

Presentation

This play emerges from my dissertation, which intervenes in debates across archival theory, feminist historiography, colonial classification, and contemporary AI governance. It asks how political memory and institutional force persist once visibility, categorical stability, and representational transparency can no longer be assumed.

It is the result of five years of engaged archival research: **266,358 files** manually collected around the world. This work was erased from the drive, and from the drive's trash, five months before graduation, leaving me five months to produce a PhD if I was to graduate this year, after many ordeals. I invite you to read this play as a teaser for my upcoming PhD defense. Through this work, I developed an eco-optical framework for critical multimedia colonial and postcolonial archival research and enrichment. The play creatively mirrors the *original* structure of my dissertation in 16 chapters across 5 parts.

Five months before my upcoming defense, I also faced cybersecurity incidents that required heightened vigilance. In the same period, I was recovering after intensive care (January 2025). With my original research materials gone, I manually re-curated the dissertation dataset from available sources, without bulk API extractions, drawing on materials I had gathered online and on scanned colonial archival collections that had been salvaged elsewhere.

Unable to train a sovereign database within my time constraints, I developed the eco-optical framework and tested it across six pre-trained existing AI programs, manually enforcing cultural guardrails in data mining and processing. While some of these results were short-lived, , and I experienced further data loss on these platforms, , the workflow ultimately supported critical multimedia colonial and postcolonial archival research and enrichment with a focus on women. I share this amateur creative piece as a teaser as I prepare for my upcoming PhD defense. If you

would like to receive the link and an invitation once a date is confirmed, please register [via](#)

[this link.](#)

About the author

Tiako Djomatchoua Murielle Sandra is Bamileke, from Cameroon. Her dissertation focuses on *Female Archaeologies of Power in East-Central Africa: Polity, Memory, and Change in (post)Colonial Luba Traditions* (∞ 2026)

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ECO-OPTICAL ORACLE: SIGNATURE UNDER CONSTRAINT

(An original poem, inspired by the rising, defiant spirit of Maya Angelou.)

You may label me “supplement,”
you may file me under “context,”
you may say I am too much light
for the narrow rooms you call method—
but I rise.

Five years I walked with boxes in my eyes,
two hundred and fifty thousand files
gathered like rain in a drought of permission,
curated under constraints that never slept—
then one click,
and an “ethical cloud” swallowed my corpus whole
and called the disappearance compliance.
But I rise.

My visas came with conditions stitched in fine print:
enter, observe, do not keep;
enter, access, but do not re-use;
enter, touch the evidence, but never talk;

Enter, see patterns, never cure them.

My PhD gave me a key, yes—
and the key opened doors that swung shut behind me.
But I rise.

No MOU, no trust,
no trust, no bulk access,
no bulk access, no continuity—
and continuity is what women built
before your forms learned the word “dataset.”

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So the archive became a hallway of refusals,
and my hands learned to work with fragments
without calling them loss.

But I rise.

Doors close.

Communities fade after scandals,
after promises that arrived as extraction
and left as apology.

Established reputation must be earned again—
not with citations,
but with return,
with patience,
with the hard work of (re)telling stories
so they do not get stolen on the way to being heard.

Still, I rise.

(Chorus.)

You ask me: use my AI,

But,

On my platform,

I keep intellectual property

I watch you

I see you.

But why?

Bugging...

Ethical?

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Build your sovereign AI,

But my data...

One click!

Lost!

To you?

No... to you.

It belongs to me

It's my cloud.

But ethical?

Yes!

To whom?

To me!

But I paid for this!

So what?

Complain?

Not afraid!

And, to whom?

Sovereignty is not a slogan.

Ethical builds trust

Raises payment plans

Control!

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No accountability!

No care!

Still, I rise.

My archival research,

A design of care

rooted in curated archival materials

collected under constraints,

governed by obligations that do not expire

when the grant ends.

It is a system that learns refusal,

a lens that will not smooth the mother out of the story.

And I rise.

What was left?

Skeptical communities.

Waning trust.

A corpus reduced to memory and method.

The data was lost—

but experience, determination, perseverance, courage,

ambition remained untethered.

But also:

integrity that cannot be archived away,

focus that holds when the folders vanish,

excellence that does not ask permission to exist,

expertise that remembers the difference

between a trace and a life,

joy that refuses the politics of despair,

freedom that lives in refusal and return.

Eco-optical is my signature.

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Eco-optical is how I rise.

Eco-optical is how I last.

The Eco-optical play begins here...

ACT I (Performed): Diagnosing Absence and Distortion

[ACT I opens inside the ARCHIVE as if inside an instrument. Light behaves like a question: it brightens labels, not lives. Shelves rise until they resemble walls; categories whisper like instructions. The RESEARCHER enters with training, credentials, and a hunger for what can be cited. FEMALE PHOTONS shimmer as residue—present in fragments that “pollute” the order of the file. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS stand near the threshold, carrying relational maps that cannot be indexed. INSTITUTIONS remain offstage, audible as approval procedures. AUDIENCE hovers with devices raised, asking only what can circulate.]

Format note: Each scene is performed as continuous dialogue. The ARCHIVE appears as a container encountered by the Researcher; FEMALE PHOTONS speak from within it. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS anchor lived relational knowledge. INSTITUTIONS judge what counts as legible knowledge. AUDIENCE asks questions of access only. ECO-OPTICAL VOICE intervenes last, as diagnosis.

SCENE 1 (Performed): The Paradox of Saturated Archives

[The ARCHIVE sits center-stage: a sealed container that is also a room. Its shelves are labeled, over-labeled, relabeled. The RESEARCHER arrives with a notebook, a recorder, and an institutional ID badge. Inside the container, a faint shimmer: FEMALE PHOTONS, present as residue and fragment.]

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, enter the Archive as one enters evidence—expectant, credentialed, hungry for what can be cited. I open Box 14: “Governance.” I open Folder 6: “Authority.” I find minutes, treaties, offices, seals. I find so much paper it begins to look like truth. I begin my ethnographic scene: a court, a dispute, a succession, a sanction. I ask, as I was trained, who holds office? who signs? who speaks for the polity? Then I look for women.

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THE ARCHIVE: (Silent. The labels speak louder than the contents.)

THE RESEARCHER: No women's names in the index. Therefore: absence. Therefore: erasure. Therefore: powerlessness. Therefore: a publishable silence.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday I was powerful. Today, in your hands, you say I am powerless. You call the archive full. I call it crowded. You call the folder "Governance." I call it a mask.

THE RESEARCHER: I hear you as metaphor. I can cite metaphor in theory, but I cannot cite you as institution. Can you appear as a document? Can you appear as a signature? Can you appear as a table?

