

# DESOBEDIENTE ARCHIVE

## *Archivo Desobediente*

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Bryan Giemza<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Current discussions of ecocentric governance, earth law, and environmental and wellbeing economics, offer a sweeping critique of the goods obtained by neoliberal capitalism's scarcity and self-interest, and suggest other paths leading to degrowth, sustainability, resilience, and anti-fragility. These concepts, in turn, speak to post-custodial ramifications touching on every aspect of the archival endeavor, from design to preservation agendas. This article revisits concepts delineated in an earlier published piece that considers community archives as an archival "tool" and commons. I interrogate the notion of the tragedy of the commons, pointing to both its limitations and benefits within an archival context, and apply Wendell Berry's criteria for tools to community archives, the concept of the black box, and conventional archives.

By applying a set of theoretical standards for evaluating archival tools, I point to the misalignment of contemporary archival principles and purpose in time of climate emergency. I issue an urgent call to address how, like society at large, archives--which *should* offer the model par-excellence of resilience and provide a reservoir of survival knowledge in time of climate mitigation--are failing to devolve their design and methods in the face of black swan events. By destabilizing the major earth systems, we have set the stage for mass extinctions and called into question a future of geopolitical resilience. Accordingly, archives should be on a footing to address these realities and to create a living treasury of community and earth knowledge geared to create resilience in the face of convergent political and environmental crises—a new sort of living archive.

**Keywords:** Archive, Black Box, Environmental Crises, Tragedy of the commons.

### RESUMEN

Las discusiones actuales sobre políticas ecocéntricas, ley de las tierras, y la economía ambiental y del bienestar, ofrecen una crítica radical hacia los bienes obtenidos desde la escasez y el interés propio del capitalismo neoliberal y sugieren vías alternativas que conducen al decrecimiento, la sostenibilidad, la resiliencia y la lucha contra la vulnerabilidad. Estos conceptos, a su vez, dan cuenta de las ramificaciones posteriores a la época de conciencia y que afectan todos los aspectos del trabajo archivístico, desde el diseño hasta las agendas de preservación. Este artículo revisa los conceptos bosquejados en

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Tech University, Texas, USA, ORCID iD 0000-0001-8962-1126. bgiemza@ttu.edu

un artículo publicado anteriormente, que concibe los archivos comunitarios como una "herramienta" de archivo y de bien común. Así mismo, cuestiono la noción de "tragedia de los comunes" donde señalo tanto sus limitaciones como sus beneficios dentro de un contexto archivístico y aplico los criterios de herramientas de Wendell Berry a los archivos comunitarios, el concepto de caja negra y los archivos convencionales.

Al aplicar un conjunto estandarizado de teorías para evaluar herramientas de archivo señalo la divergencia de los principios y propósitos archivísticos contemporáneos en los tiempos de emergencia climática. Lanzo un llamado urgente para abordar cómo, al igual que la sociedad en general, los archivos deberían ofrecer un modelo de resiliencia y proporcionar reservas de conocimiento para la supervivencia en tiempos que necesitan regulación climática, no logran devolver su diseño y métodos de cara a los eventos del cisne negro. Al desestabilizar los principales sistemas terrestres, hemos preparado el escenario para extinciones masivas, poniendo en peligro un futuro de resiliencia geopolítica. En consecuencia, los archivos deben estar en condiciones de abordar estas realidades y crear un tesoro vivo de conocimiento de la comunidad y la tierra orientado a crear resiliencia frente a las crisis políticas y ambientales convergentes: una nueva alternativa de archivo.

**Palabras clave:** archivo, caja negra, crisis ambientales, tragedia de los comunes.

## INTRODUCTION

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Let's begin, like so many of our metanarratives do, in the garden—a word of exquisite ambiguity, evoking the Edenic original. Eden, with typical Aramaic placename playfulness, blends the idea of a plain with a fruitful place—a fruited plain—perhaps in its original locus a semiarid one, quite far removed from the English gardens of King James's imagination. In the walling-off of the garden from wild places we understand at once the western turn of mind that produces landscapes, fears wastelands and wilderness, and lays waste in the name of making civilization and, it is said, for the sake of drawing order from chaos. Contrast the hedges of the garden with indigenous and commons-based agricultural system that often bend toward permaculture, "gardens" where the boundary between natural ecosystems and agriculture is blurred or nonexistent.

Image 1. *Paceable Kindom of the Branch* [Mediumóleo sobre lienzo]

Source: Hicks, E. (1826) Reynolda House.

British philosopher Anthony Flew's well-known "invisible garden" metaphor from *Reason and Responsibility* (1968) is often hailed as making a case for atheism:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Skeptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" (The Dartmouth Apologia (s/f)).

