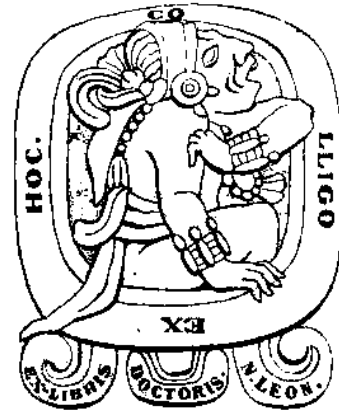


An Unexpected Influence:

The John Carter Brown Library and the circulation of early Mexican imprints

Hannah Alpert-Abrams

March 22, 2017



Text available: halperta.com/pdf/jcbl.pdf

Guiding questions:

- Why are textual reproductions made?
- How are textual reproductions made?
- How do textual reproductions circulate?
- Who produces textual reproductions?

Context: Digitization & Automatic Transcription

- How does digitization shape access to historical documents?
 - Primeros Libros Project: <http://www.primeroslibros.com>
 - Reading the First Books: sites.utexas.edu/firstbooks

Context: Collecting at the John Carter Brown Library

- 1895: George Parker Winship hired
- 1896: Acquisition of the Nicolas León catalogue
- 1913: Purchase of the Photostat machine

Documents: Circulating Mexican Books at the JCBL

Reproduction for the production of printed editions

- 1891: Letter from the Consolato generale d'Italia to John Nicholas Brown requesting photographs of the Columbus Letter
- 1891: Receipt from Leander Baker for photographing Columbus Letter
- 1892: Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati dalla R. Commissione colombiana

Reproduction to fill gaps in books and collections

- ~1883: acquisition of Molina facsimiles from Lenox Library
- 1892: Lenox Library letter requesting facsimiles of the Molina *Vocabulario*

Nicolas Leon and the Photostat Machine

- 1896: Letter from Winship celebrating Leon acquisition
- 1899: Letter of Appreciation from the Museum of Fine Arts

Presentation Text

This is a talk about textual reproduction, so let's start with some copies.

If you haven't yet, please take this opportunity to look at these three books here: three variations of Alonso de Molina's 1555 Vocabulario de la lengua mexicana.

One of these books is a complete original.

The other is an incomplete original that was missing, I think it's 7 leaves from the front, and 16 from the back. So it's been improved with the addition of photolithographic reproductions taken from a different copy.

And the third are extra copies of the missing pages that have been bound together.

Thanks to Ken Ward for pointing me to these pages, which provoke some interesting questions for me

The first question is why you would add photoreproductions of missing pages to a historical book. How does it change the book's value? How does it change the utility of the collection?

The second question is how those reproductions were made. In what ways are these copies different from the original? How do they compare to other kinds of textual reproductions that have been used to complete imperfect books?

The third is where these reproductions came from and how they were acquired. What kinds of social and economic networks facilitated their reproduction? How do they materialize the ways that information circulates?

And the fourth is who made these reproductions. What kind of labor is involved in perfecting a historical book? What kinds of people are made visible when we look into the history of a book's reproduction?

In my talk today I'm going to take on some of these questions, and at the very least gesture towards their answers in the specific case of the John Carter Brown Library. I'll start by giving some context for this research by describing my bigger project, before turning to the case studies laid out here to answer some of these questions.

My research is concerned with the relationship between historical memory and the historical record of early colonial New Spain. I focus on documents from the first decades of Spanish presence in Mesoamerica. I ask how mechanisms of reproduction have facilitated access to historical memory, and how the mediated circulation of historical documents has shaped the way Mexican history is remembered.

My interest in these questions comes from my work in digital scholarship at LLLILAS Benson at the University of Texas. I work primarily with the Primeros Libros project, which is an

effort to build a digital collection of all books printed before 1601 in the Americas – mostly books from what is now Mexico, and some from Peru.

I currently manage a project called the Reading the First Books project, which is an NEH funded effort to produce tools to automatically transcribe these books. The tools that we're building have been designed to handle the specific material challenges of early modern printed books, things like uneven inking and unfamiliar fonts. They've also been designed to handle the unique linguistic challenges of early colonial books, like inconsistent spelling and the use of multiple languages, including indigenous languages.

The last time I was at the JCB, about a year and a half ago, I presented on the technical aspects of this work. Our project was motivated by the desire to make historical information available and accessible to more people. One of our goals was work against the financial and institutional barriers to information, and especially to indigenous history. Another goal was to increase the accessibility of the historical record by making documents available to screen readers, which are reading tools for the blind. A third goal was to make the documents discoverable, facilitating exciting new research agendas. These are largely goals that we share with many digitization projects around the country – including those at the JCB, which has been at the forefront of the digitization of early colonial documents.

But there's a flip side to digitization projects. We've encountered resistance in our use of indigenous language data that points to some of the ethical considerations around the digitization of indigenous knowledge. As it turns out, screen readers can't really read historical orthography anyway, especially not in indigenous languages. And full discoverability remains a distant goal even as automatic transcription becomes more accurate. Just as our project shares many of the hopes that surround digitization, it also shares many of the anxieties around the value of information in the digital age.