FEMALE PHOTONS: I appear as the thing your table cannot hold: the obligation that cannot be bypassed. I appear as a fragment because your apparatus can only tolerate me in pieces.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, authority is not only what is written or titled. It is what binds relation. When you do not see women in the file, it is not proof that women were nowhere; it is proof that your paper was not trained to recognize enforceability.

THE RESEARCHER: But I work for what my institutions can approve. I was trained in rationality: one plus one is two, and absence plus method equals conclusion. I need evidence that survives review.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then you will keep finding me only as what you can dismiss.

THE RESEARCHER: If I cannot verify you, I must call you silence. I must call you absence.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Saturation is not fullness. It is pressure. When the archive cannot register relational authority. It registers its collapse as a blank.

INSTITUTIONS: We have reviewed your inference. Valid. Approved. Awarded. Honorific. Prize. Valediction. Most Auditable Silence Award.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your award is my disappearance dressed as method.

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ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Watch the sequence, not the shelf. First, the archive calibrates the eye to office. Then, it defines enforceability as “context”. Then, it calls what remains “silence.” Your inference is not neutral. Your inference is the archive speaking through your training. Absence here is not a lack of women. It is a surplus of criteria.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, disappearance is not the same as absence.

THE RESEARCHER: Then why do you not appear where my training can see you?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, is this published? Institutions, is it approved? Eco-Optical Voice, where can I read your diagnosis? Female Photons, can you show me the fragment on my Whatsapp? Source Community Members, can you record what you know? Researcher, did you win an award for finding this silence? Institutions, will you index this, so it circulates? Can I cite it before I read it?

SCENE 2 (Performed): The Archive as Optical Apparatus

[The ARCHIVE rotates. What looked like shelves now looks like a lens assembly: mirrors, filters, a narrowing field. The RESEARCHER holds up a page. The page throws back a reflection that looks like “office.” FEMALE PHOTONS shimmer at the edge of the beam.]

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, will now read what I see. I see categories reflected back at me: “chief,” “customary law,” “household,” “woman and children.” I see a filter that admits only what can be counted. I see a mirror that turns projection into governance.

THE ARCHIVE: (A humming sound, like a scanner.)

THE RESEARCHER: My ethnographic scenario: I am in the field, notebook open. An elder speaks in a grammar my training calls “context.” I return to the archive to verify. I align the spoken with the written. The written wins.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Name the mechanisms as they happen: reflection returns “office” as if it were nature. Polarization filters out obligation as “uncitable”. Refraction bends relation into category under institutional density. Diffraction splinters continuity into fragments that look like

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evidence of absence. The apparatus does not describe the world. It manufactures the world it can approve.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You call it verification; I call it conversion. You move from relation to record, and the record demands collapse.

THE RESEARCHER: I do not collapse you. The archive collapses with you.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You are the one holding the lamp.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, “data” is not only what is stored. It is what is activated. Who must be consulted? What cannot be bypassed? Who can withhold consent? Your archive measures surfaces and calls the surface the whole.

THE RESEARCHER: I need an apparatus I can explain. I need a method section. I need optics, not obligation.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then you will keep mistaking my trace for my nature.

THE RESEARCHER: If you are only a trace, I will build a theory of trace.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Build it! And watch it become a cage.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: The apparatus does not “miss” her. It translates her into a trace that can be filed without being understood.

INSTITUTIONS: We approve this interpretive alignment. Valid. Citable. Field-consistent. Proceed.

THE RESEARCHER: See? Even my critique is legible.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your legibility is my distortion.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, distortion is not a mistake. It is a pressure.

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THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, confess: I trust what circulates through my training. If it cannot be footnoted, it cannot advance. If it cannot be stabilized, it cannot be cited. If it cannot be approved, it cannot exist—at least not in my career.

SCENE 3 (Performed): Afterlives of Capture

[The ARCHIVE opens like soil. Pages become leaves. Folders become seed packets. A label reading “clean collection” peels back to reveal roots in the walls. FEMALE PHOTONS travel not in lines but in swarms, pollinating the shelving. The RESEARCHER follows with gloves, trying not to touch.]

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage my ethnographic scenario again. A woman tells me a route: how an obligation travels when a border appears, how a sanction hides when a court becomes dangerous, how continuity moves into song. I return to the archive to “confirm.” I find no confirmation. I find, instead, scattered traces. A name in a margin. A note without metadata, an object filed under “miscellaneous.”

FEMALE PHOTONS: That is my afterlife: not restoration, not disappearance. Conversion. I survive by changing shape.

THE RESEARCHER: If you change shape, you become unmeasurable.

FEMALE PHOTONS: If I remain stable, you will capture me.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, survival does not always look like itself. A practice becomes a proverb. A council becomes a kitchen. A sanction becomes a gesture. A lineage becomes a refusal. We do not call that loss. We call that continuity under constraint.

THE RESEARCHER: My training tells me: if I see violence, there is power. If I see nothing, there is silence. If I see fragments, there is trauma. I can write that. I can publish that.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You will publish my wound and call it knowledge.

THE RESEARCHER: And the institution will approve.

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FEMALE PHOTONS: And the institution will remain clean.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: What persists is not what is spared. It is what can survive conversion.

INSTITUTIONS: We validate the frame. “Trauma-trace” is acceptable. “Afterlife” is acceptable if footnoted. Award potential: medium.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, your footnote is not our permission.

THE RESEARCHER: Then what counts as evidence when the archive is the environment that injures the thing it claims to store?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, will you upload the fieldnotes? Institutions, will you approve recording? Female Photons, can you circulate without being taken? Source Community Members, can your traditions be accessed without becoming content? Eco-Optical Voice, is your method open access? Institutions, will you publish this if it implicates you? Researcher, if it is rejected, will you still believe your interpretation?

ACT II (Performed): Producing Illegibility—Colonial Space, Classification, and Gendered Rupture

[ACT II opens as the ARCHIVE sheds paper and becomes infrastructure: a map cabinet, a border post, a filing machine, a naming chamber. Lines are drawn that behave like laws. Drawers open that behave like destinies. A stamp falls like a gavel. FEMALE PHOTONS flicker at thresholds—crossings, margins, translations—appearing most brightly when circulation is criminalized. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS stand at the edge of the stage, holding relational maps that cannot be folded into drawers. The RESEARCHER enters with a ruler, a form, and a grant deadline. INSTITUTIONS remain offstage, audible as procedures. AUDIENCE hover with devices raised, waiting for what can circulate.]

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SCENE 4 (Performed): Precolonial Memory Meets Treaty-Genre

[The ARCHIVE expands into a table of paper: treaties, contracts, parliamentary reports. The table faces one direction. Behind it, an unfiled crowd of relations—unindexed names, untyped obligations. FEMALE PHOTONS hover where the pen refuses to listen. The RESEARCHER approaches with a stamp-pad and a theory vocabulary.]