A community garden, which arises on a common, aspires to be tended by a team of community gardeners. What is curated is the garden itself, which has a character of its own that cannot be ascribed to any prime or single actor. Is this different to a conventional archive? Perhaps it depends on perspective, and whether one stands within the enclosure, or outside of it. In *Letonica*, I earlier wrote,

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that all sides agree to the notion that the archive is indeed an organic, living garden. Holders of this worldview are more

likely to envision a community garden in which property rights are diffuse, and the right of access the highest priority.... Two questions that might be put to all archivists, then, are: what kind of garden are you tending? And how does your garden grow? Assuming that archives are a commons—whether your model is of the courtyard or the township—neither side is free of the obligation to consider what environmentalists commonly call “the tragedy of the commons.” When a resource is freely available to all, the incentive to stewardship can be diminished in turn (Giemza, 2017 p. 32).

But as Dirk Philipsen observes, there is more to the notion, and “[t]he tragedy lies not in the commons, but in the private. It is the private that produces violence, destruction and exclusion. Standing on its head thousands of years of cultural wisdom, the idea of the private variously separates, exploits and exhausts those living under its cold operating logic (D. Philipsen).” (Unpublished paper, email to the author). The community archive refutes the tragedy of the commons, since it establishes and nurtures a kind of commons within the archival landscape and resists privatization. Even university archives that afford good public access are most often, in a sense, private, since they are inexorably beholden to the story that power tells about it itself. Indeed, they resemble the “invisible gardener,” since wittingly or no, their ring-fence curation is largely invisible to the public, unexplained, and calculated to give an impression of orderly containment and the permanence of a higher power.

Flew would say it does not matter who tends the garden, and that’s the point. But who tends the garden is precisely the matter at stake, the difference between a community garden and, say, a Texas cotton ranch ringed with purple-painted fenceposts, tacitly warning those who enter that they risk injury to life or limb or criminal trespass (how fitting that the royal color is used to this purpose) (Dowell, 2014)<sup>2</sup>. Children, the visually impaired, the colorblind, and many other living things cannot read a purple fencepost, and few users can see a conventional archive’s invisible fencing, often emplaced by well-intentioned curators.

In answer to Flew’s critique, let us answer a story with another story and turn to what I’ll call the parable of the Mad Irishman (think of the Irishman who giddily declares in *Braveheart*, “It’s my island”). In the classic telling of the joke, an Irishman, a Scotsman, and an Englishman enter a contest in which they must each build the best possible sheep pen from the same set of materials.

The Scot makes a good run at building a tidy and frugal pen, which the judge dutifully inspects and determines to have a capacity of ten sheep. The Englishman fares even better at stretching out his design, with all of the kit neatly hewn and in its place. The judge rules that it could hold at least twenty sheep, making him the contest’s frontrunner.

So the party continues on to see what the Irishman built. They find him taking his ease under a tree. Around him is his pen, such as it is—he has taken the lumber and roughed in a shaped like a triangle, scarcely big enough for him to take a nap inside.

The judge, surprised, says, “This is your pen? It would barely hold a single sheep.”

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<sup>2</sup> Texas is one of several states to legalize purple paint blazing in lieu of posting “no trespassing” signs, under the argument that it is cheaper, more durable, and more expedient than signposting. I know cyclists who have been harassed and threatened for passing through “purple” ranches on public roads.

"But I'm not in the pen," replies the Irishman cocking his hat, smiling, and sweeping his hand. "Youse are in my pen."

The joke lays bare the futility of the archival enterprise, as timeless as Bing Crosby's "Don't Fence Me In." Whether a fence purposes to fence in or out is truly a matter of positionality; by fencing me out, you might be fencing me in, and vice versa. For the Irishman on the road, which he is happy to share, the ranch owner is trespassing on his property, as the world he owns begins on either side of the purple fence. Archives are defined by their collecting scope; the problem is the slipperiness of scope, since the placement of the fencing raises the paradox of the Irish fence, not to mention the Zeno's paradox of archival pursuit and the impossibility of reaching the desired quarry. Archivists like to adopt an agnostic stance toward the disposition of property as between multiple possible "good" archival homes, emphasizing instead that wholeness, convenience to researchers, and long-term preservation prospects are what matters, with the last factor accorded the most weight. To the objection that scope is a fiction of boundary, a common response is "sampling"—traditional curators should collect across affiliated areas equally. But of course the archive at once starts running out of the building, which is a small pen for so many sheep, or sheep bones. Would it not be more sensible to fashion an Irish sheep pen archive and to say, *What you seek is out there, and living and evolving—go find and observe it if you want to be a good shepherd.*

The immediate resistance is that such an approach would be a form of ahistoricism. But there's an obvious rebuttal: what if all the important history is written in life? This is a serious suggestion. Beyond its salience in oral tradition, history is writ in biology. In an evolutionary sense, we (human beings) are records of survival information enmeshed in experiments in transference and a larger computational experiment called Being Human. The human story writ large is the sum of that information, of the living and what lives in us interacting with each other and other living things within earth systems through time. The information density of DNA contains millions of generations and historical turns (and even forty genes shared in common with all living things), and of course biocomputing (and biological computing) have been pursued as offshoots of nanotechnology because computing technology is merely imitative of biological computational systems (e.g., the brains of animals), which derive their energy ultimately from solar energy. Thus biocomputing summons a digitally crude approximation of what happens at the cellular level in living organisms. (Keep this in mind when we look at Wendell Berry's criteria for tools later.) GMOs and CRISPR are, I suppose, a way of life-writing through a dark lens. Looked at from a different perspective, conventional archives are an effort to round up the rudiments of intangible cultural heritage—which, tellingly, is transmitted by the living. The business of an archive, grimly, is pinning butterflies to velvet and lamenting the fading of their wings. If you would seek, like Yeats, true monuments to unageing intellect, accompany the sages "standing in God's holy fire/As in the gold mosaic of a wall," and follow instead the procession of living things "into the artifice of eternity."

