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Good afternoon, my name is hannah alpert abrams, and you can find me online.

I have to apologize, because this is maybe the hardest talk I've ever tried to write. I am a postdoc just six weeks away from the end of my contract, without a plan for future employment, and this is a totally new project. It's been hard for me to think about new work without a clear path forward for the research.

But it's also hard because I just don't know the answer to the questions this talk was supposed to ask. So what I'm going to do is tell you the problem. I will leave the solution in your more than capable hands.

The paper I proposed was based on some archival materials that I stumbled across when conducting research for my dissertation. I was reading the archives of the John Carter Brown Library from the 1890s to learn about the history behind one of the library's major acquisitions: a collection of early American printed books that would catapult the JCB into being one of the most significant collections of early Mexicana in the world.

I was interested in the 1896 acquisition because it contained, among many treasures, a large number of works written in Indigenous Mesoamerican languages: Nahuatl, Zapotec, Mixtec, Otomí. Books like the 1555 edition of Alonso de Molina's *diccionario en lengua mexicana y castellana*, the first dictionary of a Mesoamerican language. Or a 1599 *confessionario* that offers guidance on how to take confession from indigenous converts, written in a combination of Spanish, Latin, and Nahuatl.

The important thing to understand about these materials is that they were tools of evangelization. They were written using European technologies, from the alphabet to the page, and though in many cases they preserve the intellectual labor and cultural knowledge of Indigenous people, that labor was produced under conditions of colonization. This is the contradiction and challenge of using colonial texts to study Indigenous history or to recover Indigenous voices, as scholars from Louise Burkhart to Walter Mignolo and Barbara Mundy have pointed out.

I am not really a historian of Spanish colonization, but instead of its documentary traces: the texts it left behind. I was studying these materials because I wanted to understand what colonial documents meant to a library like the John Carter Brown library, which is based in Providence, Rhode Island. I also wanted to understand how the library and its patrons made meaning out of these documents, and especially, what kinds of value was associated with Indigenous-language texts which they often could not read. And I wanted to understand how the movement of these documents might have impacted other communities, like those who speak the languages and remember the histories that these texts preserve.

This is a story about recovering lost voices because it allows us to ask how copying mechanisms, like digital technology, interact with colonial processes. In New Spain, the history of text technologies has always been part of the history of violent colonization. Studying this history allows us to think about what voices become legible in replication, and what remain unread. It is a way of thinking about who recovery is enacted for, and how recovery can lead to restitution. This has been central to my work in special collections and as a digital humanist, working with projects like the Ticha Project, the Primeros Libros project, and others, and thinking about the practices of surrogate return that I'll probably be talking about tomorrow morning.

But then.

But then my research was totally derailed.

What happened is that while I was reading the John Carter Brown archives from the 1890s I stumbled on what turned out to be a series of letters relating to the Brown family's philanthropic work. It's unusual that these records were archived among the library correspondence, which usually dealt with things like book sales and acquisitions.

But what happened is that I started reading about an initiative, partially funded by the Brown family, to construct a schoolhouse on what is now the Leech Lake Ojibwe Reservation. The story was hard to piece together: I don't fully understand it myself. But what I do understand is

that the Brown family was active in the church and they were involved in various kinds of philanthropic efforts across the United States.

At some point in 1890-91, they became involved in funding an effort to build a missionary school for children on the Leech Lake reservation, which is located in what's now Minnesota. According to the website, "The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe is committed to the responsible operation of government, preservation of our heritage, promotion of our sovereignty, and the protection of natural resources for our elders and future generations, while enhancing the health, economic well-being, education, and our inherent right to live as Ojibwe People."

The Leech Lake Ojibwe have lived in what is now Northern Minnesota since before the arrival of European settlers. They negotiated a series of treaties to reserve some of that land in the nineteenth century. But in the late 1880s and 1890s, with the passage of the Dawes Act and the Nelson Act, much of their land was stolen or lost, and the region was opened to settlers for logging and other forms of resource extraction. During this time, the Ojibwe were pushed off their lands and their children were sent to residential schools, a traumatic act of cultural destruction whose legacy is still with us today.

This is the historical context for the Brown's involvement in the Leech Lake Reservation. The Brown family was working with an episcopal missionary named Joseph Gilfillan, who wanted to establish a religious school for native children. Over a series of letters, Gilfillan and John Nicholas Brown discussed the strategy for building the school, first at Red Lake and later at Leech Lake. Gilfillan wrote regularly to discuss the challenges of getting the school constructed.

Most importantly, the difficulty of getting lumber, which had to be transported across the lake and only in winter, and accessing the government-run mill. Gilfillan's paternal tone will be familiar, he writes:

"It will be your munificence that will make it possible to shelter the 90 little children, who ought to be sheltered in it. Many of them are bright and worthy children, who will make noble men and women if they have the chance this school will give them."

But then, the Office of Indian Affairs steps in, refusing access to the government-owned saw mill, and blocking construction of the school. In a letter dated May 6, 1891, they explain "The department wishes to remove from the Leech Lake Indians any influences which will tend to keep them upon that reservation and to push in every way possible for their removal to the White Earth reservation, as provided for in the Act of January 14, 1889."

As far as I can tell, the school was never built.

So look, what is this story about? This is a story about a philanthropic, missionary effort to provide access to education for native communities. Access to education and literacy is of course a cornerstone of what many libraries and librarians do, and, in fact, it's a lot of what we mean when we talk about recovery work for documentary heritage.

But in the context of colonialism, education and literacy have been used to destroy families and communities, distort histories, and justify acts of bodily violence.

The complex and ambivalent nature of this philanthropic project is interesting and, as someone who is not a historian of this part of U.S. history, pretty confusing. I'm having trouble teasing apart the pieces, and my understanding of the history is pretty imperfect. But what I do understand is that it has something to do with book history. Because Reverend Joseph Gilfillan, a white missionary, is remembered today for his work translating religious texts and letters into Ojibwe. And his work was funded by John Nicholas Brown at the exact same time that Brown was accumulating religious texts translated into Indigenous languages as part of a colonial and evangelical process three hundred years previously. I don't think we can separate these two projects, just like we can be inspired by the fact that there's a significant overlap of scholars working on the [Recovering Hispanic Literary Heritage](#) project and those working on [Separados/Torn Apart](#).

But also, to be frank, I don't know what to do about this coincidence of events.

One question I have is how do we understand these two arms of the collecting library: bibliographic acquisition and bibliographic philanthropy?

A second is how do we understand the coming together of sixteenth century Spanish colonial history and nineteenth century U.S. history?

And a third is what do we as people who work in and with special collections do with the violence that underlies both of these histories?

And finally, what does this have to do with digital recovery work? Well I think it has everything to do with digital recovery work. Because to understand how recovery operates as the philanthropic arm of collecting institutions, we may benefit from understanding how collectors have thought about their philanthropic role in the past. And to understand what happens when heritage is unmoored from sites of production or acquisition, we may benefit from understanding how custodial institutions themselves have reached across borders and communities to build networks of textual production, preservation, analysis, and assimilation.

Thank you.

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