Identifying Post-Custodial Partners in Latin America

Lessons Learned in Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil with Special Considerations for Human Rights Archives

LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections
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I. Background

In 2014, LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections at the University of Texas at Austin received a planning grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to pilot a post-custodial approach to international archival collaboration. The project brings together scholars and community partners to facilitate access to valuable archival materials that will advance education and scholarship. Under the auspices of the grant, LLILAS Benson partnered with three archival institutions in Central America to digitize selected holdings, both facilitating the long-term preservation of these unique historical materials and making them accessible to a global audience in an online digital repository.

LLILAS Benson is uniquely situated to carry out this work as a joint endeavor between two venerable units focused on Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. In September 2011, the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection and the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies (LLILAS) joined forces to create LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, an innovative partnership that pairs the abundant scholarly resources of the collection with the teaching and research focus of the institute. Together, LLILAS Benson maintains one of the world's largest collections of digital assets in the area of Latin American Studies, including over 12 million pages of digitized records from the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive. This long-running experience both in the region and with complex digital projects lays a strong foundation to carry out collaborative post-custodial partnerships with institutions in Latin America.

As part of the grant, titled *Post-Custodial Archival Development and Digital Scholarship: Learning from Latin America*, LLILAS Benson staff provided our partners with consultation, equipment, and archival training in preservation, arrangement, metadata, and digitization. One of the main principles of post-custodial archival practice is that partners maintain physical and intellectual control over their collections. As such, partner institutions conducted the digitization work and created the descriptive metadata, which allowed for the physical collections to remain onsite in their original context throughout the project. At the same time, in collaboration with the University of Texas Libraries, project staff built the Latin American Digital Initiatives (LADI - http://ladi.lib.utexas.edu/) online portal through which the digitized collections are made available, utilizing the open source Fedora/Islandora repository framework.

The partners for this pilot phase included the Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica - CIDCA (Bluefields, Nicaragua), the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica – CIRMA (Antigua, Guatemala), and the Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen – MUPI (San Salvador, El Salvador). CIDCA digitized an estimated 900 issues (1920-1998) of *La Información*, a local newspaper that covered the economic, social, and political life of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, offering a unique historical window to the lives and experiences of indigenous and Afro-descendent communities. CIRMA digitized approximately 4,700 news clippings from the Inforpress Centroamericana archive that capture how violence and repression transformed and intensified during the height of Guatemala's internal armed conflict. MUPI digitized its holdings of clandestine publications from the Salvadoran civil war,

portraying voices and experiences from the frontlines of the conflict from 1979-1992, as well as a closely related, visually compelling collection of solidarity and propaganda political posters.

In tandem with these pilot projects, project staff also began a separate process to develop a methodology to identify opportunities for future post-custodial collaborations in the Latin American region. That process is detailed more fully in the sections below.

II. Post-custodial theory

In developing the project, LLILAS Benson explicitly adopted an approach to archival collaboration informed by post-custodial archival theory. According to the Society of American Archivists, the post-custodial theory of archives envisions that "archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but that they will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators."[1] In other words, rather than the traditional archival practice of physically taking custody of records and maintaining them in a distant repository, archivists provide consultation and support on archival practice, allowing records to remain where they are created and used.

Our interest in post-custodial practice grew out of LLILAS Benson's experience working with partner organizations through initiatives such as the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI) and the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive (AHPN). For instance, it quickly became apparent that HRDI's mission to preserve vulnerable records of human rights struggles worldwide would not be well-served by a more traditional acquisitions model based on taking physical custody of human rights documentation. Partner organizations were reluctant to relinquish custody of their materials, even temporarily. The documentation served immediate programming needs, whether advocacy or education, and its removal could severely disrupt organizational operations. At the same time, shipping the materials back and forth could increase risk to the documentation's already fragile state.

Concerns around organizations' needs for their records and physical fragility are further amplified in light of historical relations and imbalances of power between the U.S. and Latin America. Given long histories of intervention, as in the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador, it is not difficult to understand organizations' reluctance to hand their records over to a large U.S. institution. Beyond the broader geo-political context, the perceived plundering of cultural patrimony and appropriation of cultural heritage by large institutions in more resource-rich countries also adds to a suspicious wariness among potential partners in the Latin American region.