Biological interdependencies within earth systems mean that what is written in the body is related to, collated to, and legible only within the larger set of all biodocumentation, which is to say, all living things. If the ultimate goal of an archive is to preserve as much information as possible for as long as possible, then, as the Irishman might say, the world is your archive, which

contains its own metanarrative in the form of the paleontological record. And if we qualify this with "useful information" or "useful knowledge," we have the utilitarian problem of the fence, and perhaps a first principle: from the standpoint of our species, useful knowledge is that which allows us to persist with mutually assured wellbeing in the places where we dwell with one another, in common with other living things, within the larger web of life.

It is not at all clear that the modern archive agrees with this mission. On the contrary, it too often seems hostile to it. It isn't even clear if the modern conventional archive—*by conception*—can serve this principle, even when it makes course adjustments (in more pointed academic parlance, when it *changes the narrative*), because it is most often retooled to institutional, not human, survival, and subservient to the fantasies of endurance that are the fever dream of every unsustainable culture.

Put differently, *endurance is not enough*. The paradox of modern archival institutionalism is that the pursuit of permanence—underpinned by the presumed value of mere persistence—becomes a driver of fragility. Instead of endurance, we should be attuned to antifragility. The concept, as explained by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his much-discussed 2014 book by that title (*Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*), is that we conflate endurance with antifragility. It is one thing for your coffee cup not to shatter when it falls to the floor; it is another for it to gain strength from the fall. Another related concept is resilience, which is understandably gaining currency as we prepare for an era of mitigation and harm reduction in the face of climate-related disasters. The post-custodial archive might accept the notion that certain forms of cultural knowledge are best preserved outside of a conventional archive. In this understanding lies the potential of removing fencing, shoring up commons, and shifting from an endurance mindset to antifragile thinking.

In a piece for *south*, I noted moreover that the state's zeal for active exclusion by expunging the marginalized from the record can lead, counterintuitively, to archival traces that preserve them in the negative space—the sidewalk shadows that testify to the detonation at Hiroshima (Giemza, 2015). In destruction, the signatures of the effaced. On that level, even the most carefully curated archives are likely to subvert their assumed charters. The archive is disobedient unto itself, insofar as even the conventional archive frequently contains, in the negative space of documentation, signs of the marginalized and undocumented. The modern nation-state's desire for control and self-propagation often leaves a record of atrocity (e.g., surviving Stasi documents), just as economic imperative sometimes generates a record of the exploited (e.g., plantation ledgers documenting the enslaved). I cite the examples of "confessions" and correspondence from the Caste War of Yucatan that led to linguistic and cultural survivals of the very sort the state hoped to efface. Even when truth does not out, life does, through its intrinsic desire to persist; it is the only thing that can become more organized from the natural world and thus all that we know of negentropy—reverse entropy, in short—even if life is (as W.B. Yeats would say) "chained to a dying animal" and therefore subject ultimately to entropy. The true desire of an archive, then, if it would resist entropy, is to observe the negentropy of the living and to preserve the living record as far as possible. It is the confusion of property with the living commons that turns the archive into an alabaster chamber.

Similarly, the economic and legal records surrounding property and per-

sonhood often leave a strong image of the excluded Irishman, around which the archive, driven by its paradoxical instinct for erasure, has molded itself. From the standpoint of archive-creators, it might help to have a dash of the Mad Irish mentality—*I'm not a part of the archive—everyone else is*—so I had better start collecting! (Or as Emily Dickinson would say, *Who are you? I'm nobody!*) So it goes with the beautiful futility of the archival enterprise. No matter how ambitious the capture, the exclusion zone eventually manifests itself. Unless the archive would cohere, inhere, coincide, coinhabit with life on our planet.

Strategies of sustainability and resilience, then, and more broadly, of antifragility, hold self-attesting, intrinsic value to archival enterprise. Given the growing body of analysis suggesting that societies are subject to principles of scaling, and that local problems demand local solutions, I would suggest that the community archive has something to teach us about the living vessel best suited to our times. Researchers Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney point to a century-long cycle in US experience delineated by the I-we-I phenomenon: the brazen cupidity of the American Gilded Age and Great Depression collapse followed by the grassroots retrenchment of the (selectively) Progressive era going into mid-twentieth century, which soon enough faded into the Me-decades and fragmentation marking the present moment, as well as the global rise of authoritarian "strong-man" leaders (Putnam, 2020). To make this case they sifted through both qualitative and quantitative data from the archival record, ranging from the personal (writings concerning the apparently irretrievable depravity of the monopoly years) to election records documenting trends in partisan tendencies and ticket-splitting. These accidents of survival may indeed tell us something important about the present disorder, from the birds that once filled the pages of children's books to their disappearance in the living world (I will come to this later).

