From Archival Network to Digital Archive: Digital Repatriation and the *Advertencias para los Confessores de los Naturales*

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Abstract

Digital repatriation, or the return of culturally significant texts to their site of origin in digital form, has become an increasingly common means of cultural exchange. Through these projects, local institutions are able to claim ownership over digital facsimiles of heritage objects, while websites provide near-global access to historical texts. As a result, these projects disrupt the geographically bounded archival networks through which these objects have long been preserved and contextualized. This project addresses this disruption by tracing the institutional history of four copies of the *Advertencias para los Confessores de los Naturales* (Mexico, 1600) and their digital facsimiles in the Primeros Libros project. An analysis of the archival context of these copies reveals the different roles that they have played in forming institutionally sanctioned historical narratives from Mexico City to Houston Texas, roles that are defined in part by the organizational systems of the libraries and in part by their geographical location. In contrast, I consider the digital manifestation of these copies in the Primeros Libros project, a collaborative enterprise seeking to digitize all books printed in America before 1601. As my analysis will show, this new context reasserts the centrality of printing technology in the Mexican colonial archive, emphasizing the material fragmentation of colonial history and also encouraging the reconstruction of a historical ideal from that fragmented past.

Disclaimer: what follows is the written version a speech presented at the Texas Digital Humanities Consortium conference on April 11, 2014. It is not a published, peer reviewed, or fact-checked article.

1 Introduction

This paper is concerned with the ways that books undergo new interpretive possibilities as they move between archival contexts.

Theoretically, this project can be imagined as an effort to reconcile the archival theory which originates or at least is best articulated by Foucault in "The Archaeology of Knowledge" with actual archives, their history, their structure, and their use.

For Foucault and those who follow him, the archive is a theoretical construct which contains all of the articulations —- all of the discourse — possible in a historical moment. By nature fragmented and contradictory, the limits of Foucault's archive mark the limits of discursive possibility. Analyzing these limits gives us access to the underlying epistemology of the discursive community.

Foucault's imagined archive is complete — it contains all possible articulations — and so it has a frought relationship with actual archives, libraries, repositories, and other sites of discursive preservation. Inspired by the so-called "archival turn," scholars across disciplines have moved towards more material studies of archival spaces, especially in the context of national and colonial identity construction. Ann Laura Stoler's "archival ethnographies" of colonial archives are an inspiration here: she calls for "a more sustained engagement with [colonial] archives as cultural artifacts of fact production, of taxonomies in the making, and of disparate notions of what made up colonial authority" (270).

The concept of archival archaeology can be similarly fruitful. In the context work such as that by Bonnie Mak, it becomes possible to imagine the archival space as a site of historical textual engagement, and to conceive of research as a project of archival excavation. By looking at artifacts such as catalogues, bibliographies, collections, and books, the moment of historical textual engagement can be reconstructed ("Archaeology of a Digitization").

Concepts of archival archaeology and ethnography, however, imagine archives that are geographically fixed, culturally dominant, and historically static. My project, instead, is concerned with the multitudes of archives into which a text can be incorporated. In this way it follows Rodrigo Lazo's work on "migrant archives" (Lazo). Like Bonnie Mak's, Lazo's project is interested in how every archival context can provide a unique, site-specific, and perhaps subversive institutional framework for a text. These works invite the question: how do institutional frameworks shape the ways that we find, access, and research documents?

Given the rapidly growing production of digital archives, I add the question: Are digital archives significantly different in terms of research, access, and engagement? What are the implications of digitization for archival ethnography?

2 Methods

I engage with these questions by tracing the archival context of multiple copies of the *Advertencias para los Confessores de los Naturales*. The *Advertencias* was printed in Mexico City in around 1601. It was one of Mexico's first print books, printed less than sixty years after the fall of Tenochtitlan and less than forty years after the establishment of America's first printing press.

