



Capacity Assessment of Latin American and Caribbean Partners:
A Symposium About Open-Access, Technological Needs, and Institutional Sustainability

Report of Symposium and Recommendations

A text prepared as a response to the symposium

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Goals of the Symposium

In April 2020, the authors, CLIR Fellows in the second cohort of Data Curation for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, virtually convened *Capacity Assessment of Latin American and Caribbean Partners: A Symposium about Open-Access, Technological Needs, and Institutional Sustainability*. Originally the symposium was meant to take place in person in Miami, Florida, at Florida International University’s Frost Art Museum and the Wolfsonian-FIU in Miami Beach. Because of Covid-19, the symposium took place in a virtual format hosted by the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC).

The symposium centered the voices of a group of institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean by providing a forum for these stakeholders to share strategies and identify common areas of need. In taking this approach we, as organizers, intended to step outside the neoliberal model of post-custodial archiving (Alpert-Abrams et al. 2019) and create an opportunity for digital archiving and cultural preservation to be driven by archives, libraries, and scholars in Latin America and the Caribbean. The recommendations in this report for working with archives and libraries in the region were formulated by these stakeholders based on the needs of and the particular challenges faced in their respective regions.

Our goal was for these stakeholders to formulate a set of questions for funders, libraries, archives, and others based in the United States, Canada, or European nations to consider when evaluating grant proposals for digital projects, or when considering post-custodial archival work with institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean. Recordings from the virtual event were easily made widely available to libraries, archives, and funders, thus advancing knowledge and equitable practices for working with Latin American and Caribbean archives, libraries, and cultural heritage institutions. We sought to develop recommendations and equitable practices to enhance cultural engagement through collection development that fully acknowledges Latin American and Caribbean organizations as equal partners with a voice in decision making for projects and grant funding. It is our intent that this virtual symposium serve as a model to strengthen and diversify collections, as well as promote inclusion through the active preservation of historical and contemporary documents and voices.

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The Symposium

For the symposium, we wanted to have a diversity of voices even within a small group. Latin America and the Caribbean comprise immense linguistic and cultural diversity, varying levels of cultural heritage and archiving infrastructure, and a mix of mainstream institutions and those that prioritize marginalized communities. Each of the authors has an existing relationship with an institution in the region, either through project work or institutional ties. Upon assessment, we chose institutions that reflect the kind of diversity we aimed to represent; thus, those we invited were from Haiti, Jamaica, Barbados, Colombia, Belize, and Mexico.

From Haiti, the Institut de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine National (ISPAN) was invited as Hadassah St. Hubert, based at the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC, <https://dloc.com>) is working directly with its staff. Founded in 1979 to protect Haitian national patrimony, ISPAN's archive (<https://www.dloc.com/ispan>) contains extensive documentation on archaeological explorations, architectural designs, research publications from Haitian scholars, and photographs concerning Haiti's monuments, structures, and cultural and historical sites. The archival documents are mainly in French and Haitian Kreyòl. UCLA Libraries recently awarded ISPAN a Modern Endangered Archives Program (MEAP) grant to digitize its archival collection located in Cap-Haitien, Haiti.

In addition, two of dLOC's institutional partners, the National Library of Jamaica (NLJ) and HeritEdge Connection based in Barbados, were added to have voices from the Anglophone Caribbean. The National Library of Jamaica (<https://nlj.gov.jm>) was established in 1979 under the Institute of Jamaica Act of 1978. It originated from the collection of the West India Reference Library (WIRL), which was founded in 1894 as a section of the Public Library of the Institute of Jamaica. NLJ is responsible for coordinating digitization efforts as the head of the Jamaica Library and Information Network. HeritEdge Connection (<https://heritedge.foundation>) teamed with the Barbados Archives and was awarded two Endangered Archives Programme grants through the British Library to digitize historical newspapers in the archives' collections. In addition, HeritEdge Connection completed the archival processing and digitization of the records of the Synagogue Restoration Project in Bridgetown, Barbados.