At the same time, our project is unusual among digitization projects, though hardly unique, in its focus on colonial documents. The specific challenges of working with colonial and indigenous-language texts have made visible some of the social and cultural tensions that underlie these projects. The last time I was here, over a year ago, I spoke about the technical aspects of this work and some of the interpretive work that I've done to understand how digital algorithms rework colonial history.

Today, I want to provide some historical context for some of that digital work. The more research I've done on digitization, the more I've begun to think that these anxieties are not new. By looking at other moments of textual reproduction, I hope to provide some context for my own digital work, and to better understand how that work has shaped research practices and historical knowledge.

The JCB is a great place to explore these questions because of its long history both building and reproducing documents from early colonial Mexico. I'm sure that many of you are more familiar with the history of the JCB than I am, but I'll run through a very brief summary just in case.

The JCB began in the 18th century when John Carter Brown, made wealthy, I think, in trade, began to establish a private gentleman's library. Over the subsequent generations, that library

grew and developed an intensive focus on Americana. This focus became particularly voracious in the 19th century, with the rise of bibliomania, or the obsessive desire to acquire rare and valuable books and manuscripts. At the same time, book dealers like Obadiah Rich and collectors like Henri Terneaux-Compans popularized the collection of American documents. The JCB focused narrowly on printed works, rather than manuscripts, and its particular strengths were in New England history and European books about the Americas, including maps. The library remained private until the death of John Nicholas Brown in 1900, when it was given to Brown University along with an endowment and funds to construct the building that we stand in today.

My particular interests in the JCB focus on the transitional period of 1895 to 1915. In 1895, John Nicholas Brown hired the historian George Parker Winship to be the librarian of his private collection. Winship had translated an account of the Coronado expedition from Spanish, and he had a particular but not exclusive interest in New Spain. It was under his guidance that the library in 1896 acquired the catalogue of Nicolas Leon, a collector and dealer of early Mexican books. It was also under his guidance that the library acquired a Photostat machine, which is an early version of a Xerox machine. My purpose for my time as a fellow here is to examine how these two acquisitions shaped the study of early Mexican history.

In this talk, though, I'll have to revise the scope of the conversation, because I haven't yet read the bulk of the records from that period. So what I want to do instead is to paint a picture of textual circulation at the beginning of this research, in the 1890s. We'll walk through different examples of textual circulation to try to answer the questions that opened this talk:

Why are textual reproductions made?

How are textual reproductions made?

How do textual reproductions circulate?

Who produces textual reproductions?

Document Group 1: Reproduction for the production of printed editions

Researchers contacted the JCB with any number of research requests. Some wanted to confirm bibliographical information, or to conduct genealogical research. But the majority of files in the Library Archives are requests for extracts from documents held in the collection, and perhaps the most popular documents were those pertaining to Christopher Columbus.

This is especially true in the lead-up to the quadricentennial of the first Columbus voyage. We know from Trouillot that the quadricentennial celebrations were an important moment for reimagining the origins of the New World according to new national and ethnic categories. It's unsurprising, then, that both Spanish and Italian researchers contacted John Nicholas Brown by way of their consulates in order to request information about the Columbus letters in his possession. Brown sent the Spanish consulate photographs for free, but he charged the Italian consulate \$48 for photographs, and later, for photonegatives.

On display here you can see some of the many letters sent from the Italian consulate, as well as the book that was finally produced by the Italian Columbus Council to celebrate the quadricentennial. In so many ways the book represents the Italian claim over the discovery of the New World. But the fact that they had to purchase copies of the documents from Providence shows the financial shift in power away from Europe.

The Columbus example isn't the only case where people purchased copies of books from the Browns in order to produce printed editions. In 1891, the Chilean bibliographer José Toribio Medina contacts Brown to ask for a copy of Melchor Jufre de Aguila's *Compendio Historial* of 1630. He wants to produce a printed edition. Brown contacts a colleague to ask about reproduction costs, and though he doesn't specify, he does give the impression that he plans to have the book transcribed. In the end, though, he sends a copy of the book to the Chilean consulate in 1895 so that they can take photographs. The digital copy of the book available today on Cervantes Virtual is a digital facsimile of the 1897 edition made from those photographs.

Reproduction to fill gaps in books and collections

The second set of reproductions that I want to look at is the Molina volumes which we saw at the beginning of the talk. The Molina vocabulary is a rare and valuable sixteenth century Mexican imprint, and while I'm not sure exactly when the first copy was acquired by the JCB – I'm working on it! – it was some time in the nineteenth century. According to the bibliographic note from John Russell Bartlett, we know that it was acquired from a catalogue that listed it as intact, but when it arrived they found it was missing several pages, including seven from the front and 16 from the back.

So the Bartlett contacted the Lenox library, which also had a copy, and they made him several sets of photolithographic reproductions. You can see here that one set was bound into the book, while the other set was kept separately. It's unclear to me why they kept that addition set.