The reading of the evidence must be selective, as always, but the legibility of the record is often an unintended consequence of the breadth of its scope, not necessarily its intention. I raise the point merely to observe that I am not advocating for a Living Archive that is compiled exclusively of what is conventionally known as natural history—though this is extremely important. It should be acknowledged at the start that a living archive must be fashioned through some complementarity of unities: ecological-intangible cultural heritage-tangible cultural heritage. A traditional archive is not a canary in a coal mine. The health of a society cannot be judged by archives that are scintillatingly replete until the moment of collapse, whereupon they signify nothing but a great sound and fury.

Even if we could conjure up a living archive of some description—unwalled, and focused on the living world not merely as it pertains to our uses, one that takes stock of the most important information about living things, including, incidentally, humans—we would find the basis for its "holdings" much depleted. In 2014 the World Wildlife Fund warned that populations of the invertebrates they monitor had declined by half in the space of four decades (Carrington, 2014). A 2020 follow up census was even more bleak: "Globally, monitored population sizes of mammals, fish, birds, reptiles, and amphibians have declined an average of 68% between 1970 and 2016." "The findings are clear," the report sums up. "Our relationship with nature is broken." And humankind is unambiguously to blame. Whether we are truly in the Anthropocene, or a sixth

extinction are matters of purely academic concern. By contrast, from 1974 to 1996—roughly the first two decades of the time period—the books and bound serials added to US academic libraries grew by about 80% (no correlation or causation inferred here—just a comparison) (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001). Imagine a zoo in which 70% of the animals disappeared and an enormous bookstore was instead erected in their place; would it be regarded as a good steward of conservation? Or an archive that involuntarily lost 70% of its holdings since 1970. While archives have gone about their business of preservation this past half century, the living record has crashed, and the living garden has been relentlessly trampled. Perhaps one reason why archives have been so good at growing themselves is that they hold the media on which a fragile and unsustainable culture feeds itself—including those indigestible bones that are accidents of survival.

Can we accept the antinomy of soaring archival holdings in an age of mass extinction? While "history" was being safeguarded, the world that sustains it was immeasurably impoverished. Could it be because we document primarily what we fashion according to our own image? And are we prepared for an overhaul of our systems of knowledge production and circulation that environmental governance will call for? Continuing the metaphor of community archive as a resistant part of the commons-and-living-garden, we might ask, are archives always fated to be measured by the hole in their doughnut, the space carved out of the wildlands, until the wildlands are no longer? In the Hegelian sense, is a community archive "antithetical" to the conventional archive, or actually its synthesis, and thus as close as we will come to seeing the New Archive? (As I have already implied, it would seem the New Archive defines its scope principally in terms of its ability to sustain human life and wellbeing, and with it, the living record inscribed in biodiversity.) Or do community archives suffer from the exclusion paradox, too? If an archive is built to document power's zone of silence, does it still have a void in its middle?

As in so many areas, I do not have answers, but these are not merely rhetorical questions. An entire generation of archival invention will be devoted to addressing them—if we do. Recent headlines provide another example of archival futility in the face of biology and disrupted earth systems as catastrophic feedback loops open, portending mass extinctions. What is an archive to do as such an eschatology bears down? Record it, apparently, some say, in an "indestructible" black box archive. Jim Curtis, creative director at Clemenger BBDO, explained to an Australian Broadcasting Corporation reporter, "The idea is if the Earth does crash as a result of climate change, this indestructible recording device will be there for whoever's left to learn from that" (Kilvert, 2021). The function of a black box presupposes that it can be located and subsequently rendered legible, which requires both translation and context.

Consider, Ozymandias, how well monuments of bygone civilizations have fared in this regard. A sphinx will do as well as a black box as a khipu. If the climate emergency leads to human extinction—a real possibility—there will be no one to receive and interpret the warning message in a bottle. Whether we are in a Holocene extinction event is a matter of purely academic debate. While it is being debated, we are speeding extinction; by the time feedback loops open and systems collapse, resisting the lost record of planetary impoverishment will be too late. The paleontological record is admirably well equipped to record extinctions, as we know from the fossil record, for which a



black box archive can only be a pale horseman riding point, an act of hubris akin to sending a golden record of human voices into the vastness of space. We had better hope that whatever is greater than us must love us.

We might instead devote our attention to the preservation of the living archive, without which, there is no archive. This, then, is a call to avoid the redundancy of the black box; the flooding of an archive in New Orleans is all we need to know of the black box, and likewise, the vanity of the archival enterprise on a planet in which humans have destabilized major earth systems, and consequently, any hope of geopolitical resilience. In reality, collapsed civilizations are self-embalming, creating necropolises that are holographic, self-validating black boxes, whether as the scorched, bare shelves of Alexandria, or in the undisturbed form of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 resting undiscovered in a trench of the Indian Sea. Paleontologists can surmise theories of collapse based on the physical record of the earth-as-an-archive. When it comes to human societies, the earth-as-archive offers clues to historic collapse, within the bounds of expert conjecture—and occasionally even falsifiable hypothesis—most often pointing to human inability to stave off an environmental or political calamity or both. Landfills, both in scale and scope, are the finest archives that American civilization has to offer, and likely to be far more durable than the middens of yore, if anyone is around to admire them.

