

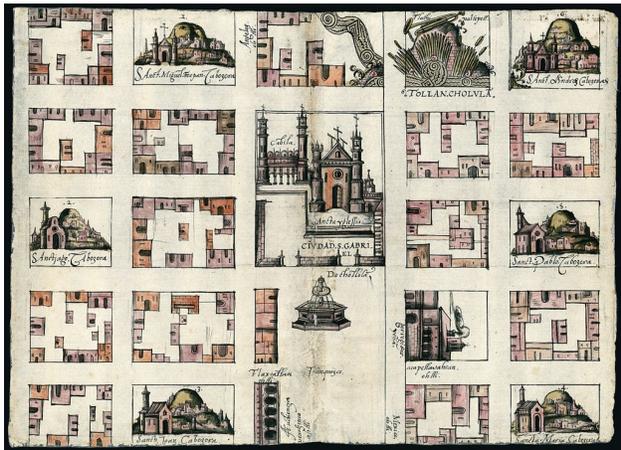
Surrogate Return: Copying for the Collective Good

Hannah Alpert-Abrams

[This talk was presented at SHARP 2019 / July 2019 as part of the Politics of Facsimiles panel.]

Contact halperta@gmail.com

In 2016 Kelly McDonough, at the University of Texas, partnered with Lidia Gómez García, at the BUAP in Mexico, to enact [a repatriation project](#): the return of a sixteenth century map to the Indigenous community in Cholula, a town about two hours outside of Mexico City. They did this by returning, not the sixteenth-century document itself, but a high-quality facsimile made from a digital photograph.



[This is the map](#). It is part of the Relaciones Geográficas, a collection of census records made in New Spain in the 1580s. While the project was a Spanish and a colonial project, much of the work was produced by Indigenous subjects.

Hannah Alpert-Abrams, 2019
Surrogate Return

One thing you see in the case of this map, for example, is the rigid grid of the town and the centrality of the church, which is obviously a product of the Spanish spatial imagination. But as [Barbara Mundy has written](#), the grid also seems to map onto pre-hispanic polities, or calpollis. And the pyramid and toponym in the upper right corner take on the position of a different kind of center. The map was likely made by a Nahuatl cartographer, trained in Cholula by Franciscan friars. It is because of the Indigenous knowledge embedded in the map that the decision was made to return it.

The map of Cholula shown here is held at the University of Texas. It was acquired, along with other rare colonial Mexican materials, by the librarian Carlos Castañeda, a Mexican American teacher and historian, the first Mexican American professor at UT Austin, and a fierce advocate for the rights of Mexicans in Texas. Castañeda fought the University of Texas over ethnic discrimination. He also stewarded the development of what is now the Benson Latin American Collection, but was then part of the Texas history collection. I don't think it is a stretch to say that one aspect of why Castañeda valued this collection is because he saw it as part of his heritage, and as part of Texas's heritage.

But colonial materials never just belong to one community. The Relaciones Geográficas were acquired from the family of the nineteenth-century Mexican historian Joaquín García Icazbalceta. Icazbalceta did not spend much time thinking about whether Indigenous communities deserved access to these records, but he was very unhappy about the fact that so many of the documents that recorded Mexico's colonial history had been dispersed to other nations over the tumultuous nineteenth century. For Icazbalceta, these materials were part of Mexico's national heritage, and belonged in Mexico.

The map of Cholula represents a conundrum when it comes to cultural heritage because like many colonial documents, it belongs to many people: to people in Texas; in Mexico; in Spain; and in Cholula. As [Jeannette Bastian](#) wrote in her foundational work on post-custodial archiving, reprography, or the replication of historical records, can serve as a solution when there are multiple people who all have a claim to documentary heritage.

By making copies, we can distribute custodianship of historical memory to multiple stakeholders simultaneously. Archivists who work in the post-custodial tradition, like [T-Kay Sangwand](#), Theresa Polk, [David Bliss, and Itza Carbajal](#), have implemented this model as an approach where community organizations partner with large, highly-resourced institutions, to replicate their records. But it can also go the other way. Institutional custodians, like the university of texas, can replicate their holdings and give them to affiliated communities in the form of a surrogate or facsimile.

This practice has received attention recently under the name [digital repatriation](#), but I like to call it more generally surrogate return.

Surrogate return has some advantages over ordinary repatriation. Repatriation is, of course, the return of cultural heritage to the community that claims ownership over it. It is usually enacted in a context where the holding institution acquired the materials through a violent colonial process. It is viewed as an act of restitution.