Furthermore, human rights documentation is particularly sensitive. Records such as those contained in the AHPN are the product of a massive state surveillance apparatus turned against its own citizens. Organizations are well aware of the dual nature of human rights records to both support struggles for justice and the full realization of rights, as well as feed the mechanisms of state repression. Our partners are justly careful about what information they are willing to share, with what potential audiences, and via what means of distribution.

For the AHPN, HRDI, as well as the three pilot sites that we have collaborated with under The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant, preservation and access are fundamental concerns. Yet, removing these

[1]Pierce-Moses, Richard. A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005. Available at: http://www2.archivists.org/glossary.

collections which local communities use and identify with from their original contexts would be gravely problematic and lead to the loss of significant local and national cultural patrimony. This loss would have far outweighed potential gains from transferring them physically to the Benson's facility in Austin for preservation and access for researchers. Indeed, it is unlikely that our partner institutions would have even considered the possibility. Given these concerns, LLILAS Benson decided to adopt a different approach to working with partners in Latin America – one which enables the preservation of vulnerable archival material, yet remains flexible, maximizes local control, and builds trust toward the shared stewardship of archival resources.

Since the post-custodial theory of archives does not prescribe a specific methodology, we are able to use it to guide our work without being limited to a rigidly mandated set of practices. This gives us the flexibility we need to adapt to the distinct needs and contexts of partner institutions. In particular, we have adopted digital technologies to support our post-custodial practice, implementing cross-border, collaborative digitization workflows. At the same time, this practice is rooted in the establishment of deep collaborative relationships--horizontal and reciprocal in nature--with our partner institutions in Latin America, recognizing and valuing the expertise of each. While we provide equipment and training in archival and digitization best practice, our partners contribute the essential digitization work, as well as their rich contextual knowledge of the collections captured in their descriptive metadata. Together, we create contextualized workflows to achieve project goals, along the way receiving vital feedback for improving our own internal processes.

III. Scoping the inventory

Building on this framework, the inventory was conceived as an exercise to systematically identify and assess future opportunities for post-custodial collaboration in the Latin American region. We were interested in identifying collections that were of high scholarly interest and research value, and oriented toward a collaborative stewardship framework rather than a traditional acquisition model, whether for reasons of historical context, cultural patrimony, sensitivity, or other concerns.

We found, however, that under these broad principles, the universe of potential archival collections of interest in the region remained too large to enumerate or to usefully guide decision-making about future directions for work. We needed to identify additional meaningful criteria that would focus our selection process. We decided to focus our work on collections documenting human rights, given the high level of scholarly interest at LLILAS Benson and related units at the University of Texas, and the close ties between the project and the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI). Our working definition of human rights encompasses not only rights violations by repressive regimes, but also themes of defense of territory, migration, civil society, and cultural identity that are equally central to the realization of and scholarship on human rights in the region. We are interested in records that not only testify to the perpetration of human rights violations and their impacts, but that also document the realization and exercise of rights and agency: that is, the practice of these rights, not just their absence.

Human rights documentation is produced by a variety of actors, including individuals, non-governmental organizations, and public and private entities at the local, national, and international levels. Formats can range from paper records to photographs, posters, and audiovisual materials. In some cases, national archives or other public institutions hold these records. However, we choose to prioritize

documentation held by private individuals or human rights organizations that are less likely to receive support elsewhere. These collections can tell vital stories of resistance and offer insightful counter-narratives to official versions of historical events. Nevertheless, they are often at high levels of risk and vulnerability, particularly where histories of repression and state-sponsored violence mean there is little trust in state entities, and where there are well-founded fears that the documentation could be destroyed or misused against civilian populations.

Even with these additional criteria, we learned that scaling the exercise to collections documenting human rights in the Latin American region still remained too conceptually broad. A preliminary pass at developing an inventory of human rights collections in Guatemala alone, based on scholar recommendations, secondary literature, online research, and staff knowledge of the local context, yielded a list of well over 500 organizations holding collections of potential interest. Based on our evaluation of this preliminary exercise, the research strengths of LLILAS Benson and associated scholars, and the presence of deep local contacts, we decided to focus on three countries to pilot a process for identifying and selecting collections – specifically Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. We then further honed our focus to collections documenting the effects of racial or ethnic-based forms of social exclusion on the realization of human rights.