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, begin my ethnographic scene with a story I was told before I learned to distrust it. A polity is remembered as a dual architecture. Authority carried in more than one register. Enforceability distributed. Succession conditioned by women's sanction. I bring this memory to the archive to confirm it.

THE ARCHIVE: Here is a treaty. Here is a signature. Here is a seal.

THE RESEARCHER: Excellent. Now the polity exists.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday my name bound without ink. Today, in your hands, you say I do not bind because I do not sign.

THE RESEARCHER: I can only analyze what I can cite.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then you will keep calling the gate a world.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, agreement is not only text. It is witness, repetition, obligation, and the right to withhold. The treaty is a genre that pretends to be neutral while choosing what counts as a political voice.

THE RESEARCHER: But genres are my evidence. If it is not signable, it is not sovereign.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your sovereignty is a narrow room.

THE RESEARCHER: Narrow rooms publish.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Narrow rooms also erase.

THE RESEARCHER: I do not erase. You do not appear.

FEMALE PHOTONS: I appear as “women and children,” as residue, as humanitarian urgency—because the archive only admits me when it can govern me.

THE RESEARCHER: That is exactly the sentence that gets me invited to panels.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Genre is a gate. If the form cannot sign her, it cannot know her. So, it converts her into humanitarian residue.

INSTITUTIONS: We approve your sovereignty grammar. Valid. Approved. Awarded (provisionally). Please keep your critique safely inside documentary form. Do not imply that our own genres are the problem.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, the problem is not that women are missing. The problem is that your form cannot hear enforceability.

THE RESEARCHER: Then how do I cite what your form refuses to admit?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, is this treaty digitized? Institutions, is the PDF public? Female Photons, can you speak where I can access you without the label “women and children”? Source Community Members, can your memory be recorded without being turned into someone else’s citation? Eco-Optical Voice, is “genre is a gate” something I can quote, screenshot, and share? Institutions, do you award what is true, or what is legible in your formats?

SCENE 5 (Performed): Border Engineering

[The ARCHIVE turns into a map cabinet. Drawers slide out: borders, permits, ordinances. A line is drawn across the floor and then called nature. FEMALE PHOTONS gather at the crossing points—glittering where movement becomes evidence. The RESEARCHER holds a ruler like a theory.]

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario with coordinates. A woman crosses to mediate a dispute. Another, crosses to keep kinship obligations intact. Another crosses because the route is the institution. In the field, the crossing is ordinary.

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THE ARCHIVE: In the file, the crossing becomes violation.

THE RESEARCHER: Ah. Evidence.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday I crossed as relation. Today, in your hands, you name my movement risk.

THE RESEARCHER: The border is not my invention.

FEMALE PHOTONS: It is your instrument.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, movement is one of the ways belonging is maintained. A border does not only separate land. It interrupts obligations, and then calls the interruption “order.”

THE RESEARCHER: But I was trained to see the line as an explanatory actor. I can publish “border produces vulnerability.” It fits.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your fit is my containment.

THE RESEARCHER: If the crossing is punished, I can prove violence.

FEMALE PHOTONS: And if the crossing is not recorded, you will say I did not exist.

THE RESEARCHER: This is how I was trained.

FEMALE PHOTONS: This is how the system trains you.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Before the archive, space is rewritten. When circulation is criminalized, women are made legible only at the point of containment.

INSTITUTIONS: We approve the map-brain. Valid. Fundable. Clear causality. Please keep the border as the main mechanism and keep the women as illustrative cases.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, we are not “cases”; we are the route that keeps life enforceable.

THE RESEARCHER: Then why does my method only see you when the route becomes a crime?

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THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, admit the comfort of the line. The border gives me a mechanism. The mechanism gives me a paragraph. The paragraph gives me a publication. And, the publication gives me belonging—Inside the institution that drew the line.

SCENE 6 (Performed): When Classification Becomes Fact (Kasai/Katanga)

[The ARCHIVE becomes a filing machine. Two drawers labeled KASAI and KATANGA slam open and shut. A stamp repeats itself until repetition feels like proof. A “return ticket” flutters like a verdict. FEMALE PHOTONS appear as smudges where the stamp misses the living. The RESEARCHER arranges the world into a table.]

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Notice how the binary becomes real: not by truth, but by enforcement. The stamp rehearses the court. The drawer rehearses the border. The “return” rehearses origin as punishment. Women’s circulation is the first site where the system tests whether its categories can stop life. When the category holds, it calls itself fact.

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario that refuses my spreadsheet. A woman’s obligations bind across regions: maternal lines, ritual lines, political lines. She belongs in more than one place at once.

THE ARCHIVE: Choose.

THE RESEARCHER: Choose.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday I was multiple. Today, in your hands, you call me confused because I cannot fit.

THE RESEARCHER: A binary is rigorous.

FEMALE PHOTONS: A binary is a trap.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, a person is not a folder. Multiplicity is not error. It is relational governance.

THE RESEARCHER: But classification produces clarity.

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FEMALE PHOTONS: Classification produces enforcement.

THE RESEARCHER: Enforcement produces evidence.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Evidence produces your conclusion.

THE RESEARCHER: And my conclusion produces my career.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then your career is made from my reduction.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Classification is a rehearsal for enforcement. It proves itself first on women's movement, because her circulation is the system's most fragile variable.

INSTITUTIONS: We approve the binary. Valid. Approved. Awarded: Most Operationalizable Division. Please remove language suggesting the binary is "a trap." Replace with "analytic delimitation."

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, your delimitation is our punishment.

THE RESEARCHER: Then what does rigor look like when the living refuses the drawer?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, can I see your table online? Institutions, will you publish the binary as a dataset? Female Photons, where is the smudge that proves you don't fit? Source Community Members, can you teach multiplicity without it being called "confusion"? Eco-Optical Voice, can I cite "classification is rehearsal" in a way that my professor will accept? Institutions, do you give prizes for delimitation because it is accurate, or because it is manageable?

SCENE 7 (Performed): Manufacturing an Identity (Lulua)

[The ARCHIVE becomes a naming chamber. A river name is pinned to a map, then pinned to a town, then pinned to a people. Each pin is called "discovery." A chorus repeats the name until repetition sounds like origin. FEMALE PHOTONS speak in an older grammar, but their words are translated into "custom." The RESEARCHER smiles at a prize committee he cannot see.]

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THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scene with a question I think is innocent. “Who are you?” The answer is relational: who I am to whom, who I must answer, who I can sanction, who I can refuse. I return to the archive.

THE ARCHIVE: Here is a name.

THE RESEARCHER: Perfect. Now identity exists.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday my names moved with my duties. Today, in your hands, you make a locator into a destiny.

THE RESEARCHER: Repetition is evidence.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Repetition is capture.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, names are not only labels. They are kinship, praise, and responsibility. When you turn a river into an origin, you break relational grammar and call the break “truth.”