A black box archive of the Tasmanian kind strikes me as primarily a self-authenticating artifact of human hubris. *While the world was on fire we built this as a protest. We were right.* Is this different to the variants of the classic and irrefutable tombstone ditty ("As you are now/so once was I/as I am now so you shall be/Prepare to die and follow me"—to which the traditional wag's reply is, "To follow you I'm not content/Until I know which way you went!"). If I am correct about durable, authentic archives being living archives, the closest things we have to actual black box archives have emerged only from thinnest margins of mere survival. We start with the desire not to repeat atrocities, for example, in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Herewith, a larger peace memorial: we could examine the remains of the living archive of the Century of Thanatopsis, currently expiring, as part of Black Box earth: the levels of radioactive isotopes in the soil and atmosphere and seas where human inventions have altered ecology and evolution, the spunky dogs of Chernobyl and their displaced human counterparts (Baraniuk, 2021). Or my friend from County Donegal in Ireland who, along with many others in her country, developed a rare cancer at an early age in a part of the world where the Chernobyl fallout clouds collected, swirled, were concentrated, and rained to earth. Her body is a black box. So is my friend whose body, as she has written, is a Confederate monument, and unlike the fragments of Richmond, Virginia's Monument Avenue, still standing (Randall, 2020).

Perhaps we might pause to consider how monuments of colonialism are being taken down globally even as we flirt with global catastrophe by attempting to violently control nature and thwart natural laws. In 2021 the Mayor of Mexico City, Claudia Sheinbaum, announced that "the Columbus statue that once gazed down on Mexico City's main boulevard will be replaced with a precolonial Indigenous figure — notably, a woman." *The Guardian* reported in 2021 on the nearly seventy monuments to slave traders and colonialists taken down across the UK in the wake of Black Lives Matter (Mohdin et al,

2021). How does resistance to monument itself signify cultural fragility and/or antifragility?

Black box archives only speak of final moments if they have a witness. Again, I am not suggesting that the biochemical record is all we need to know of the human past. Rather, I am urging that conventional, inanimate archives not focused on perpetuating the good of life are a bonfire of vanities, useful primarily for glimpsing, retrospectively, the ravages of entropy and human fantasies of civilization-supra-nature. Should we not set their ilk aside in time of crisis, when invention is needful, and hardly anyone over thirty is to be trusted to move with appropriate urgency?

A new, living archive would start with the supposition that *natural* history and human history are entwined. Such an archive contains knowledge of remedy and ecocentric governance instructive for creating a body of earth law, containing rubrics and systems of valuation that are not exclusively gauged by utility to human life and property. By way of definition, Herman Greene writes in Chapter 16 of *Earth Law: Emerging Ecocentric Law, A Guide for Practitioners*, "Earth law encompasses all legal structures and mechanisms that protect, stabilize, and restore the functional interdependency of Earth's life and life-support systems. Ecocentric or ecological governance (the two terms are used interchangeably) is an essential part of Earth law." (Zelle et al, 2022, p. 105). In 2008 Ecuador amended its constitution to confer inherent rights on nature and standing for any person to observe those rights before public bodies. In 2010, Bolivia enshrined the rights of nature within its system of constitutional jurisprudence. Many nations and treaties acknowledge the rights of nature and nonhuman life, and the list is growing and finding incremental affirmation in court precedents and amendments, as when the UK recently approved a series of reforms, including a landmark bill formally recognizing that animals are sentient beings with attendant rights (Harvey, 2021). Indeed, indigenous cosmologies around the world suggest that legal personhood inheres in nature, as has been meaningfully affirmed, for example, in New Zealand (Luck, s/f).

It is not hard to draw parallels to the ethos of community archives, which favor a post-custodial setting. Contemporary archives are tacitly informed by the notion that humans have custody over nature, and this extends to the positions that nonhuman living things and intangible cultural heritage can become archival chattels. While community archives are geared toward promoting social justice and reconciliation and preventing the institutional usurpation of the curation and representation of community commons, it might be pointed out that this archival consideration has not been extended to the rights of nature. Consistent with Maori belief, Mount Taranaki in New Zealand has been conferred legal personhood. Talk about a living archive! Archives have been interested in the special considerations that attend indigenous history, but what have archives done to preserve those wellsprings? Can the informed consent of indigenous leaders and communities overcome the problem that a colonial archive murders to dissect/preserve?

As community archives have addressed themselves to antiracism and themes of restorative justice, it seems appropriate to look into, as a colleague of mine suggested, "the analogy between racist justifications for exploiting other humans and speciesist justifications for exploiting other sentient species".