By adopting race, ethnicity, and social exclusion as a lens for the inventory, we refocused our attention on communities marginalized not only in social, political, and economic processes, but also often in the historical record. Indigenous and African diasporic communities and organizations are the most underrepresented in cultural heritage institutions at local, national, and international levels, and when they are portrayed, it is often without their input or consent. A post-custodial model offers these communities and organizations greater control over selection, description, and access to their documentation, and helps build local capacity to preserve these collections, while diversifying the broader archival record.

In summary, we refined the scope of the inventory exercise according to the following criteria: a) organizations with collections of high scholarly interest and research value located in Brazil, Colombia, or Mexico; b) collections documenting efforts to achieve human rights, or to contest their denial, particularly involving racial or ethnic-based forms of social exclusion; and c) openness to exploring a collaborative stewardship framework rather than a traditional acquisition model. We also prioritized collections outside of government-affiliated or corporate-sponsored cultural heritage institutions that were less likely to receive support elsewhere, and considered additional criteria, such as fragility or vulnerability, whether due to lack of infrastructure, environmental causes, or political context.

IV. Methodology

The project team identified scholars at the University of Texas, both faculty and graduate students, who, due to their research expertise and experience in the field, would be well-positioned to identify collections that met the aforementioned criteria. Taking advantage of the unique institutional configuration of LLILAS Benson – the partnership between the Benson collection and the academic institute – we were able to ensure that our post-custodial collection development closely complemented the research and teaching priorities of the scholars in our community, as well as existing collections at the Benson. By actively engaging scholars in the process of identifying collections and

building the inventory, we were able to build a constituency invested in the project's success and excited about envisioning ways that such collections could be used in the classroom and beyond.

In December 2014, we circulated a survey to LLILAS Benson affiliated faculty and graduate students soliciting recommendations of collections for inclusion in the inventory. The survey provided us with preliminary information on collections of interest to our community, and also helped us identify key interested stakeholders who we were able to more actively engage in the process. After reviewing survey responses, we conducted follow-up phone and in-person conversations with scholars to gain a better understanding of the collections and organizations that they had recommended.

The most vital, exciting, and productive leads were generated by graduate students undertaking socially engaged research in the field through which they had established strong relationships with local organizations. Their deeper institutional knowledge and demonstrated commitment facilitated contact with collection holders, helping to establish an initial level of trust and openness. This enabled a more dynamic conversation between scholar, archivist, and partner organization, which recognized the expertise of each and laid critical groundwork for future collaboration. Indeed, we found that their commitment to socially engaged research engendered a powerful and productive synergy with our post-custodial archival framework.

The conversations with scholars resulted in a preliminary list of potential opportunities that informed our plans for field visits conducted in the summer of 2015. Project staff conducted supplementary background research online and in the academic literature in order to better understand both the archival context and the human rights situation in the three selected countries – Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. Nevertheless, the information we were able to collect remotely was incomplete and lacked critical archival context. We came to the conclusion that a verified inventory would require the time and direct contact.

Site visits to potential partners in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico occurred in July-September 2015, and gave us a better sense of organizational needs and interest in collaborative archival partnerships. And while not every organization we met with was a good fit based on the criteria we had elaborated, we came home with a strong list of candidates and some very exciting potential projects. Our field visits to Colombia and Mexico each yielded eight compelling opportunities, with two additional possibilities in Brazil.[2] At the same time, several important overarching themes emerged from these exploratory conversations, which are elaborated in the conclusion below.

V. Conclusion: Special considerations for working with human rights archives

The potential partnerships identified through the process above are a small sample of the universe of potential post-custodial opportunities in the region, yet if their potential was realized, they could yield infinite possibilities for new research and scholarship. Narrowing our focus to collections documenting human rights from the perspective of race, ethnicity, or social exclusion energized our scholarly community to engage with the project, and at the same time yielded important considerations for the future.

[2] For more information about the specific sites, please contact Theresa Polk, Post-Custodial Archivist, LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, at tpolk@austin.utexas.edu.