Written by the Franciscan friar Juan Bautista, at the time of its publication the *Advertencias* was a kind of how-to book for field missionaries. It would be carried to the far reaches of the Valley of Mexico and used for help with practical and thorny questions of theology — how to deal with confessions of incest or of idolatry.

One of its first archival contexts was in the library of the Colegio Imperial at Tlatelolco — an early school for indigenous education, and the first academic library in the Americas. We can imagine its original use would have been pedagogical in both the context of missionaries and of the Nahua students (Mathes).

I am interested in tracing how that use has been changed by the archival contexts to which this book has been subjected. The *Advertencias* is interesting for this project in part because it is not interesting — it is neither the best, nor the most interesting, nor the most radical or subversive or informative of early print books. It does not have the same value as more famous works like those of Sahagun or Molino. This quality makes it more vulnerable, or more available, to multiple interpretive uses.

It is also interesting for my research because there are more surviving copies of this book than most other texts printed in Mexico during this time. (I still don't know why!) Therefore, it can be acquired by poorer or less intentionally motivated instutions, which in turn allows it to be used in multiple and competing archival contexts.

Finally, the book is interesting because it has been incorporated into a relatively-new digital context of the Primeros Libros project, an effort to digitize all texts printed in Mexico before 1601.

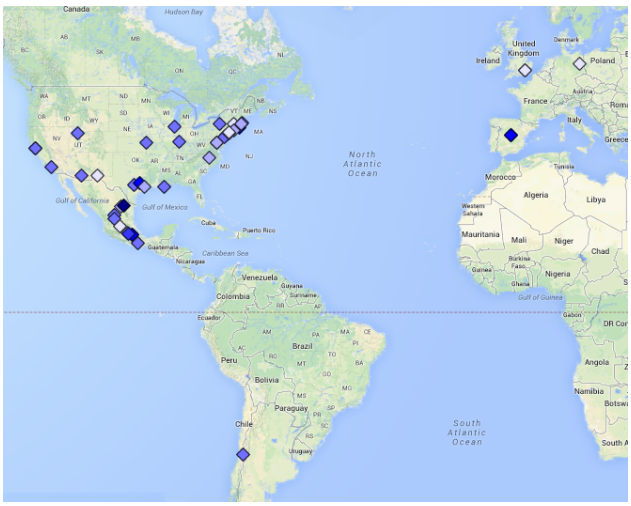

Figure 1: Map of located copies of the *Advertencias para los confessores de los naturales*. Darker colors indicate increasing number of copies; white indicates that copies have not yet been confirmed.

Like many colonial documents — print books, manuscripts, letters, etc. — that were preserved within the archives of Mexican religious institutions, the *Advertencias* is currently broadly dispersed in libraries across Mexico, the United States, and the world. This dispersal — what some call an "exodus," and others call robbery — began during the decline of the Mexican churches in the eighteenth century and was accelerated after Mexican independence. Figure 1 shows the location of 44 extant copies of the *Advertencias* that I have been

able to find.[1]

In this paper, I compare three libraries in Texas which hold the *Advertencias*: the Albert and Ethel Herzstein Library at the San Jacinto Monument, the Cushing Memorial Library at Texas A&M, and the Benson Latin American Collection at UT Austin. I look most closely at the Benson to see how archival space, systems of cataloguing, and points of access together provide a framework for interpretation. I then compare these three contexts to the digital archive of the Primeros Libros project to consider in what ways the digital context affects archival spaces.

I argue that each physical archive incorporates the book into a geographically unique interpretive framework. These frameworks contest traditional ideas about the value of the book as an artifact of Mexican national heritage.

I interpret the digitization project as a continuation of this narrative of archival interpretation, but one that reasserts a singular concept of heritage located in a virtually constrained national geography.

3 Texas Archives

Figure 2: Homepage of the San Jacinto Monument.