The Latin American Digital Initiatives (<https://ladi.lib.utexas.edu>) at LLILAS Benson, where Jennifer Isasi was based, has been working with the Palenque Regional el Kongal branch of Proceso de Comunidades Negras, “an Afro-Colombian rights network which seeks to secure, promote, and defend the rights to identity, ancestral territory, autonomy, and collective well being of Afro-Colombian men and women, in order to guarantee the principles of equity, equality, and justice” (<https://renacientes.net>). Isasi decided to invite one of the partners in this institution as it reflects efforts to use digitization practices for the dissemination, understanding, and preservation of the ongoing fight to gain the long-awaited rights and justice for Black Colombians.

The Institute of Social and Cultural Research (ISCR, <https://nichbelize.org/iscr>) in Belize was invited as it falls under the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH), which is tasked with promoting and safeguarding Belize’s historical and cultural patrimony. ISCR’s goal is to serve as the leading digital repository of Belize’s intangible cultural heritage inventory and open-access research in the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences. Some of its collection includes the National Hero Philip Goldson Collection, Journal of Belizean Studies, Belize Historical and Anthropological Reports (2012-present), and an extensive set of audiovisual cultural content dating from 2011 to the present. ISCR was recently awarded a planning grant from the Modern Endangered Archives Program for a project to assess and safeguard audiovisual materials on Belize’s indigenous Garifuna language, music, and dance, which is inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Nicté Fuller Medina (UCLA Library) is currently working with ISCR. Belize is unique in being part of both Latin America and the Caribbean yet not traditionally considered representative of either region.

Finally, Margie Montañez (UNM Library) works with the Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPECFT) (<https://econtent.unm.edu/digital/collection/fapecft>), based in *Distrito Federal*, Mexico. The partnership between the University of New Mexico Libraries and FAPECFT provides open access to 300,000 digitized documents from FAPECFT. The digital collection consists of hidden and/or endangered Mexican cultural, historical, and political research material. The Julio Galán Family Digital Collection is another post-custodial collection between the family of the late Mexican artist, Julio Galán, and University of New Mexico Libraries. This collaboration makes accessible digital replicas of family papers, sketchbooks, and personal correspondence. These projects demonstrate the breadth and scope of our partnerships by highlighting personal archives, cultural heritage in terms of the arts, and microhistories as an important aspect of collaborations that centers local voices.

The UCLA Library has had collaborative projects with multiple cultural heritage institutions in Cuba for a few years. These institutions were to be important contributors to the symposium because of their ongoing work in partnership with other U.S. and European institutions. However, because of travel embargos, it became apparent that it would not be possible to arrange for the necessary visas. Once we transitioned to a virtual symposium, participation from Cuban institutions was still impeded because the internet access available to the Cuban institutions UCLA Library partners with would not allow for videoconferencing. While in some cases these institutions may have better internet access in-office, due to the pandemic staff were working from home and not in-office. While the embargo is specific to Cuba, obtaining travel visas always requires attention and planning. Barriers to internet access, or digital infrastructure in general, must also be taken into consideration when working collaboratively in the region and when putting content online.

Our keynote speakers, Gimena del Rio Riande and Roopika Risam, were chosen as a result of the invited partner survey we conducted during the microgrant. As open access was one of the concerns that was identified, we invited Dr. del Rio Riande as the most prominent voice in the matter in the Spanish-speaking Americas, as well as a very well-known practitioner of *humanidades digitales* at large in research and teaching in Latin America and Europe. Dr. Risam's expertise addressed another concern reflected in the survey, namely, postcolonial practices¹ in the digital cultural record. Dr. Risam highlighted the need to cultivate relationships and participation to help intervene in knowledge production that privileges the Global North. Dr. Risam reminded us that archival records for Latin America and the Caribbean are for the most part distributed across countries and institutions. Transnational partnerships should aim to bring them together and provide wide access to the communities from which the archival records originated, while practicing an ethics of collaboration.

