

# Archives Beyond Borders: Preserving Historical Memory Through Transnational Collaboration in Latin America

by T-KAY SANGWAND

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**DESPITE THE PASSAGE** of three decades since the dirty wars unfolded across Latin America, the ramifications of these histories continue to reverberate into the present. Over the past year the world has witnessed former heads of state in Guatemala and Argentina stand trial and be convicted

for crimes of genocide and child abduction,<sup>1</sup> respectively, during their countries' period of armed conflict and military dictatorship. While acknowledging and confronting the past through these public, state-led accountability efforts is indeed necessary, they present a historical narrative that still foregrounds high-ranking state actors. The complex histories and lived experiences of victims and survivors are rarely represented in their own right or through their own perspectives and voices, particularly in a way that reaches broad audiences.

To address this erasure from the historical record, many communities, small institutions, and individuals have undertaken the task of archiving their experiences and histories. Yet these groups and individuals struggle with issues of long-term preservation of, and access to, their documentation. In the spirit of collaboration and solidarity, LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections and the University of Texas Libraries have partnered with individuals and community organizations to ensure that these communities' valuable documentation remains preserved for the historical record and future generations of education and scholarship. In December

2013, the Mellon Foundation awarded LLILAS Benson with an eighteen-month planning grant to support these archival collaborations through a project titled "Post-Custodial Archival Development and Digital Scholarship: Learning from Latin America." The grant will fund three archival pilot projects in Central America as well as an inventory of human rights-related archival partnership opportunities across Latin America.

The University of Texas Libraries formalized its commitment to working with communities to preserve valuable and fragile archival documentation through its establishment of the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI) in 2008. Over the past six years, the HRDI has successfully partnered with seven organizations: the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda; the Museum of the Word and Image in El Salvador; the Guatemala National Police Archive; Free Burma Rangers in Southeast Asia; Texas After Violence Project in Austin, Texas; WITNESS in New York; and the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C. HRDI's collaborative archival efforts in Latin America focus on documentation related to the region's dirty wars and include preservation of and access to El Salvador's Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front's (FMLN) Radio Venceremos recordings; Guatemala's national police historical archive, which the state claimed never existed; and, in partnership with the National Security Archive, Paraguay's Terror Archive and Argentina's Foreign Ministry records.

When the University of Texas Libraries first conceived of its Human Rights Documentation Initiative, it envisioned a more traditional acquisition model in which partner organizations would send their materials for digitization at the Libraries, the Libraries would retain

digital copies, and the original material would be sent back to its creators. However, as the HRDI began establishing its first partnership, it encountered flaws in the traditional model of acquisition, which requires record creators to send their materials to a distant repository for preservation. Partner and potential partner organizations were understandably reluctant to relinquish custody of their materials, even temporarily. In the first place, the documentation serves immediate programming needs, be they advocacy or education, and its removal could severely disrupt the organization's operations. From a preservation standpoint, shipping the materials back and forth between organizations poses an additional risk to the documentation's already vulnerable state. Additionally, considering U.S. relations with the countries with whom the HRDI partners, and histories of U.S. intervention—as in the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador—it is not difficult to understand the reluctance of human rights organizations to hand their materials over to a large U.S. institution. Thus, the HRDI had to find another model that would facilitate use of rich, unique information resources as well as address both preservation and custody concerns. As a result, the HRDI drew upon the post-custodial theory of archives, which envisions that “archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but . . . will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators.”<sup>22</sup> This model allows record creators to maintain custody of their materials while archivists work with them to develop preservation and access solutions that fit the needs of both groups.

In the HRDI post-custodial model, both archivists and partner organizations are experts. Archivists share their professional expertise in preservation, description, and access in order to help develop the partner organization's preservation capacity and infrastructure; partner organizations draw upon local labor for digitization work and harness their subject expertise to provide in-depth description of their materials. The resulting product supports the partner organizations' programming, meets established standards for preservation, and serves as a valuable primary resource for teaching and research. Incorporating the partner organization into the archival process empowers and further

invests the local community in the preservation of its cultural patrimony, and helps ensure that the historical record remains intact. The post-custodial model, as practiced at UT, is thus rooted in the establishment of deep collaborative relationships—horizontal and reciprocal in nature—with our colleagues and sister institutions around the globe.

Through the Mellon-funded post-custodial archiving project LILAS Benson will partner with three organizations in Central America—specifically Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua—to set up pilot projects to preserve, digitize, and provide online access to valuable and fragile historical documents. These pilot projects build on the momentum gained from the 2014 Lozano Long Conference, “Archiving the Central American Revolutions,” which offered firsthand reflections from historical actors and scholars on the necessity of preserving memory and documentation related to the social and political upheaval in Central America during the late twentieth century. Additionally, the project will build a directory of other post-custodial archival opportunities across Latin America, in the hope that other U.S. academic institutions will consider adopting post-custodial partnerships with Latin American communities to preserve their historical memory.

The Mellon-funded project will be directed by partner organizations and their priorities, and will build on the lessons learned from the HRDI's implementation of the post-custodial model as well as existing LILAS Benson relationships with Latin American organizations and UT Latin Americanist faculty's research strengths in the region. ✨

#### Notes

1. While a three-judge tribunal in Guatemala convicted General Efraín Ríos Montt, former president of Guatemala, of genocide on May 10, 2013, the Constitutional Court overturned the conviction ten days later.
2. “Postcustodial theory of archives,” Society of American Archivists, *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/p/postcustodial-theory-of-archives>.

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Radio Venceremos broadcasters in La Cueva de las Pasiones, La Guacamaya, Morazán, El Salvador, ca. 1980s