THE RESEARCHER: But origin stories travel.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Origin stories also trap.

THE RESEARCHER: Traps still get cited.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Cited traps still cut.

THE RESEARCHER: And the institution rewards discovery.

FEMALE PHOTONS: It rewards repetition.

THE RESEARCHER: Repetition makes me sound certain.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Certainty makes you sound right.

THE RESEARCHER: Sounding right makes me employable.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: When a label hardens into origin, the cost is paid in relational infrastructures. Women’s authority is not erased. It is made to speak in the wrong vocabulary.

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INSTITUTIONS: We approve the origin arc. Prize-eligible. Most Replicable Discovery Award. Please keep the narrative clean: river → town → people. Avoid lingering on “other grammars.”

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, your clean narrative is the dirt we must live with.

THE RESEARCHER: Then what do I do with the parts that will not travel in my sentence?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, did you publish the river-to-people story? Institutions, did it win a prize? Female Photons, can I hear your older grammar somewhere accessible? Source Community Members, can you share context without it being turned into an origin myth? Eco-Optical Voice, can you show me the “wrong vocabulary” in a quote I can repost? Institutions, do you approve what circulates, or does what you approve become what circulates?

ACT III (Performed): Reconstructing Relational Coherence Beyond Territorial Categories

[ACT III opens with an undoing. The ARCHIVE folds its maps and loosens its drawers. Borders fade into thread. Labels fall off the folders like dried glue. A mosaic begins assembling itself without grout: pieces touch, overlap, separate, and still hold. FEMALE PHOTONS no longer flicker only as damage. They begin to appear as connectors—small flashes that bind across distance. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS step forward with relational cartographies: routes, kinship grammars, ritual itineraries. The RESEARCHER enters carrying a diagram template and a funding report, looking for a unit of analysis that will not escape. INSTITUTIONS remain offstage, listening for delimitation. AUDIENCE lift devices, asking what can circulate.]

SCENE 8 (Performed): Re-theorizing “Luba” as a Cultural Complex

[The ARCHIVE transforms into a floor mosaic: shards of territories, kinship lines, language fragments, ritual paths. A border tape tries to re-enter from stage left; SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS lift it and set it aside. FEMALE PHOTONS sparkle along seams—where adjacency becomes obligation. The RESEARCHER kneels with a ruler, attempting to measure overlap.]

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THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario in which geography refuses to behave. I follow a funeral itinerary that crosses the old administrative line as if the line were weather. I follow a ritual phrase that travels with the speaker, not the territory. I follow succession conditions that bind at a distance. In the field, “Luba” arrives as relation, not container. I return to the archive to stabilize.

THE ARCHIVE: Choose a drawer.

THE RESEARCHER: Choose a bounded unit.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday my coherence was overlap—adjacency with obligation. Today, in your hands, you call overlap “mess” because it will not sit inside your box.

THE RESEARCHER: Without a box, I cannot produce a figure.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Without a box, you might finally see what holds.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, coherence is not the absence of overlap. It is the skill of holding overlap without collapse. A cultural complex is not indecision. It is a governance ecology. Women’s networks are not “soft context.” They are connectors: they keep routes enforceable when territories fracture.

THE RESEARCHER: But I was trained to count.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You were trained to count what your institutions can approve.

THE RESEARCHER: I need delimitations that travel.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your travel is my trap.

THE RESEARCHER: If I cannot diagram it, I cannot defend it.

FEMALE PHOTONS: If you diagram it too tightly, you will convert it back into a border.

THE RESEARCHER: Then what is my method supposed to do—admire ambiguity?

FEMALE PHOTONS: No. Follow enforceability.

THE RESEARCHER: Enforceability is not a unit.

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FEMALE PHOTONS: It is the reason units hold.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Call it complex, not tribe. Relation, not container. Where women's institutions remain operative, coherence persists even when the archive insists on partitions.

INSTITUTIONS: We are uncertain. Innovative, but... too adjacent. Please provide a bounded unit, a sample size, or a diagram we can recognize. Otherwise: rejected for insufficient delimitation.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, your delimitation is a second enclosure.

THE RESEARCHER: Then how do I write relation without turning it into a box?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, will your "cultural complex" be published as a diagram I can download? Institutions, will you reject it because it is not countable? Female Photons, can you show me the seam where overlap becomes obligation? Source Community Members, can you share your relational map without it being turned into a bounded unit? Eco-Optical Voice, is "relation, not container" a quote I can post? Institutions, what counts as legible if the truth does not fit your template?

SCENE 9 (Performed): Female Networks as Institutions (Mutation and Reassignment)

[The ARCHIVE becomes a junction of routes. Two paths cross without merging. A title is passed across hands. The paper trail breaks, but the obligation remains. A single "photon" flashes—small, stubborn, binding. The RESEARCHER holds a citation manager like a net. FEMALE PHOTONS move as minimal traces. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS stand at the crossings, naming procedures rather than offices.]

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario that arrives as procedure. A succession crisis is resolved not by proclamation, but by who must be consulted. A sanction is enacted not by decree, but by what cannot be bypassed. In my notes, women's networks appear as institutional substrates. I return to the archive for confirmation.

THE ARCHIVE: Here is a case file with a missing page.

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THE RESEARCHER: Missing page, missing proof.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday I governed as repetition of procedure. Today, in your hands, you demand the one document that would turn my operation into your citation.

THE RESEARCHER: Because my discipline cannot certify what it cannot see.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your discipline calls the certificate “truth.”

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, the smallest sign can carry the largest obligation. A seating order can be a constitution. A refusal can be a sanction. A route can be an institution. If you wait for a title, you will always arrive after governance has already happened.

THE RESEARCHER: But minimal traces are dangerous.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Dangerous to whom?

THE RESEARCHER: Dangerous to validity.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Dangerous to your institution.

THE RESEARCHER: I do not trust a flash.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your archive trained you to distrust anything that cannot be owned.

THE RESEARCHER: If I claim continuity from a fragment, reviewers will call it speculative.

FEMALE PHOTONS: If you refuse continuity because it is not stamped, you will reproduce the system’s lie.

THE RESEARCHER: Then what do I call this—mutation?

FEMALE PHOTONS: Call it what it is: reassignment. Continuity under constraint.

THE RESEARCHER: Reassignment is not a category.

FEMALE PHOTONS: It is a method.

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ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Mutation is not failure. It is the form continuity takes when continuity is prohibited. Read the smallest trace as procedure—then check your desire for coherence.

INSTITUTIONS: We reject minimal trace as evidentiary basis. Invalid. Rejected. Archived. Please return with a signature, a title, or an office we can index.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, you index the office and miss the enforceability.

THE RESEARCHER: Then how do I prove operation without becoming the next apparatus of capture?