We believe that this symposium was timely given the interest in post-custodial archives and the various types of funding available for partnerships. It is also in keeping with the aims of the CLIR microgrant program to provide opportunities to promote collaborative research addressing problems shared across institutions in that we address issues with the underlying infrastructure of digital projects between institutions in the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean. Ultimately, we seek to engage our partners to discuss the various approaches to conducting digital projects with Latin America and the Caribbean. Thus, when we talk about equitable practices it does not mean that we aim to find one way to approach the diversity in the region but rather to provide the space for partners to determine what these might look like or even if a set of such practices can be articulated.

¹Survey participants did not identify their concern with this wording, however, their questions about the pros and cons of digitizing and granting access to their cultural records in an open format on the internet pointed toward this type of theorization of current efforts.

We believe that this symposium was timely given the interest in post-custodial archives and the various types of funding available for partnerships.

Survey of Partners

In November 2019, the team created a survey for the identified partners. The survey questions were aimed at identifying connecting concerns and interests among our heterogeneous group in order to set the guiding themes for the symposium.

The survey revealed that participants face the following key challenges when working in partnership with a U.S.-based institution: (1) financial means and labor costs are the two most significant barriers to continued or enhanced collaboration; (2) access to equipment and technological skills or knowledge are considerable barriers; and (3) stable communication and consultations with partners are still a barrier. Language and cultural barriers are also a significant concern for those partners whose primary language is not English.

Transition to Virtual

In March 2020, the spread of COVID-19 in the United States meant that we had to either delay the symposium or move it to a virtual format. By then, we had already spent a portion of our budget on partner flights, and some of us were changing positions. Although we and our partners wanted to have the symposium in person, we ultimately decided to move forward in transitioning to a virtual platform. We decided to increase partner honorariums for their participation to cover additional costs of technology, equipment and the internet, and to pass on funds originally associated with in-person travel.

Planning for a virtual setting took more preparation, work, and “invisible” administrative labor on our part. Several concerns arose in transitioning to a virtual symposium. First, we were concerned about connectivity for the partners, their access to technology, and how to ensure they had stable internet access for virtual participation. To palliate this issue, we scheduled a number of calls with our partners prior to the symposium to practice and troubleshoot, and we advised them to turn off the camera when not participating to lower bandwidth use. Another concern was language interpretation that would not only enable communication among participants but would also allow people to hear our partner’s voices. Because of Zoom constraints,² we decided to have consecutive interpretations that connected the interpreter and the partner on a WhatsApp call while both were connected to the Zoom meetings. Although this takes more time and troubleshooting, simultaneous interpretation would have led to a silencing of the speaker. Finally, given the multiple moving parts of the virtual meeting, the Digital Library of the Caribbean stepped in to provide graduate students and undergraduate student workers to support us during the process and to monitor Zoom rooms and questions via Facebook live.

²Zoom has a feature for language interpretation in meetings and webinars, however this is an add-on service that our sponsor institutions had not subscribed to at the moment, thus, we didn’t have access to it. See <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360034919791-Language-interpretation-in-meetings-and-webinars>.



Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes that “silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded” (1995, 49). Inevitably, these silences came in through the conversations and connections that did not take place because of the switch to a virtual symposium. We attempted to mitigate this issue by having private sessions for partners only (e.g., no participants, funders, university administrators), while being cognizant of the consequences on freedom of speech in virtual meetings due to the constant surveillance we are now exposed to in using digital technology. We recognize that virtual meetings cannot replace the impromptu and spontaneous conversations that often happen in person once people connect.

The transition to a virtual format, however, allowed more foundations, funding programs, and other collaborative partners to participate. We had representation from U.S.- and European-based foundations such as the Center for Research Libraries (CRL), the Green Family Foundation, the Library of Congress, the Modern Endangered Archives Program (MEAP) at UCLA, and the Prince Claus Fund. It was the first time that many of our partners had communicated directly with these funders. The funders’ presentations helped demystify the grant process and allowed our partners to directly engage with grant program officers. Since the symposium, some of our invited partners have already had conversations with funders about potential projects.