Bartlett writes that unfortunately, the Lenox copy also had a flaw. Someone had cut out the woodprint image on the title page. It seems that the same was true of the copy held by Joaquín García Icazbalceta in Mexico, and the one at the British Museum.

So Bartlett had to get creative. He believed that the woodprint in the *Vocabulario* was the same as one on the title page of his earlier *Arte de la lengua mexicana y castellana*, which he also conveniently owned a copy of. So he went ahead and photographed that title page as well, merged the two together, and created an approximation of what once was there.

The story doesn't end there, though. In 1892 the Lenox Library acquired another incomplete copy of the Molina Vocabulario, so they wrote and asked for their facsimiles back. Presumably what they received was a packet similar to the one here, including the title page. I wonder whether they knew that the title page was a modified one?

The case of the Molina Vocabulario is not unique. Libraries like the JCB circulated facsimiles in order to complete imperfect copies of historical volumes. When they couldn't get photolithographic reproductions, they used pen and ink to make up copies, though by the period I'm working in the Browns would never consider doing such a thing. Nevertheless, one letter that I saw remarked that it's always a good idea to make the facsimile pages, as it will always and forever increase the value of the document.

That's not true today, of course. But the effort to produce a perfect copy does show us something about how these nineteenth century collectors imagined their libraries to be: complete repositories of the world's most valuable and desirable books.

Nicolas Leon and the Photostat Machine

So my talk ends at the beginning of my research: with the acquisition of the Nicolas León books and the rise of the Photostat machine. The Nicolas Leon books were acquired through a bookseller named Frank Borton, who begins contacting the Browns by offering to sell them Indian Heads and Mexican Incunabula. I don't have time in this talk to address the Indian heads, but artifacts and human remains circulate around historical books in ways that bear remembering.

The acquisition is a moment of glory for the Brown library as it transitions from a center for British Americana one with an equal claim to Mexican print history. From that point on, we see an increase in the circulation of Mexican materials, and the case of the MFA in Boston is just one example. As far as I can guess, the facsimile title pages gifted to the MFA were something akin to a calling card. They weren't research materials but decorative gifts. Interestingly, the MFA still has them in their archives, and I'm hoping I'll get to see them next time I'm in Boston.

Soon after the León collection, the library undergoes the transition from a private library to part of Brown University. There is much discussion at the time about the effort to preserve the feel of a gentleman's club even in the new research space. But the new context carries with it new collecting principles, and Winship sets out to acquire more cheap books to fill in the gaps in the collection. Now the goal is

no longer to build a catalogue of valuable rarities, but rather to accommodate research agendas.

It is on that front that the Photostat becomes valuable. When it's acquired in 1913 it is quickly put to use making copies for researchers from elsewhere. But the project that is more celebrated is the establishment of a circulating project of libraries across the United States which set out to fill in their Photostat collections of early American documents and newspapers. Other libraries join by subscription, or send Photostat copies of their own volumes in exchange. This process may sound familiar for those of us who have worked with Hathi Trust, Internet Archive, Google Books, or other paywall-protected, library-funded repositories.

For the period that I've looked at, very few Mexican documents circulate in the Photostat trades. Because these are US institutions, their goals are to establish uniform resources across the country for American themes, and Mexico does not yet apply, though I suspect it soon will. So the Mexican documents remain site-specific in a way that is not true for the colonial British ones.

I want to conclude by talking briefly about labor. We saw from the receipt that the photolithography was outsourced, a process that was costly and risky because it required shipping books. A great deal of attention was paid to the protection of volumes while in transit or in storage.

In house photocopying, in contrast, could be done by the librarian. When Winship writes in the annual report of 1915 that "The photostat machine has had a busy year," he means, of course, that the assistant librarian has had a busy year. More specifically, I suspect he means people like a Miss Rebecca Phillips Steere, who hardly appears in the library records, but who resigned as assistant librarian in 1916. One thing I hope to learn by digging deeper into the archive is how library work changed with these new tools for textual reproduction, and how that work was gendered. Like other technologies for textual reproduction, from the typewriter, to the scanner, I expect that the Photostat got its start as women's work.

I know this talk has been a bit fragmented, so I want to take a moment now to gather it back together for you.

I said when I started that I was interested in looking at moments of textual reproduction, and using them to think about the intersection of technology, history, libraries, and labor. The cases I chose have shown, I hope, some of the ways that the movement of materials into libraries like the JCB brought gentlemen collectors to the center of historical research practices. Transcription and photolithography

made it possible for people like Brown and Winship to control the circulation of information, and to control the accuracy of reproduced documents.

It looks like things changed with the institutionalization of both the books and the reproductive tools. Rare books stop circulating when they are institutionalized, because institutions are less likely to buy and sell according to whimsy, or to death. Instead, they start circulating ever more copies, first as Photostat reproductions, and today as digital facsimiles. Both seek to build ever more complete collections of information, even as the idea of completion shifts, from torn title pages to fully photographed facsimile reproductions. Both rely largely on unseen labor for their production. And both replicate not just the materials but the context of their production, their collection, and their dissemination.