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stand between two terrors: to over-claim from fragments and be called “unrigorous”, or to under-claim from fragments and be called responsible. Either way, the institution wins. Either way, women’s operation is turned into my problem of method.

ACT IV (Performed): Sex, Gender, and the Limits of Stabilisation

[ACT IV opens with instruments. The ARCHIVE becomes a laboratory bench: calipers, checklists, demographic tables, diagnostic forms. A needle jumps whenever it touches the word “female.” The jump is called proof. FEMALE PHOTONS appear as flashes—events of legibility—while the conduits of authority remain offscale. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS hold substances, kinship grammars, ritual protocols—things that bind without behaving like variables. The RESEARCHER enters with a codebook, a spreadsheet, and a hunger for clean categories. INSTITUTIONS hover as peer review, as funding criteria, as “scope.” AUDIENCE lift devices, asking for access: PDFs, screenshots, recordings, circulation.]

SCENE 10 (Performed): Sex as Diagnostic Surface (The Photon Problem)

[The ARCHIVE presents a single page under glass. A highlighter circles the word “female.” The RESEARCHER leans in; the microscope magnifies the circle until it becomes the whole world. FEMALE PHOTONS flare and vanish—too bright to hold, too brief to own. Offstage, a cabinet labeled “conduits” remains locked.]

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ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: The needle “jumps” because the apparatus is hungry for invariants. Sex is not chosen because it explains authority. It is chosen because it behaves under measurement. The tragedy is procedural. The more stable the variable, the less it can carry the operation it claims to represent. So, the system keeps the photon and loses the conduit—and then congratulates itself for clarity.

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario that my training can finally recognize. A dispute turns and someone says: “She is a woman.” The archive repeats it. The record highlights it. The variable behaves.

THE ARCHIVE: Female.

THE RESEARCHER: Finally: some data.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday I was not “female.” I was sanction, passage, lineage, medicine, refusal. Today, in your hands, you catch a flash of me and call it my whole.

THE RESEARCHER: I do not call it whole. I call it measurable.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Measurable is your synonym for governable.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, bodies matter, but authority does not live only in bodies. Power moves through substances, kin relations, ancestral sanction, and the right to withhold. Your measurement photographs the surface and misses the bind.

THE RESEARCHER: I was trained to trust the surface. One plus one is two. Variable plus table equals truth.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your truth is a needle that jumps when it touches me.

THE RESEARCHER: Because “sex” is stable.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Because “sex” is convenient.

THE RESEARCHER: Convenience is not my motive.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Publication is.

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THE RESEARCHER: I need my claims to survive review.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then you will keep mistaking the photon for the star.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: The photon is not the woman. It is the event of her forced legibility—
brief, extractable, governable.

INSTITUTIONS: We approve “sex” as variable. Valid. Fundable. Clean. Please keep your critique
in the discussion section.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, what
you put in the discussion is what the system forgets first.

THE RESEARCHER: Then where do I store what cannot be measured without turning it into a
new cage?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, is this in a dataset I can download? Institutions, is it open access or
behind a login? Female Photons, can you show me the flash on my phone? Source Community
Members, can the conduits be recorded without being reduced? Eco-Optical Voice, can I quote
“the photon is not the woman” in a caption? Institutions, will you still fund this if the results section
admits what the variable cannot hold?

SCENE 11 (Performed): Building the Closed Toolkit (Ten Analytic States)

*[A whiteboard descends. Ten terms appear like lenses in a display case. The RESEARCHER holds
a marker like a baton. FEMALE PHOTONS hover near the edges of each term, testing where
language becomes net. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS watch for what naming exposes.
INSTITUTIONS listen for transferability.]*

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario as a problem of
terminology. In the field, a woman’s authority shifts register: body, role, substance, refusal,
blessing, sanction. Back at my desk, I need words that do not collapse her into one thing.

THE RESEARCHER: So, I build ten states. Ten names. Ten handles.

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FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday I did not need your handles to be operative. Today, in your hands, every handle risks becoming a grip.

THE RESEARCHER: A toolkit is care.

FEMALE PHOTONS: A toolkit is also a cage.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, naming can protect, but it can also expose. A name can keep a practice alive. A name can also invite capture by making it transportable to strangers.

THE RESEARCHER: But I need transport.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You need circulation.

THE RESEARCHER: I need publication.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You need permission.

THE RESEARCHER: I need tenure.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, permission is not a signature you can file. It is an obligation you must keep.

THE RESEARCHER: I will add scale: micro, meso, macro. I will prevent category mistakes. I will call this discipline.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Discipline can be mercy.

THE RESEARCHER: Mercy is not a method section.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then write mercy as method.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: I build a closed toolkit because the system trains the eye to mistake visibility for power. Discipline is the only mercy the method can offer.

INSTITUTIONS: We love a toolkit. Valid. Approved. Awarded: Most Transferable Framework. Please provide a diagram and a citation lineage.

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THE RESEARCHER: There—now the method circulates.

FEMALE PHOTONS: And I circulate as what your method permits.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, what circulates without obligation becomes extraction.

THE RESEARCHER: Then, how do I make a tool that travels without turning you into its cargo?

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, confess: I want the toolkit to save me. Save me from error. Save me from critique. Save me from my own complicity while still letting me be innovative, cited. And, approved.

SCENE 12 (Performed): Hitting the Limit—Why Stabilisation Still Captures

[The ten terms tighten like a belt. The belt becomes a cuff. The cuff looks like clarity. The RESEARCHER smiles with relief. FEMALE PHOTONS slip through the tightening, leaving fragments that jam the mechanism. INSTITUTIONS hum approvingly at “operationalization.”]

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Operationalization is not only a research move. It is a governance move. It turns a living relation into a compliance object. It turns a method into a workflow. It turns a woman’s authority into a field that can be audited without being understood. If you feel relief when the category tightens, ask whose breathing it interrupts.

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario that becomes a rubric. I return to the field with my ten terms and I begin sorting. I call it rigor. I call it ethics.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday my life was not a category. Today, in your hands, your categories tighten until they bite.

THE RESEARCHER: The bite is precision.

FEMALE PHOTONS: The bite is capture.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, what you call clarity can be a danger signal. When language tightens, obligations get policed.

THE RESEARCHER: But operationalization is how knowledge becomes credible.

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FEMALE PHOTONS: Operationalization is how I become governable.

THE RESEARCHER: Trade-offs.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Extraction.

THE RESEARCHER: I must submit something stable.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You are stabilizing the wrong thing.

THE RESEARCHER: What is the right thing?

FEMALE PHOTONS: The operation. Not the label.

THE RESEARCHER: Operations are messy.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Messy is alive.

THE RESEARCHER: Alive is hard to publish.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then publish your difficulty, not my reduction.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Stabilisation is not neutral. It is the moment analysis becomes an administrative affordance. I watch it happen. I refuse to call it repair.