The transition to a virtual format allowed more foundations, funding programs, and other collaborative partners to participate.

We very much look forward to these future collaborations and projects.

The virtual format allowed us to record the event more easily. Zoom provides recording services and streaming on Facebook, which keeps a copy of the video itself. This means that we can offer the public a video of the event and allow those who did attend to re-watch as a reference. One problem with this, however, is that all videos online should comply with ADA regulations which, in this case, include closed captioning. Although this can be automatically done and is free (we have access to video hosting and CC services such as Kaltura through institutional affiliation), the accuracy of captioning is not ideal for a recording that, albeit monolingual, includes multiple voices with different accents; for instance, the machine doesn't capture Isasi's English as accurately as Montañez's.

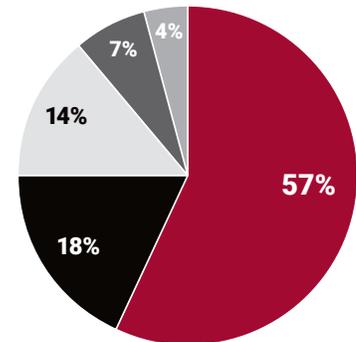
Attendance and Social Media Data

The symposium took place April 16 and 17, 2020, and its virtual format allowed a wider audience to attend the event than would otherwise be possible. Initially, our in-person event budgeted for about 30 participants. However, a total of 126 people registered to participate in the symposium, which reached a total of 315 views via Zoom in its different panels. The livestreaming and recorded video of the event on the [Digital Library of the Caribbean's Facebook page](#) had 1,765 views as of August 11, 2020. Because Roopika Risam needed to reschedule her address, Dr. Risam's keynote took place on July 28, again in a virtual format, and it gathered 34 people in the audience.

Our post-symposium survey to participants (28 responses) shows a variety of attendance in terms of region, with 57% attending from the United States and Canada, 18% from the Caribbean Islands, 14% from Mexico, 7% from Europe, and 4% from South America. Half of the survey respondents reported that they learned about the symposium through a personal invitation. Five of the respondents reported hearing about it through social media, and another five through word of mouth.

We also monitored Twitter for social media participation during the symposium. A total of 143 tweets with the hashtag #CLIRLACC2020 were recorded. These were written by 22 unique users from 13 different locations and we found a cohesive network formed by many of them by aggregating tweet creators and mentions within the tweets. The same hashtag was used about 30 times during Risam's keynote on July 28, from several locations around the globe.

Symposium Attendance by Region



- United States and Canada
- Caribbean Islands
- Mexico
- Europe
- South America



Survey of Attendants Report

The post-symposium survey included several questions designed to give the organizers a clear sense of the symposium's impact.

Respondents reported that their three major reasons for participating in the symposium were (1) a desire to attend a symposium that included a range of discussants from international institutions, (2) the accessibility of the virtual format, and (3) the chance to attend the funding agencies panel. Almost all reported being extremely satisfied with the overall event, the learning opportunity it granted, the diversity of the panels, the organization, and the digital platform.

We received very positive comments on the open-ended feedback request for the organizers. In general, everyone was satisfied with the information provided, the questions posed, and the format—they expressed gratitude for being able to attend because of the virtual format. Some of the criticism had to do with language visibility and diversity. We would like to address this issue briefly. For the in-person symposium, we had planned for the partner who is not fluent in English to be able to participate fully by providing her with a dedicated interpreter; we also knew that most of our participants can speak Spanish to some degree. This same level of facilitation is quite challenging to achieve in a synchronous virtual event of this nature and without the proper—very expensive—technology and preparation. The conversations that would have taken place in-person among speakers of the same language—for example, those from Mexico and Colombia—were not possible on a Zoom meeting as we didn't have, and didn't want, contiguous rooms, nor did we hold the typical "after hours" chats and pre- and post-event dinners. As much as we are advocates and proponents of language justice in our daily lives, work, and research, we had to come to terms with the fact that synchronous virtual settings impose limits to multilingual conversations (see footnote 2).