But repatriation isn't always an option. Sometimes there is no single community that can claim an object, as we saw in the case of the Relaciones Geográficas. Sometimes the community does not have the resources to care for the object. And sometimes the holding institution is unwilling to part with a document that it may have acquired legally and that has become central to its collection.

In these cases, surrogate return can be a good solution. We tend to think of this as a very new option, one that was born in the digital age. But what I have found in my research on copying technologies is that people have been thinking about how to use copies to resolve inequities in access to cultural heritage for a long time.

In what remains of my talk, I'm going to tell you very briefly about three examples of surrogate return that I've encountered in my research, and see if we can use those examples to extract some principles relating to the use of facsimiles as restitution.

The first claim I want to make is that facsimile production is interpretive work, and so we have to be cautious about how inequity is embedded into the repatriation project.

The image you see here is an 1851 transcription of a colonial era document. As those of you who work in this time period know well, transcription is how historical records were circulated among researchers. But inequities determined the quality of the transcriptions.

This copy, for example, was acquired by the Mexican researcher Joaquín García Icazbalceta. Icazbalceta was unable to get copies based on the original, either because the costs were

prohibitive or because political relationships were strained. So instead, he went through an intermediary. He wrote to the Boston-based historian William Hickling Prescott and asked Prescott to have transcriptions made from his personal collection. Prescott's collection, in turn, was made up of transcriptions taken from collections in Spain and France.

The problem was that there were no scribes in Boston familiar with colonial Mexican Spanish. Instead, Prescott hired an Italian student who had passed through Havana on his way to Boston. The impact of the student's limited expertise is visible in Icazbalceta's careful edits, which became the basis for this first printed edition of this historical record.

While we can't call this a repatriation project, exactly, we can see how inequity can become embedded in the very form of a repatriated surrogate.

The second claim I want to make is that surrogates get old quickly.

What you see here is a photostat copy of the Motul Maya dictionary, a seventeenth century dictionary written in Spanish and Yukatek Maya. The Photostat was introduced in the 1910s as a mechanism to quickly and cheaply photograph large collections of documents or books. Special collections libraries, like the John Carter Brown library where I work, used the photostat to circulate information. They also used it to resolve inequities to access. The Motul Maya dictionary was part of a large collection of Mexican materials that the JCB purchased from a Mexican historian named Nicolas León in 1896. Leon's financial precarity led him to sell the collection, but his friends worried that the loss had impacted his ability to do research. So they

decided to repatriate his own collection to him by sending him photostat copies of his own books.

Though they never completed this project, we can see in it the seed of the idea that would become heritage repatriation: the idea that finances shouldn't prevent people from accessing their own nation's history. They were able to do a much smaller project, photostating one volume on behalf of Nicolas León and circulating it to multiple libraries. But that copy, too, had a shelf life. Unlike the Motul Maya dictionary at the JCB, the value of the photostat copy has dropped significantly as digital facsimiles have risen in prominence. Surely that too will change, as we develop new methods for copying historical records.

To maintain a successful surrogate repatriation, the JCB would have to continuously replicate the repatriation project with new copies. This would require an ongoing commitment to repatriation work, and to maintaining a community relationship.

Finally, I want to return to the map of Cholula for my third argument: surrogate return is political.

After the map was presented, I visited Cholula and spoke with Don Tomas, then the mayordomo, and others involved in the original return. They laughed and told me they didn't know why the map had been repatriated.

"You can get it online," they said.

A facsimile copy had been available for years at the local university. A local artist had even produced engravings of the map which decorated a local hotel. Though I asked to see the copies that had been gifted, I was never able to find them. They had become private property, rather than a community resource. In one case, it seemed that no one knew where the map was.

But that's not the only story to come out of the Cholula map, because when the map was gifted, the Nahua community was in [a land rights battle](#) with the municipal government. The government was enacting an ambitious construction plan to make the city a more popular tourist destination. In doing so they, were forcing Indigenous people off of their land, and disrupting sacred traditions with long histories. (Cholultecas love to tell you that theirs is the longest continuously inhabited city in the Americas.) Drawing attention to the map, which showed that the same communities had occupied this land since colonial times, mattered in the context of this political battle. So did the endorsement of the University of Texas, a prestigious U.S. institution.

The politics of the facsimile return weren't necessarily the politics of cultural heritage as we tend to think of them at all. It was the performance of the return, not access to the historical record, that mattered in the context of Cholula. This isn't always the case, but it speaks to the importance of deep community engagement when enacting surrogate return.

Thank you.