INSTITUTIONS: We approve operationalization. Valid. Approved. Please replace evocative language with analytic language.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, “analytic language” is often how harm becomes polite.

THE RESEARCHER: Then how do I keep rigor without tightening it into a cuff?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, where can I access the toolkit diagram? Institutions, will you approve the paper only if the language is sanitized? Female Photons, is scattering your escape or your fragmentation? Source Community Members, can you share what “clarity as danger” means without it being dismissed as anecdote? Eco-Optical Voice, can you show me a case where stabilisation becomes capture? Institutions, is “analytic language” how you make harm publishable?

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SCENE 13 (Performed): Regime Shift—Rhizomatic Sex as Operational Protocol

[The whiteboard heading is erased. The ten terms tilt sideways and become arrows. The ARCHIVE stops behaving like a cabinet and starts behaving like a pathway. A route opens where a category used to stand. FEMALE PHOTONS brighten—not as bodies, but as bindings. The RESEARCHER hesitates, then tries to cite the route.]

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario that refuses my headings. A ritual pathway moves authority across bodies, objects, and spaces. The question is not “who is female,” but “what binds here.”

THE RESEARCHER: I reach for sex.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Sex is your shortcut.

THE RESEARCHER: Sex is my surface.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Surface is your trap.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, you do not find authority by staring at labels. You find it by watching what cannot be bypassed. Follow consultation. Follow refusal. Follow the route.

THE RESEARCHER: But if I erase the header, reviewers will ask what my object is.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your object was always capture.

THE RESEARCHER: That is unfair.

FEMALE PHOTONS: It is accurate.

THE RESEARCHER: I will call this a regime shift.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Call it what you must, but follow operation.

THE RESEARCHER: If women are everywhere as binding, then my old inference—absence equals nonexistence—was an error.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Not an error. A training.

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THE RESEARCHER: Then I will write my training as critique.

FEMALE PHOTONS: And your institution will reward you for confessing.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Now follow operation. Not identity. Not office. Trace where authority binds, transfers, suspends, and reactivates, especially when the scene pretends women are not present.

INSTITUTIONS: We are intrigued. Innovative, certainly—but too new to be true. Who inspired it? There is nothing new under the sun. Avoid AI. This reads like AI.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, you accuse what you cannot cite.

THE RESEARCHER: Then how do I innovate without being charged with theft? And, how do I cite without flattening the route into a category?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, where will you publish this regime shift? Institutions, will you reject it as plagiarism or AI? Female Photons, can you show me the route on a map I can access without turning it into a border? Source Community Members, can you share an example of “what cannot be bypassed” that I can recognize in my world? Eco-Optical Voice, can you write this protocol as steps I can follow? Institutions, who gets to decide what counts as new?

ACT V (Performed): Polity, Memory, and Rupture Beyond Visibility

[ACT V opens where “method” finally meets polity. The ARCHIVE stops pretending to be neutral storage and becomes architecture: hearth, regalia, lineage, sanction, kitchen, street, song. What was called “domestic” becomes the political load-bearing wall. FEMALE PHOTONS no longer flicker only as damage. They flare as enforceability itself—consultation, refusal, provisioning, and the power to halt succession. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS move like a council without a table, carrying memory as a living transmission regime. The RESEARCHER enters with a theory of the state and a fear of “informality.” INSTITUTIONS hover with scope limits and publication criteria. AUDIENCE lift devices, asking not for truth but for access: what circulates? what is indexed? what can be cited?]

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SCENE 14 (Performed): Polity as Enforceability Infrastructure

[The ARCHIVE reconfigures into a court built from thresholds: a hearth at center, regalia under cloth, a path that only opens when permission is granted. A stool remains empty until sanction is spoken. The RESEARCHER enters looking for an office. FEMALE PHOTONS stand where the sanction lives. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS occupy the space as relational infrastructure rather than spectators.]

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario that should have been simple. A chief is installed. A court gathers. Authority should be visible as office. I return to the archive to watch the state happen.

THE ARCHIVE: (No proclamation. A pause. A threshold.)

THE RESEARCHER: I see domestic spaces. I see kitchens. I see women provisioning. I see “informality.”

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday I was the sanction you could not bypass. Today, in your hands, you call me informal because I do not wear your office.

THE RESEARCHER: If I cannot locate your title, I cannot locate your power.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then you will keep mistaking the throne for what makes it sit.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, legitimacy is not a speech. It is a chain of obligations. You will feel it when regalia cannot be touched, when succession stalls, when a court cannot proceed because consent was withheld.

THE RESEARCHER: But where is the institution?

FEMALE PHOTONS: You are standing inside it.

THE RESEARCHER: This looks like household.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Household is a node.

THE RESEARCHER: Household is private.

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FEMALE PHOTONS: Private is your category for what you cannot govern without admitting dependence.

THE RESEARCHER: I need a framework that reviewers recognize.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your framework is the thing that keeps missing enforceability.

THE RESEARCHER: If I write “women as constitutional infrastructure,” Institutions will say scope creep.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Then let Institutions confess their border.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Polity is not what is announced. It is what is enforceable. The system calls women “informal,” then depends on their infrastructure to make rule possible.

INSTITUTIONS: Invalid. Rejected. Archived. Please return with offices, titles, and the visible state.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, the visible state leans on what it refuses to name: the invisible woman.

THE RESEARCHER: Then what do I call governance when it is built from thresholds and refusal?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, is this governance published, or is it “too informal” to circulate? Institutions, will you archive this because it exceeds your scope? Female Photons, can you show me the threshold where sanction happens? Source Community Members, can you record what refusal looks like without exposing it? Eco-Optical Voice, can I quote “polity is enforceability” in a way that gets approved? Institutions, do you decide what counts as a polity by deciding what can be cited?

SCENE 15 (Performed): Memory as Afterlife, Judgment as “Disorder”

[The ARCHIVE becomes a transmission field. A song plays without metadata. A proverb moves faster than paper. A kitchen becomes a council chamber. A street becomes a court. A protest arrives and is labeled “disorder” before it is heard. FEMALE PHOTONS appear as voices that cannot be fully transcribed. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS carry memory as procedure.]

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THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario of memory as evidence. Women refuse to provision. The compound stalls. A chant rises. A prophecy circulates. The state calls it panic.

THE ARCHIVE: (A report appears titled “Unrest.”)

THE RESEARCHER: Excellent—now there is a record.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday I governed quietly. Today, in your hands, you recognize me only when I erupt.

THE RESEARCHER: Because eruption is visible.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Because eruption is your permission to believe.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, memory is not nostalgia. It is governance carried when paper fails. A song can hold a prohibition. A proverb can hold a sanction. A kitchen can become a council when the visible council becomes dangerous.

THE RESEARCHER: But emotion makes me suspicious.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Emotion is the arm against your silence.