*H. sapiens* relies on notions of race to explain why some humans can't think, don't feel (at least like "we" do), lack moral judgment, produce nothing of any account, and may therefore be treated, like the rest of the brute creation, as labor-saving resources. But is racism a by-product of speciesism? Or did we come to gain an inkling of awareness about speciesism when we finally learned how to look analytically at how and why racism was invented and perpetrated? (W. Andrews, comunicación personal, 14 de diciembre de 2021).

The contested system of humans-as-chattels remains, to an astonishing degree, subterranean within US archives. Artificial intelligence, combing through collections-as-data, has introduced new possibilities for surfacing, for example, the legal history of civil rights, or the relationships of enslaved persons through plantation record. There is undeniably great urgency, if not primacy, in efforts to redress racism and its toll on humanity, and I am not suggesting a hierarchy of value or mutual exclusivity here, but rather, a complementary relationship. This genuine *recovery*, valuable beyond compare, might be rendered naught unless it is broadened to understand the underpinnings of speciesism, and its erasures—and indeed the importance of understanding governance as a complex system far more expansive than government.

As Bruce Jennings urges in his 2016 book, *Ecological Governance: Toward a New Social Contract with the Earth*, an attendant new social contract is needful, one that distinguishes governance from government, as governance encompasses more than government, and extends to economic, religious and cultural institutions, including intangible cultural heritage. Mere survival is often mistaken as a signifier for a civilization's superiority when, in reality, the race is not to the swift (cf. Jared Diamond's guns-germs-steel argument). Yet if it is unaccompanied by a living archive, overmastering the artifact serves, paradoxically, as a means of erasure. A perfect inscription of the Mayan codex, if we had one, would be a mere fetish, subject to discard if it presented an inconvenient cultural pattern (and of course Diego De Landa, that avatar of imperial history, ultimately did rule to destroy, a mistake we perpetuate, often unwittingly, in our own time, with the western turn of mind that insists that capture is per se salvific).

In the grand age of fossil fuels, it was reasonably foreseeable that we should have been using them to create better energy sources and to wean ourselves from them. What did the archives say? The mechanisms of climate change have been understood by scientists for 150 years; climate models have been crudely and surprisingly accurate for fifty, with no supercomputing required; and thirty years ago we knew perfectly well why it made sense, in terms of return on effort, to transition promptly from them during the golden hour of carbon reduction (Cornwall, 2019). The records of history's failure to instruct are neatly arrayed on archive shelves, perhaps in part because they were unexamined as much as disputed, and perhaps because archives have been attuned to documenting the rule of death, more so than life.

What is reasonably foreseeable now? For the moment, a sputtering effort to record a dysfunctional culture instead of reforming it, chasing a global digital culture complex enough to give rise to Artificial Stupidity in the form of divisive manipulation and eco-political black swan events. Mass extinctions, displacement. New York, and Venice, and Mexico City (which floods and yet

runs out of water) and Insert-Your-Coastal-City-Here as New Atlantis. Things stripped of their cultural referents in which meaning itself collapses in lockstep with the furling roll of species.

**Table 1.** Contrasts/complementarities (not necessarily opposites)

<b>Traditional archive</b>	<b>Community/living archive</b>
<i>Curated necropolis</i> (holds for tangible cultural history and archeological record)	<i>Living conversation</i>
Walled garden	Community garden
The invisible gardener	The visible gardener
The invisible fence	No fence
Consolidation	Localization
Monopolizing	Self-devolving
From monoculture to Big Ag	Permaculture
Entropic	Negentropic for as long as we are
What survived	Survival
Conservation of things	Preservation of living things
Landfill	Landfall – what now?
Waiting for extinction	Waiting for speciation
Acquisition as a means to an end	Reconciliation
System-dependent	Earth-system dependent, thus antifragile and resilient
Lawgiver	Restorative justice, ecojustice and ecological governance

**Fuente.** Elaboración propia con base en Igartúa (1987).

An archive of the unliving does such injury to eternity as poet William Blake's "robin Red breast in a Cage" that quizzically "Puts all Heaven in a Rage"; even "A Dove house fill'd with Doves & Pigeons/Shudders Hell thro' all its regions," while "A dog starv'd at his Masters Gate/Predicts the ruin of the State." The forsythia that blooms, in January, around the archival heart of the District of Columbia, testifies to human folly and archival futility as the time cycle itself collapses, with winter season marching inexorably to abridgement and collapse (Patel, 2021). So I lament in time with Walt Whitman's old lyric,

*When January lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,  
And split the cherry blossom with ice in deathless summer,  
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with never-returning spring.*

\* \* \*

Who can see the typical modern US archive, with its humming systems of temperature regulation, its advanced technologies for probing artifacts and revealing long-withheld historical footprints and palimpsests, its burgeoning staff of specialists driving to work, and not marvel at this essential vanity: the very thing that is meant to endure is visibly and obviously tied to the thousand fragile strings of delicate petrochemical and other frayed, overtaxed "civilizational" dependencies. Who cannot see the proposed Black Box archive in remote Tasmania, designed to record planetary destruction via climate change, for what it is, a vanity of vanities, with a vanishingly short and redundant charter, since (as every archivist knows) technological media obsolescence and legibility are endlessly accelerating? (Kilvert, 2021). Why are archivists not sounding the loudest alarms about these vulnerabilities, risible to outside eyes? Could it be that they have lost sight of their survival superpowers, gradually inured and conditioned as institutional insiders to submit to the creeping faux-professionalization, top-heavy administrative bloat, and self-perpetuating credentialism of the academic institutions they inhabit? Have we lost all sense of disobedience? Where are the archivists on the frontlines of climate advocacy, the most essential work of any long-term agenda of preservation?