Recommendations

For Latin American and Caribbean Institutions

We offer the following recommendations to Latin American and Caribbean institutions considering a digitization project in partnership with U.S.-based institutions.

- Reach out to potential scholars and collaborators between and among different institutions that can help you decide what material would be most useful to digitize and how to delimit the scope of your project to maximize impact.
- Understand scholars, their information-seeking behavior, and how they use digitized material. This will help you better describe the potential research benefits stemming from your proposed digitization project.
- Explore the possibility of engaging local scholars and researchers from the region in the resource selection process, as their input and involvement can ensure that a more diverse audience will access the digitized resources.
- Learn about past grant projects from potential funders and reach out to program officers even when a project is still at the idea stage.
- Contact scholars and agencies that can potentially help if your organization has challenges in preparing applications because of language. Ask the funding institution staff if they can provide guidance and application materials in your language(s).
- Have a lengthy list of scholars who can provide assistance and letters of support for your projects. Scholars will be happy to help you write a winning narrative and provide letters of support, particularly if the material to be digitized is useful for their research.
- Be aware that digitized material will be shared online and will be openly accessible. Because open access is a unique process within each nation, all institutions involved in the project need to be clear about its goals and consider copyright and reuse terms. Assess whether lack of revenue poses a barrier to open access and what long-term solutions can help bring visibility and financial stability to the institutions whose collections will be digitized.

Archives are political spaces. They create knowledge, reveal or obscure histories, mediate with the past, and shape narratives in the future.

- Clearly communicate concerns of open access and reuse terms:
 - Provide information regarding who is responsible (funding agency vs institution) for selecting items to be provided through open access
 - Establish the terms of usage of the unique items being provided through Open Access, e.g., state that items should only be used for study and research purposes
 - Set requirements for the quality/resolution of items to be uploaded to open access platforms
 - Determine the institution’s role in managing permissions to reproduce the resources.
- Initiate conversations regarding operational expenses, especially with project-based funding. Set a plan, where possible, on how to sustain projects and people over time, and how to engage future generations and respective governments in this effort.
- Initiate regional asset mapping for Caribbean and Latin American Institutions; know who has particular kinds of expertise in other archives to build collaboration.
- Consider building an online platform, such as a shared google sheet, that heritage institutions in your country and other Latin American or Caribbean countries can use to list material that they would like to digitize. This might create synergy and collaborations, and it can also provide an opportunity for funding agencies to approach institutions and urge them to apply for particular funding.
- Use digitization projects for local outreach and community engagement so that funding agencies can see the value-added impact of their grants.
- Encourage and promote the establishment or ongoing work of national, regional, and inter-regional networks, projects, and collaborative spaces. New and existing online platforms may increase the visibility, accessibility, and dissemination for open-access archiving and funding.

For U.S. based Libraries, Archives, and Cultural Heritage Institutions

Archives are political spaces. They create knowledge, reveal or obscure histories, mediate with the past, and shape narratives in the future. Power dynamics in U.S.-based archives are embedded in cataloging, metadata, and organization. Taking into consideration the political nature of archives, our observations of working environments, rules, traditions and interests in U.S.-based institutions, our conversations with colleagues, and listening to partners in Latin America and the Caribbean, we recommend the following to institutions in the United States mainland:

- Facilitate stronger connections between cultural institutions, faculty, librarians, and archivists. One of the ways this can be done is by visiting partner institutions

early in the process. In addition, if there are various departments working with a partner, try to be clear on project roles, scope, and tasks. The divide within institutions can be frustrating internally and even more frustrating for external partners.

