and make space for the rebellious memories that are expressed beyond printed words. It is recognizing that threads and strokes on walls are also ways of telling, resisting, and remembering. They are legitimate and necessary supports in the construction of a diverse, inclusive, and truly representative collective memory.

Conclusion

Redefining the Library: From Words to Action

This text has sought to challenge traditional conceptions of libraries (and other equivalent spaces) as mere repositories of printed texts. It is urgent to reimagine the concept of "library" — not as a static storage space but as a vibrant space of sensory, cultural, and political experimentation.

We need to think of libraries that transcend the boundaries of shelves full of printed documents. We must imagine places where knowledge is not limited to written text but is manifested in a variety of sensory and experiential forms; spaces where knowledge elements are interwoven in innovative and enriching ways. The walls can be adorned with graffiti that narrates collective stories, rooms can resonate with live stories and music, and spaces can be filled with three-dimensional objects that tell their own stories through their materiality and design.

This environment not only challenges established knowledge hierarchies but also opens new possibilities for interaction and understanding. Instead of simply consuming information, users can experience (and even create) knowledge actively and multisensorially in a true cultural laboratory — a space of creativity and resistance where every form of memory has a prominent and not subordinate place.

The goal should be to transform libraries into places that not only safeguard knowledge but also live and experience it in all its richness and diversity. This new paradigm should promote the integration of all forms of expression and memory (those labeled as "alternative" or "other"), creating an environment where every type of knowledge is recognized and valued. The library of the future would become a meeting point and exchange space where plurality is celebrated, and the connection between different ways of knowing and remembering is fostered.

Postscript

Decolonizing

The process of decolonizing memory is a fundamental challenge that requires conscious and determined action. It is not a mere theoretical discourse; it should be an active and transformative practice that begins by questioning and redefining what we understand by knowledge, who has the power to produce it, and how it is preserved and transmitted. It should be a call to transform libraries into centers of cultural and political resistance, where the written word shares the stage with gestures, voices, art, and matter.

To achieve this transformation, it is crucial that libraries adopt an inclusive and equitable approach to different forms of knowledge — what is called "epistemic justice." This involves recognizing and valuing the forms of memory that have been historically marginalized or ignored by the hegemonic structures in power. Libraries must become spaces of hospitality and celebration of cultural and epistemological diversity, where every form of expression, from oral stories to material artifacts, has a place to be preserved and appreciated.

The dismantling of knowledge hierarchies implies a paradigm shift in the way knowledge and memories are conceived and managed. In this context, decolonization necessarily requires a reevaluation of archival and bibliographic practices to ensure that they are inclusive and representative of the plurality of voices and experiences.

Going through this process would not only expand our understanding of the world and its inhabitants but also strengthen the social and cultural fabric. Libraries, in this new configuration, could be beacons of inclusion and plurality, where information is preserved but also lived and experienced in dynamic and meaningful ways. This approach would not only enrich cultural institutions themselves but also contribute to building a more equitable and just society.

Libraries should become places where knowledge manifests in all its complexity and diversity. That is the challenge and the opportunity: a call to act with courage and creativity to build a future where every form of knowledge has its place in the grand tapestry of human understanding.