Throughout the process of developing a methodology and building the inventory, project staff encountered challenges and sensitivities that led us to think through how to adapt our work to particular contexts, and highlighted the value of keeping the post-custodial methodology flexible. We often found ourselves needing to strike a fine balance between competing priorities -- building trust with managing expectations, a commitment to open access with privacy and security concerns, scholarly interests with organizational priorities. Many of these questions and concerns emerged from the special considerations involved in working with archives documenting human rights, and are elaborated below.

a. **Building trust while managing expectations**
   The trust barrier proved to be a significant hurdle, particularly for human rights organizations, and especially in conflictive areas. Even in cases where scholars were able to facilitate contacts and vouch for our intentions, it was clear that establishing enough rapport to enter into a collaborative agreement for the shared stewardship of archival resources would take time and engagement with potential partners. Their caution is understandable given not only difficult local contexts for human rights defenders, but also a long history of hidden strings to international development aid. While many were intrigued and excited by the post-custodial model we were proposing, their long-running experience with northern cultural institutions has been shaped by more traditional acquisition practices that in some cases may appear to be little more than looting of local cultural patrimony.

   At the same time, we needed to carefully balance building trust with managing expectations. As representatives of a large U.S.-based institution, we were inevitably perceived as resource-rich -- in context, not necessarily a false presumption. The organizations that we met with presented us with an array of needs well beyond the scope of what we had to offer, encompassing staffing, infrastructure, technology, and security. With no committed funds in hand, we needed to carefully navigate expressions of interest in order to avoid raising expectations that we would not be able to deliver on, and thus undermining the trust we were carefully cultivating.

b. **Balancing open access with privacy needs**
   Open access is a core value broadly espoused by library and information professionals, and one to which we are also deeply committed. Nevertheless, human rights documentation highlights particular vulnerabilities and security risks. Indeed, providing comprehensive open access to human rights documentation for researchers may be neither ethical, due to privacy and safety concerns, nor culturally appropriate for communities who are represented in the collections. Many of the organizations we met with expressed concerns that their information was too sensitive to be made available online at this time, fearing that it could result in attacks against them and their members. Even in cases where collections are open to researchers in analog format, placing them online would raise their profile considerably and facilitate identifying individual actors that could become political targets.

   At the same time, human rights organizations also recognized that allowing scholars access had the potential to support deeper analysis of information, identification of patterns in violations, and the formulation of enduring solutions. In some cases, redaction of individual names and specific places seemed a workable compromise that would provide a sufficient level of protection, yet still allow some measure of access. Nonetheless, in many cases, more immediate

needs were for information security protocols and infrastructure, with a view towards a future in which documentation could eventually be made publically available.

c. **Navigating scholarly interests and partner needs**

Scholars' interests in access to primary resources for research are not necessarily aligned with organizations' needs to manage their information. For instance, privacy and security concerns as outlined above can come into conflict with the information needs of scholars. And while the products of research may in some cases support the goals of human rights organizations, they are also shaped by outside forces (academic trends, funding requirements, etc) that not necessarily aligned with local needs or organizational priorities. Nevertheless, despite some hesitations, many potential partners were intrigued and excited by the vision of a tripartite collaboration that dynamically linked human rights advocacy with teaching and scholarship with access to and preservation of archival documentation.

On the other hand, human rights organizations have limited institutional capacity to provide the critical archival or reference services that provision research. The three pilot sites in the initial phase of the grant varied greatly in institutional capacity, priorities, and available resources, yet they shared certain basic characteristics as cultural heritage organizations. Providing preservation of and access to information resources were foundational to their missions. This basic tenet is not necessarily true in the case of human rights organizations; their missions focus on the realization of fundamental human rights and other advocacy goals. While they recognize the value of their documentation and express sincere interest in seeing it preserved, they do not necessarily have the capacity to divert scarce resources or staff time away from vital programming towards archival or digitization initiatives. Nor should we ask them to do so.

Taken together, these tensions should provoke reflection and careful planning, however should not detract from the energy and excitement shared by scholars and potential partner organizations, as well as within LLILAS Benson. Rather, they should reinforce the intrinsic value of investing in strong and enduring collaborative relationships and of fostering flexibility in our post-custodial practice. In turn, as we explore what post-custodial collaborations look like in variety of different contexts, we strengthen the case for its relevance, moving from the margins of archival practice towards the mainstream, with important long-term implications for the representativeness and inclusivity of our collections and our profession.