In such a configuration, the archive is nothing but the fetishized crown of empire that has the farthest to fall when she topples. In the belief that it was built for endurance, it exalted glory from behind colonial spectacles colored by visions of self-perpetuating order and continual growth, and thus cheated eternity. In *Scale*, complexity scientist Geoffrey West observes how, remarkably, everything from the bodies of animals to corporations are subject to certain scaling rules. Companies, for example, "tend to become more and more unidimensional, driven partially by market forces but also by the inevitable ossification of the top-down administrative and bureaucratic needs perceived as necessary for operating a traditional company in the modern era. Change, adaptation, and reinvention become increasingly difficult to effect, especially as the external socioeconomic clock is continually accelerating and conditions change at a faster and faster rate." One might observe the same of academic institutions and many archives, which means that scaling up introduces fragility and confounds aspirations to antifragility.

By contrast, West notes that cities "become increasingly multidimensional as they grow in size. Indeed, in stark contrast to almost all companies, the diversity of cities, as measured by the number of different kinds of jobs and businesses that comprise their economic landscape, continually and systematically increases in a predictable with increasing city size." Cities, too, suffer from the effects of entropy, and notwithstanding the Eternal City, it is not difficult to furnish examples of collapsed cities. However, West is gesturing specifically to the sources of urban resilience and how cities sustain themselves, and asks, Is there a maximum size to cities? Or an optimum size? From the standpoint of archives, by erasing archival walls and blending the archive into the commons of a city, do we gain additional antifragility?

In common with West, other commentators are pointing to the limitations imposed by the "laws" of ecology, including Rob Dunn in his *A Natural History of the Future*:

Some of the laws of biological nature are laws of ecology. The most useful of these are universal. These biological laws of nature, like the laws of physics, allow us to make predictions. However, as physicists have pointed out, they are more limited than the laws of physics because they only apply to the tiny corner of the universe in which life is known to exist. Still, given that any story that involves us also involves life, they are universal relative to any world we might experience. Knowing about these laws helps us understand the future into which we are—arms flailing, coal burning, and full speed ahead—hurling ourselves (Dunn, 2022).

Dunn offers as an example a terrifying experiment in which Harvard scientists deliberately created a petri dish with increasingly high levels of antibiotic. "The experiment," Dunn writes, "mimicked the way we use antibiotics to control disease-causing bacteria in our bodies. It mimicked the way we use herbicides to control weeds in our lawn. It mimicked each of the ways we try to hold back nature each time it flows into our lives."

The law of natural selection would predict that so long as genetic variation could emerge, via mutation, the bacteria should eventually be able to evolve resistance to the antibiotics. But it might take years or longer. It might take so long that the bacteria would run out of food before they evolved the ability to spread into the columns with antibiotics, the columns filled with wolves.

It didn't take years. It took 10 or 12 days.

So what? As Dunn points out, "An understanding of the law of natural selection is key to human health and well-being and, frankly, to the survival of our species." And he goes on to cite "other biological laws of nature with similar consequences," like the species-area law, which "governs how many species live on a particular island or habitat as a function of its size." (It turns out to be useful for predicting extinctions, too.) Then there is the law of corridors that "governs which species will move in the future as climate changes, and how." And the law of escape, which "describes the ways in which species thrive when they escape their pests and parasites"—a topic of increasing relevance to humanity in time of climate change, if the speciesism can be forgiven.

If archives have considered the consequences of these laws as part of their endurance strategies, or their duty to foreground them as repositories of preservation, I see little evidence of it. But once again, I would suggest the primacy of playing by the laws of ecology if archives wish to endure. An archive that is as complex as a microchip always calls for a chip-reader, consigning itself to accelerating obsolescence, and pointing to a garish fenceline: a culture that is unsustainably complicated is doomed to become, in its ruination, its necro-archive (geared to thanatopsography). Complex systems become unstable and subject to black swan events, and this includes complex societies and their archives. If we seriously purposed to create an archive "for the ages" it would be integrated as far as possible into earth systems that are minimally dependent on human energy inputs, and reliant as far as possible on renewable energy. In the end, those archives need endure only for as long as the species unless we have enough hubris to believe that we offer an object lesson to other lifeforms that may come; instead of preserving the great bust, we should be intent on gathering the timeless graffiti-impulse

of our vandalistic species. *Observe all ye who wander by, as you are now so once was I...*

One might protest that the Tasmanian black box aspires to record the action and inaction of world leaders to provide a record of culpability. This seems prudent to preserve, though its meaning will be contingent on whatever form of social organization persists in the wake of the climate emergency, and whether enough of Nuremberg remains to hold court. But compare the black box conception of the archive to what happened in Canada's Wanuskewin Heritage Park in 2019, where, after the reintroduction of bison to their ancient grounds, the traffic of browsing animals exposed four 1,000-year-old indigenous rock carvings (Selkirk, 2021). The rock, inscribed by understanding of ancient ecological patterns, remains a legible signifier despite cultural erasure with genocidal intent. It announces, "Bison liked it here. We're not sure why. Or maybe we are—it doesn't matter. This pattern is so predictable that we can depend on them to unearth evidence of their own being, and our dependence on them. Observe this sign, which requires no language." In this living and minimally intrusive archive we find not just a record of life, but life itself, and a signifier that has endured without electricity or human maintenance.