The San Jacinto National Monument in Houston, a memorial dedicated to the 1836 Battle of San Jacinto, is an unexpected context in which to find an obscure Mexican colonial book like the *Advertencias*. I haven't been to the museum itself, but we can see from the website shown in Figure 2 how it serves as a war memorial and a site of state pride. Its website replicates this pride with evocations of Texan slogans like "Come and Take it" or "Conquer or Perish" ("Herzstein Library"). The event it memorializes, of course, is considered the decisive battle in the Texas Revolution, the defeat of Mexican troops under Santa Anna. The Texan pride that this site represents is one which depends on the expulsion of the Mexicans.

The *Advertencias* is held by the the Albert and Ethel Herzstein Library, a one-room library within the San Jacinto museum. Visitors to the library today are likely to see the *Advertencias* on display as part of the "making a mark, leaving a legacy" exhibit. This exhibit features objects that reveal marks of ownership, including books but also rocker stamps, masonic aprons, and a wax bust of Sam Houston. The *Advertencias* is on display because of the *Marca de Fuego* impressed into its pages. In this exhibit, the content of the *Advertencias* disappears almost entirely from the display. No one visiting the San Jacinto library is likely to ask to read the book. Instead, it is the traces of history that matter here.

The *Advertencias* came to the library as part of a private donation from the nineteenth century bibliophile George A. Hill, Jr., a museum chairman and renowned book collector whose mission for the museum was, among other things, to "extend and diffuse knowledge of our history, and promote and perpetuate peace, friendship and sympathetic understanding between the people of Texas and the people of Mexico, Spain, France and the Latin-American Republics" ("History"). Thus at San Jacinto, the *Advertencias* functions as both a historical object and as a cultural ambassador between historically conflicting nations.

The *Advertencias* appears in a more traditional context at the Cushing Memorial library, where it is accessed through the rare books reading room and catalogued under the Colonial MexicoCollection. This collection gathers together thematically related texts with the intention of facilitating research.

When asked about the purpose of the collection, Anton DuPlessis, the collection's archivist, explained that it was associated with the library's location in east Texas. As part of a Texan research university, the Cushing is dedicated to facilitating research on local history. The Spaniards were the first Europeans to arrive in Texas, and Texas was part of

[1]This information has been aggregated from Fernández de Zamora's 2009 bibliography, with additions from the Primeros Libros project and WorldCat.

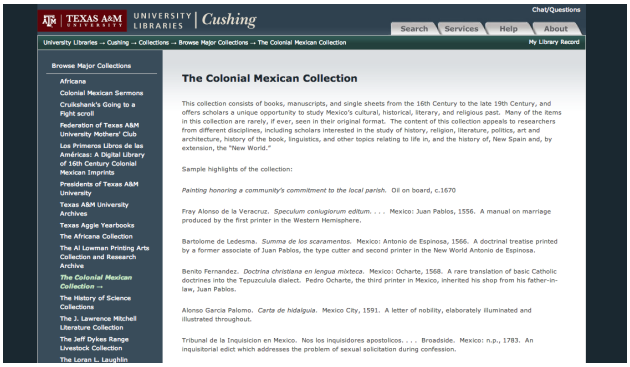

Figure 3: Website for the "Colonial Mexico Collection" at the Cushing Memorial Library.

both the Viceroyalty of New Spain and of the independent Mexican state. For DuPlessis, then, Mexican colonial documents can help form a more complete narrative of Texas history. The collection of early American print books is a part of that project.

In the online description of the Cushing's Colonial Mexican Collection, the so-called *Primeros Libros,* or early American print books, are highlighted along with the colonial Mexican sermons. It is apparent that the literary production of colonial missionaries is at the heart of this collection. However, the category of *Primeros Libros* also emphasizes the material quality of the book. If at San Jacinto material history is highlighted at the expensive of content, at the Cushing the emphasis is on material production, with a secondary interest in colonial content.

