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Statement of Purpose

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The digitization of historical documents through projects like Google Books, Early English Books Online, and the *Primeros Libros* project has transformed the ways scholars can access primary sources, but the implications of these changes are only partially understood. My research seeks to address this gap by situating these projects within the longer history of the circulation, transcription, and transmission of historical documents. Focusing on the case of written documents from the first century of the Spanish presence in Mexico, the project asks the questions: how do practices of reproduction and circulation impact the shape of Mexico's historical record? And conversely: how are the conditions of colonization made present in the processes of textual circulation? To answer these questions, this dissertation introduces new methods for understanding the intertwined relationship between book history, digital humanities, and postcolonial theory that have implications for both the history of communications systems and for new projects of digitization and repatriation.

My dissertation research is organized around the categories of collection, transcription, repatriation, and representation. The first chapter, collection, traces the history of printed books, manuscripts, and indigenous written documents from early colonial Mexico as they move through private libraries, public institutions, and digital collections. In doing so, it responds to the call for renewed attention to information structures put forth by archival theorists like Kirsten Weld, who writes, "We must place archives - with their histories, their contingencies, their silences and gaps, and their politics - at the heart of our research questions rather than simply relegating them to footnotes and parentheses" (13). This critical approach to archival structures can reveal the political and cultural factors that determine how we access historical knowledge.

The first chapter takes as its subject the long history of the collections of the Mexican bibliophiles Joaquín García Icazbalceta and Nicolás León. In the mid-nineteenth century, these collectors compiled two of the most influential collections of documents pertaining to the first century of Mexican history, including unique and unknown manuscripts, rare printed books, and indigenous codices. This chapter will describe the incorporations of these documents into U.S. institutional libraries, and then into digital projects like the *Primeros Libros* collection of digital facsimiles of American books printed before 1601. In doing so, it will show how the formation of private collections of Mexicana reflected the "transnational desires and anxieties" of nineteenth-century America, and how those anxieties inform modern collections (Brickhouse 33).

In the second chapter, this dissertation turns to the transformations wrought on the historical record through process of transcription. Most scholars who work in archives engage regularly with transcriptions, and as Arlene Farge has pointed out, the process of transcribing can often evoke moments of scholarly inspiration. The interpretive potential of transcription practices remains understudied, however, a lacuna that is made particularly apparent when we seek to understand the shift in transcription labor brought about by the development of automatic transcription tools that convert digital facsimiles into machine-readable text. Recent scholarship has called for renewed attention to automatic transcriptions, but offers few resources for contextualization (Cordell 2016).

My research considers three case studies that explore the long history of transcription practices. The first examines the role of scribes in composing manuscript copies and printed texts at the Colegio de la Santa Cruz, a Franciscan school for indigenous students in Tlatelolco, Mexico. These scribes were frequently responsible for orthography, translation, and interpretive linguistic choices. The second case study focuses on the networks of transcription through which García Icazbalceta accessed manuscripts that had long been preserved in archives in Spain. To acquire these documents, he purchased transcriptions from the assistant to the celebrated U.S. historiographer William H. Prescott, who in turn was working from transcriptions made by his contacts in Spain. The third case study uses this historical context to examine the automatic transcription tools that I helped to develop through the “Reading the First Books” project, an NEH funded effort to produce new tools to transcribe digital facsimiles of early American printed books. My work has shown how culturally informed ideas of language and accuracy shape the decisions of the transcribing algorithm.

Archiving and collecting have often been framed as processes that limit access to and ownership over cultural heritage items by the colonized people who produced them. Both material and digital repatriation have been posited as a resolution to this history, but these processes carry their own questions about ownership, authenticity, heritage, and history. The third chapter of this dissertation addresses these questions by examining three different strategies related to the return of early colonial Mexico’s documentary record, all of which are based in the city of Cholula, Mexico. First, it considers the strategy of digital return through the *Primeros Libros* project, a multi-institutional project that seeks to produce digital facsimiles of all books printed before 1601 in the Americas. Second, it considers the strategy of material reproduction through the case of the *Relaciones geográficas*, seventeenth century maps owned by the Benson Latin American Collection that are being returned to the communities they represent in the form of high-quality reproductions. Third, it considers the strategy of bibliographic return, taking as its case study the effort to recreate the Franciscan libraries of colonial Mexico at the newly-established *Biblioteca Franciscana*. Collectively, these three cases illustrate both the potential of and challenges embedded in processes of repatriation.

The final chapter in my dissertation focuses on how the colonial documents described in the prior chapters are represented in literary discourse through what I refer to as the “historical imaginary.” This chapter examines both the material and symbolic legacy of these documents in order to understand their position as authorizing documents in modern textual culture. It turns to works of fiction like Carmen Boullosa’s *Cielos de la Tierra*, a post-apocalyptic novel about early colonial Mexican manuscripts, and Gary Jennings’s *Aztec*, a historical romance masquerading as an early colonial manuscript, to analyze the positioning of these documents as signifying objects. It then turns to the Taller Martín Pescador, a small printing operation known for its careful reinvention of early colonial Mexican texts and avant-garde poetry - including books by Boullosa - to understand the material presence of these historical objects in textual production today. Through a combination of bibliographical analysis and close reading, this final chapter will show how the processes of production, collection, transcription, and return described in this dissertation mediate our imaginative engagement with early colonial history.

The four categories that inform my research agenda – collection, transcription, return, and representation – offer four distinct methodological approaches to the question:

how do texts transform over the long history of their use? In doing so, they offer a critical analysis of what Lisa Gitelman calls the commonplace comparison between “the ascendance of digital networks and the World Wide Web with the rapid dissemination of letterpress printing in Renaissance Europe and the supposed emergence of print culture” reflected in such diverse volumes as Elizabeth Eisenstein’s *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1980), Adrian Johns’ *The Nature of the Book* (1998), David McKitterick’s *Old Books, New Technologies* (2013), and Gitelman’s *Paper Knowledge* (2014) (20). This dissertation proposes that we can gain critical understanding of this commonplace analogy by reorienting it towards Mexico City, an argument that has implications for our understanding of both the history of communications technologies, and the mechanisms of colonial rule. In one sense, then, the goal of this project is to accomplish a rethinking of the so-called “digital age” that acknowledges its colonial roots, offering a reminder that colonial history is book history is digital history.

The larger question that this dissertation seeks to address, however, has to do with the narratives that shape our engagement with both print history and the digital present. How have processes of reproduction, circulation, acquisition, and destruction informed the stories we tell about the history of modern textuality, and how do these stories, in turn, inform our understanding of the textual present? Looking primarily at the movement of historical documents from New Spain between the United States and Mexico (with some attention, also, to Spain, France, and England), this project considers how the desires awakened by historical documents interact with financial, political, and intellectual factors to shape public access to the historical record. It considers, in other words, how the stuff of colonial history becomes the stuff of book history and how that, in turn, becomes the stuff of legend.

References

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