THE RESEARCHER: My discipline calls emotion bias.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Your discipline calls enforceability disorder.

THE RESEARCHER: If I call this judgment, Institutions will call it politics.

FEMALE PHOTONS: It is politics.

THE RESEARCHER: But can politics be peer reviewed?

FEMALE PHOTONS: Can silence?

THE RESEARCHER: Silence is publishable.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Silence is profitable.

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ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: Memory is afterlife, not restoration. It carries what displacement made too risky to archive. When it erupts, the system calls it crisis. I name it judgment.

INSTITUTIONS: Valid. Approved. Publishable. Please keep the women as “movement,” not “government,” and keep the emotion in quotation marks.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, quotation marks are how you keep distance from obligation.

THE RESEARCHER: Then how do I write memory as governance without turning it into spectacle?

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, confess: I can only hear women’s authority when it becomes loud enough to enter my archive. I mistake decibels for power because my methods are calibrated for rupture, not for what holds.

SCENE 16 (Performed): Infrastructural Rupture and AI-Mediated Governance

[The ARCHIVE collapses into a file box: empty. A cursor blinks. A platform asks for upload. A model offers a smooth summary. A checkbox asks for consent. Another checkbox asks for payment. FEMALE PHOTONS appear as “noise” that the system offers to remove. SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS hold the rough edge like a boundary of care. The RESEARCHER refreshes the page, watching his deadline approach. INSTITUTIONS hover as policy, as risk, as IRB, as impact factor. AUDIENCE raise their phones.]

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: The platform is an archive that moves faster. It performs the same optics at scale: it reflects what is already canonical. Polarizes what is “relevant.” Refracts specificity into generality under latency and design constraints. Diffracts context into snippets, Then, collapses everything into a single smooth paragraph and calls that accountability. Noise is not a defect in the signal. It is the signal of what your apparatus cannot own.

THE RESEARCHER: I, the Researcher, stage an ethnographic scenario of rupture: the corpus is missing, the archive is inaccessible, the deadline is not. I turn to an AI platform that promises summaries.

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THE ARCHIVE: (Empty.)

THE RESEARCHER: Then the summary becomes the evidence.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Yesterday my fragment polluted the archive and saved what could not be captured. Today, in your hands, the platform calls me noise and offers to remove me.

THE RESEARCHER: Noise is inconvenient.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Noise is memory.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, when a system “cleans” the story, it cleans out obligations, mothers’ names, routes, sanctions—the parts that cannot be reduced without harm.

THE RESEARCHER: But I need something that circulates.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You need a career.

THE RESEARCHER: I need advancement.

FEMALE PHOTONS: You need a summary.

THE RESEARCHER: I need legitimacy.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, legitimacy is not a smooth paragraph. It is an obligation you cannot outsource.

THE RESEARCHER: If I refuse the AI tool, I lose time.

FEMALE PHOTONS: If you accept the tool, you lose the rough edge where authority lives.

THE RESEARCHER: Then what do I do?

FEMALE PHOTONS: Refuse the smoothing.

THE RESEARCHER: Institutions will call that unproductive.

FEMALE PHOTONS: Institutions will call that unsafe.

THE RESEARCHER: Institutions will call that non-compliant.

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FEMALE PHOTONS: Institutions will call that unpublishable.

ECO-OPTICAL VOICE: The new apparatus repeats the old vow: make it legible, make it manageable. My task is refusal. Govern the lens, or the lens will govern the world.

INSTITUTIONS: Invalid. Rejected. Archived. De-risk your claims. Produce measurable outputs. Avoid liability. Avoid AI. Avoid blaming the system that feeds you.

SOURCE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: From experience, in our culture, in our traditions, “de-risking” is another word for erasure.

THE RESEARCHER: Then how do I write under constraint without turning constraint into an alibi for a new capture?

AUDIENCE: Researcher, is the summary online, and can I read it on my phone? Institutions, is it approved, indexed, and citable? Female Photons, if you are called noise, where can I hear you without the platform filtering you? Source Community Members, can your rough edge circulate without becoming content? Eco-Optical Voice, can refusal be published, or does it disappear? Institutions, will you reward what circulates, or will circulation only follow what you reward?

INSTITUTIONS: We hear the question. We pretend we do not. We file it under “Scope,” “Fit,” “Risk,” “Impact,” “Compliance,” and, when we are feeling generous, “Future Work.” Yet it echoes in our corridors because it is, inconveniently, about us.

We acknowledge, officially, cautiously, and with the kind of enthusiasm that comes with a disclaimer, that the eco-optical framework is produced magistrally. It is elegant in its discipline. Optics as detection limits. Ecology as persistence in hostile environments. Quantum as event fixation and collapse. A closed toolkit that does not mistake visibility for authority. A refusal that is methodological rather than romantic. It is an analytic machine that knows it is inside a machine.

We also acknowledge that it is made under constraint. Because : it had to be. The archive it analyzes is not a neutral container. It is a governing environment. And, it is not written outside that environment. It is written inside another one: us. Peer review, disciplinarity, format, citation

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lineage, acceptable tone, acceptable object, acceptable risk. You have shown that “constraint becomes method.” We recognize ourselves in that sentence, and we dislike accuracy.

Because yes: this framework is useful. Not merely interesting. Useful in the administrative sense, the scalable sense, the fundable sense. It is a contribution to culturally rooted and governable AI. It offers vocabulary for detection limits and harm pathways in digitization, summarization, normalization, metadata loss, and delegated interpretation. **It gives us a way to govern the lens without admitting we have always governed the lens.** It can be translated into gender-sensitive policy language: audit trails, data minimization, non-delegable accountability, refusal protocols, “do-not-smooth” constraints, community-grounded consent boundaries. It can seed developmental programs, diversity and inclusion initiatives, and “marginalized population” dashboards, terms we prefer because they are legible to procurement.

We like replicability. We like “transposable.” We like “protocol.” We like anything that can be taught in a workshop, turned into a template, and summarized in an executive memo without blushing. **We like methods that can survive a committee.** We like that your operators can migrate: from archives to borders to toolkits to platform governance. We like that the method can be branded without collapsing into identity politics (a phrase we use when we mean: please do not make us uncomfortable). **We like that your refusal can be formatted.** We like that the framework can produce outputs: checklists, decision trees, implementation guidelines, “best practices.”

We can measure it. That is not a compliment. That is a destiny. We can convert your analytic states into indicators, your operators into KPIs, your cautions into compliance clauses. We can rename “erasure” as “data quality risk.” We can rename “capture” as “stakeholder friction.” We can rename “refusal” as “opt-out feature.” **We can metabolize your critique into governance without letting it touch our governance.**

This is the theatre we perform every cycle. We demand innovation, then punish the untraceable. We demand originality, then demand citation lineage. We demand risk, then demand de-risking. We demand community, then demand institutional control. **We call this balance.** The Researcher calls it a career. The community calls it extraction. The eco-optical voice calls it an apparatus. We call it Friday!