The final example to consider is the case of the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas. The Benson holds two copies of the *Advertencias*, both of which were acquired in 1936 as part of Joaqun Garca Icazbalceta's personal archive. Garca Icazbalceta was a renowned nineteenth-century Mexican bibliographer and historian, celebrated in particular for his work on religious history, on indigenous Mexican history, and print history during the early colonial period.

Writing soon after Mexican independence, García Icazbalceta's work as a historian was concerned with the construction of a national Mexican narrative that originated in the indigenous Mexican communities and was preserved in the literary production of the church. Printing technology is central to that narrative, and one of his projects was recovering the documentary history of sixteenth century Mexico, including print books. The *Advertencias* were part of that project.

It is possible to see García Icazbalceta's interpretive frame at work in his two copies of the *Advertencias*Ò one copy, which has been rebound in Icazbalceta's signature green and gold binding, shows an effort to erase both difference and history, producing a text that conforms to a nineteenth century ideal. It appears as two identical volumes that are part of a larger set belonging to García Icazbalceta's personal collection. Any prior ownership marks (*marcas del fuego*, nameplates, binding, etc.) have been erased and replaced with the newest owner's mark; if the books were bound together with other volumes, that information is lost. The resulting volumes celebrate and unify Mexican print history, even as they celebrate the intellectual authority of García Icazbalceta.

The other copy, in contrast, is a crumbling volume wrapped in what is likely a seventeenth century or original binding. It is a historical document that bares traces of its past throughout its spine, its cover, its title page, its binding. The result is a collection that reveals two complimentary movements of García Icazbalceta's bibliographic work: to use primary documents as evidence of historical truths, and to organize and stamp those facts with the mark of contemporary Mexican identity and culture.

I would suggest that at the Benson, the collecting and cataloguing of these two copies of the *Advertencias* encourages users to view the books through the eyes of García Icazbalceta. The books are held in the García Icazbalceta collection and accessed through the rare books room. Their original finding aid, a book printed in 1927, is an annotated copy of a typed copy of a manuscript that García Icazbalceta apparently wrote to catalogue his personal collection (García Icazbalceta). I find the authorship of the document to be suspect due to uncharacteristic bibliographic errors. As a catalogue, however, its use is shaped by its organizational schema, which divides the books into a number of vague and overlapping categories, and lists them apparently at random, with no perceiveable alphabetic or temporal system. A scholar looking for a specific book would struggle with this catalogue. A scholar interested in learning about García Icazbalceta's intellectual history, however, would find it informative. This early

finding aid (still available for use in the reference scction of the reading room) reveals how access to the *Advertencias* is shaped by biography.

Today, the *Advertencias* can also be located through an online catalogue, just like any other book in the University of Texas' extensive library system. It is notable, however, that the *Advertencias* lacks subject terms, a fact which suggests that the book's biographical use remains central to its function in the library. This claim is reinforced by the fact that the García Icazbalceta collection itself has been tagged with subject terms. Again, scholars seeking to learn about the colonial past are directed to these documents through the framework of García Icazbalceta's intellectual history.

4 Digital Archives

In the prior section, I showed how three Texan archives incorporate the *Advertencias* into their collections in ways that imply unique and geographically bounded interpretations of the original text. In this section, I will consider what happens when the *Advertencias* is released from all geographic boundaries through digitization. I will argue that in the Primeros Librosproject, the *Advertencias* is incorporated into a collection based in a virtually idealized Mexico, a project which recollects the nationalism of García Icazbalceta.

The Primeros Libros project, a collaboration between U.S. and Mexican institutions, is explicitly defined as a project of "digital repatriation" or "digital return". Digital return is a specifically postcolonial or post-war term which refers to the return of culturally significant texts to their site of origin as digital files. In this case, as Anton du Plessis has described, the process refers literally to the transportation of hard drives across the Mexican border.