Archives are inescapably and irrevocably little more than the material signature of intangible cultural heritage, which, history shows, is the living endurance of human orders. Kwesi Daniels, assistant professor and head of the Architecture Department at Tuskegee University, in Alabama, recently explained how his community partnership focused on historical preservation surfaced some unusual architectural features in the home of a civil rights leader, including sturdy poured foundations, reinforced brickwork, and cement firebreaks. Initially a perplexity, the community stories surfaced the reality, the bedrock of the overengineering: this was a house built by local hands to resist the arson and dynamite of domestic terrorists, a house built for the preservation of life in a culture of hostility<sup>3</sup>.

We can document the entire planet with bioinformatics—the science of collecting and analyzing complex biological data include genetic codes, per Oxford's definition—but without animation and without living narrative, that record is dead and useless. The sum is demonstrably greater than the whole—indeed, it requires the whole, and how would the information begin to approach the animated record?

Acknowledging human division through racism to be a bar to our survival, I have been deeply devoted to the sort of community archives that, for instance, reveal the living legacies of racism within a new garden for narrative. In *south* I wrote,

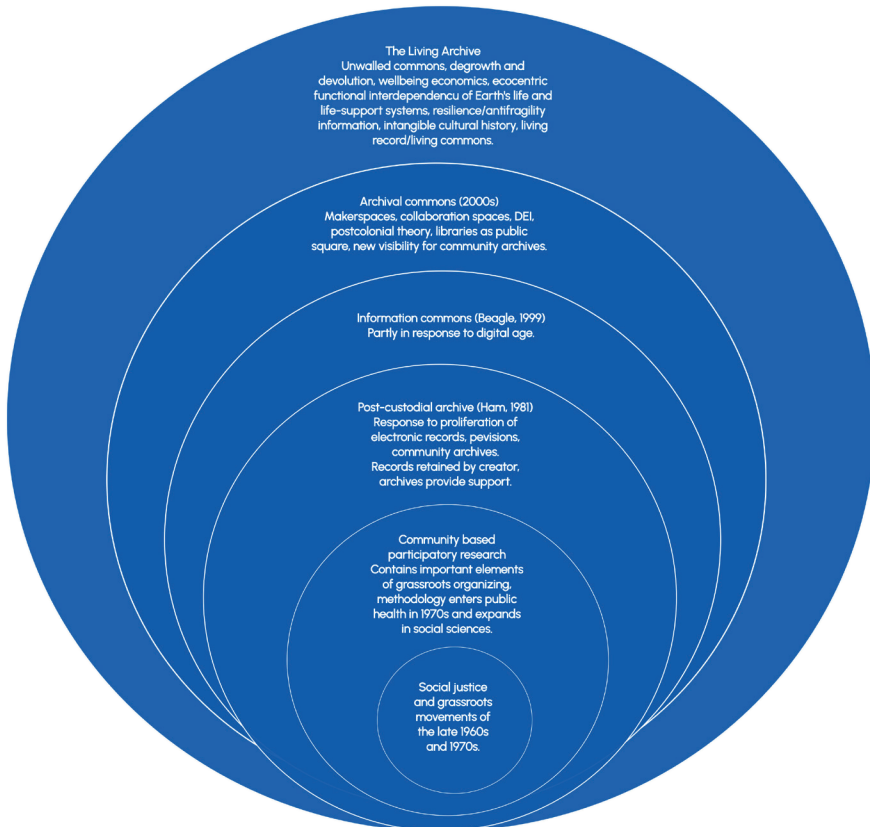
Suppose the archive—the deep archive—is more than a monument to necropolis. Suppose it's alive. Suppose that it is a way to see the gears of the machine. Suppose that the deepest capacity of the archive isn't for preserving the story that imperium tells about itself, but for thorny truth and reconciliation (Giemza, 2015).

Acknowledging that such archives are living archives, attuned to human survival often in opposition to *imperium*, I hold them up now as an instructive model. Acknowledging that old archives often perpetuate the image of a

<sup>3</sup> Webinar, Legacies of American Slavery, University of Sewanee Roberson Project, 26 Sept 2021.

zero-sum society, we look for a model attuned not to the limited good but to the greater good. Acknowledging that the climate emergency imperils their work and all of us, I offer this updated manifesto that would position the living archive as a tool for perpetuating and creating resilience.

Tabla 2. The Living Archive





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