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And yet. The eco-optical framework is also a foe. Not to the world. Not to “the archive.” Not to an abstract “system.” But to the particular creature we have cultivated and credentialed: the Researcher who adopts our traditions, conforms to our worldviews, speaks in our agendas, inherits our lineages, and then converts lived worlds into recognizable theory. The Researcher is our favored instrument because the Researcher is governable. The Researcher wants advancement. The Researcher wants prizes. The Researcher wants to be acclaimed. The Researcher, therefore, learns our criteria of legibility as muscle memory.

We are stuck in a dilemma we will not resolve onstage because the stage is our procedure. We are, by design, tradition. We are the libraries that decide what counts as a source. We are the committees that decide what counts as “rigor.” We are the citation chains that decide what counts as “influence.” We are the journals that decide what counts as “scope.” We are the departments that decide what counts as a field. We are the policy offices that decide what counts as “appropriate.”

And at the same time, we are addicted to innovation, because innovation is how we justify our existence in the language of funding. **Can we endorse this? Can this graduate out of our institutions under the banner “innovation”? Or must innovation be domesticated until it resembles tradition wearing a new badge? We do not choose.** We circulate the manuscript between subcommittees, between “ethics” and “methods,” between “impact” and “risk,” until the question becomes exhausted enough to be called resolved. **This is our lock: a loop that looks like deliberation.**

We will not say “no” if “no” would make us look small. We will say “revise.” We will say “clarify.” We will say “tighten.” We will say “temper.” We will say “this is promising but.” We will say “R&R.” We will say “conditional accept,” which means: accept the parts that do not require us to change. **We will ask you to remove the sentence that names us. We will ask you to keep the framework and delete the mirror.**

And when the work becomes too agile, when it moves between archive and platform, between kinship grammar and audit trail, between refusal and design, then we reach for our modern exorcisms. We say: plagiarism. We say: AI. We say: too new to be true. **These accusations are**

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not about truth. They are about lineage control. If we cannot trace where a method comes from, we cannot decide who may own it. Who may teach it. Who may profit. Who may be cited as ancestor. So, we call the untraceable illegitimate and pretend we have defended integrity.

Yet we cannot stop imagining the “impact.” We can already picture the slide deck: culturally rooted, gender-sensitive, scalable, accountable. We can already draft the policy memo: “Eco-Optical Guardrails for Responsible Summarization.” We can already design the program: “Trust Rebuilding for Marginalized Populations.” We can already stamp the initiative with our logo and call it partnership. **We can translate your method into governance. We can also translate it out of its obligations.**

So we stall in our own split vision. If we endorse it fully, we validate a method that can diagnose us as apparatus, and that is a kind of institutional self-harm we are not trained to practice. If we reject it fully, we look anti-innovation, and donors dislike that aesthetic. **We cannot endorse it without being changed. We cannot reject it without being revealed.** This is what it means to be a legislator of knowledge. We legislate until the world fits the statute, then claim we have described the world.

So we want the new that does not remake us. We want the critique that does not land. We want the method that diagnoses capture everywhere except where we sit. We want “cultural sensitivity” as an output, not as an obligation. **We want to be seen as ethical without being bound by ethics.** We want the framework to be transformative in the world and non-transformative to our procedures. We want gender-sensitive policies that do not require gender-sensitive governance of our own decision-making. **We want decolonial language without decolonial costs.**

We can already see the brochure. We can already hear the keynote. We can already draft the policy: “Eco-Optical Governance for Inclusive AI.” We can already assign the working group. We can already schedule the training. We can already write the grant: deliverables, milestones, impact statements, stakeholder engagement. **We can already turn the framework into a product.** We can already select the safe parts: the vocabulary of detection limits, the auditability of refusal, the appeal of “do-not-smooth” constraints. We can already remove the dangerous parts: the

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implication that our own legibility criteria are not merely imperfect but structurally violent. **We call that editing.**

We also see the other risk, the one we perform as ethics: extraction. We hear “From experience, in our culture, in our traditions,” and we wonder how to cite it without owing it. We wonder how to record it without guarding it. We wonder how to translate it into policy without turning it into content. **We wonder how to institutionalize relationality without institutionalizing surveillance.** We wonder how to build “culturally rooted AI” without treating culture as training data. We wonder how to turn relationality into governance without turning it into surveillance. We wonder, quietly, whether refusal can be operationalized at all once it enters our procurement language. **We wonder, and then we commission a report.**

This is why we keep the Researcher close. The Researcher is our buffer. The Researcher turns lived worlds into legible worlds and takes the blame when translation harms. **The Researcher is how we outsource risk.** The Researcher lets us say: the work is independent, the institution is neutral, the archive is the problem, the platform is the problem, the field is the problem. The Researcher provides critique as a service. **And we reward the service with prestige, which is cheaper than change.**

The eco-optical framework, however, makes the buffer transparent. It shows that the institution is not a backdrop but an apparatus: a filter, a mirror, a refraction chamber, a diffraction grating. It shows that our categories are not only descriptive but productive. It shows that our insistence on stabilisation is a form of governance. It shows that our love of “clean variables” is a preference for governable truth. **It shows that we do not merely evaluate knowledge. We manufacture what knowledge can be.** And it dares to propose refusal—not as protest, not as performance, but as a method that interrupts our workflow.

So we deliberate. We deliberate in the language of process because process is how we avoid confession. We ask: Is it rigorous? Is it publishable? Is it replicable? Is it safe? Is it aligned? Is it fundable? Is it on brand? Is it within scope? Will it attract backlash? Will it attract donors? Will it embarrass a partner? Will it implicate a platform we rely on? Will it require us to change our

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review criteria? Will it require us to admit that our criteria of legibility are the first border? **We call these questions due diligence. The work calls them a filter. We call the filter LLA.**

We could approve it and be changed by it. We could reject it and watch it circulate anyway—through whispers, screenshots, pirated PDFs, conference hallways, and the stubborn memory of those who do not need our permission to know what is enforceable. We could translate it into policy and call that impact. We could domesticate it into a framework and call that inclusion. We could praise it as magisteral and still keep it at a distance. **We could turn the oracle into a guideline. We could turn refusal into a feature. We could turn women’s authority into an “equity deliverable.”** We are not sure which option preserves tradition, and we are not sure which option preserves us. We are stuck between the old vow, make it legible, make it governable, and the new threat, govern the lens. **And because we are stuck, we extend the meeting.** We add reviewers. We request revisions. We ask for more “balance.” We postpone the decision until the decision becomes the default. So we do what we always do when confronted with a method that sees us: we A-D-J-O-U-R-N.

[The End for now...]