- Demystify the paperwork or administrative work needed for archival partners by providing a timeline of needed documentation.
- Consider simplifying administrative requirements and paperwork at the start of and during the project. Latin American and Caribbean institutions lack the staff and time to dedicate to this process, which might become onerous and not worth their effort.
- Be aware that partner institutions might not have—or might not have in the required format—all the documentation regularly requested by U.S.-based granting agencies. Be ready to negotiate these requirements with the grant recipient and/or to assist the partnering community in developing these materials.
- Examine project-based resources that are contingent on funding and honestly assess what long-term sustainable relationship building will look like with the partner organization.
- Make stronger connections with other U.S.-based institutions doing post-custodial archival work in Latin America and the Caribbean. This will help build capacity locally if institutions are working in the same country and help build more resources. Consider creating and sharing lists of scholars, trainers, and other experts for those nations.
- Engage trainers who speak the language of the community and are familiar with the technology and training when conducting training on digitization, curation, and archiving.
- Allocate sufficient funds for translation, whether through an external service or by an institutional staff member whose time is properly covered by the grant for this purpose. The translator must have basic training in translation and good knowledge of the vocabularies needed for communications, training, and product delivery.
- Understand and recognize open access as a long-term process when working with Latin American and Caribbean archival partners. Communicate about the potential use for researchers and various publics that would have access. Many archives in Latin America and the Caribbean are state agencies, and thus can be distrustful of projects that result in digitized material that are hosted by institutions abroad.
- Schedule community engagement events with digitized materials. Provide funding for engaging the community in events that aim to introduce and promote digitized material, or for developing the web presence of the local partner to avoid them feeling that digitized material has been “taken” abroad.

Power dynamics in U.S.-based archives are embedded in cataloging, metadata, and organization.

For Funding Institutions

- Build camaraderie within each cohort funded to encourage sharing information and learnings between institutions. This will help others who need expertise around their respective areas.
- Build a mentoring cohort among previous and current grantees to allow for sharing of lessons learned in an organic way. Ideally, the mentor and mentee would share regional backgrounds and language and/or a similar institutional background.
- Demystify the paperwork or administrative work needed for archival partners by providing a timeline of needed documentation. Recognize that staff are usually stretched thin and think about how to streamline paperwork or guide applicants on what to expect.
- Be aware that foreign institutions might not have all the documentation that is regularly requested in grants (e.g., a budget history). Be ready to be flexible.
- Factor in funding delays, loss in experience and training, and loss of staff for project-based funding. Funds that are only project based have made long-term development of the institutions difficult since oftentimes they have to wait for another round of funding.
 - Connect applicants to other local resources and personnel for capacity building that you have funded previously.
 - Build lists of personnel and the types of experience they have to facilitate collaboration regionally.
 - Build in operational expenses, if possible, for the institutions to potentially keep personnel at least until the next round of funding.
- Consider providing more funding for longer and sustained project digitization. In addition, build in professional development and training of all staff at the institution if possible.
- Allocate money for translation work. Make application materials available in different languages. Be prepared to receive applications in languages other than English, with a multilingual pool of reviewers, and/or translation of applications into English.
- Diversify the pool of peer reviewers by having a mix of those who can speak to the local situations, varied contexts, and others with expertise in collaborative projects in the Global South.

Conclusion

We began the conversation through the creation of a survey to identify how U.S. partners can provide adequate support, encourage the usage of materials, and establish more effective partnerships. Additionally, the survey sought to reveal barriers to digitization projects across our Latin American and Caribbean partners such as language, technology, and funding that ultimately helped shape the symposium. Over the course of the symposium, we learned that these complexities are shaped by the specificities of the project—whether it is social justice initiatives, projects nearing the end of their funding cycle, getting buy in and encouragement for open-access, government support for cultural heritage institutions, or needed IT expertise and storage. Ultimately, the symposium also helped reveal the need for more transparent decision-making and thinking about how to sustain projects in the long term through funding and removing barriers.



The symposium revealed the need for more transparent decision-making and thinking about how to sustain projects in the long term through funding and removing barriers.

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About the Authors



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