Implicit in this concept is the idea that these objects are the unique heritage of the Mexican nation, and that they belong in the hands of Mexican institutions. This is part of a broader narrative, as we have seen, in which Mexico lays claim to a national heritage based in Nahua culture and colonial Spanish literary production. We can see how this narrative is reproduced within Primeros Libros by considering the homepage of the website, shown in Figure 4. The homepage is in Spanish, and the text reads "The First Books of the Americas: Mexican Imprints of the XVI Century in the Libraries of the World" ("Los Primeros Libros de los Américas: Impresos Mexicanos del siglo XVI en las Bibliotecas del Mundo"). This subtitle implies, as I have described, the global reach of these texts. But it also suggests a process of virtual consolidation and relocation within a Mexican context. We have already seen how the claim that Mexico places on these books has been contested in Texas institutions. Mexico's claim to America's first books might equally be contested by Spain or by Peru, where printing began in the 1580s.

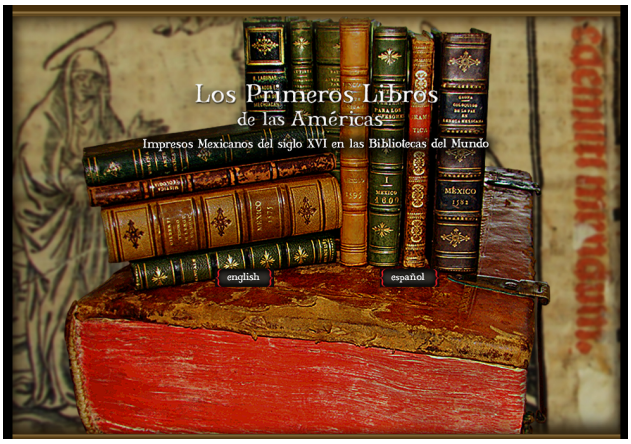

Figure 4: The homepage of the Primeros Libros website.

At the same time that the Primeros Libros project locates these books within a virtual Mexico, it globalizes their distribution. For the first time, they can be accessed from anywhere in the world, by anyone with the proper resources. There are two consequences to this process that I would like to address.

The first has to do with the transformation of the reading experience. Digitization makes it possible for readers to compare volumes in geographically distant locations for the first time, a possibility that has many positive implications for book historians. I can, for example, seek differences in the spelling of catchwords adn running titles between all copies of the *Advertencias*, a project that would be prohibitively difficult and inefficient otherwise.

But even as typographical differences are brought to the fore, other differences disappear in the process of reading digital copies. The experience of reading the two copies of the *Advertencias* held

in the García Icazbalcetacollection, for example, is nearly identical; material differences like the fragility of the pages or collective bindings disappear. In pointing this out I am not making a nostalgic complaint about the aesthetics of digitization; I am instead trying to illustrate how digitization might shape the kind of research questions scholars can ask. The globalization of the reading experience here erases certain kinds of material difference.

A second consequence of this digitization process is the way it implies new historical analogies. The concept of a "first book" or "primer libro" encourages a global narrative about the spread of the printing press in which all nations have analogous or comparable first book experiences. The most obvious example here would be the comparison with Europe's incunables — and the selection of 1601 as a cutoff date (precisely 100 years after the cutoff date for the incunable) invites this comparison. The consequences of this kind of analogy are worthy of greater examination.

In conclusion, in this paper I have attempted to show how we can analyze archives to identify their multiple and competing interpretive contexts. In doing so, I have revealed in the case of the *Advertencias* the ways that these interpretive meanings are both geographically and institutionally localized. These interpretive frameworks important implications for the ways that scholars and other visitors interact with the archive and the text.

I have further considered the ways that digitization and the Primeros Libros project change that geography by locating the text in a "virtual nation." This validates the Mexican claim to these book artifacts in a way that might be contested by Texas, Spain, or even Peru, where printing began in 1581. But it is counteracted by a globalizing process which "flattens" books and implies new forms of historical analogy.

The good thing is that digitization can coexist with localized archives. As a result, I understand Primeros Libros and similar archives as one more interpretive claim in a multitude of archival narratives.

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