Library accumulation and the emergence of Latin American studies

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Abstract  During the age of Pan-Americanism (1890–1940), US universities built impressive collections of books, periodicals, government papers, and manuscripts relating to Latin America. Collectors showed great interest in documents and books of the early Spanish colonial period, and they also gathered materials that could help account for the contemporary progress of Latin American societies. Implicit in these early library collections was the assumption that, in order to facilitate commerce and investment in the region, a prior understanding of Latin American culture, society and politics was needed. Hence, humanist and material interests converged in the building of comprehensive collections of 'Latin Americana', well before the formation of Latin American studies. The collective enterprise of building Latin American collections is placed in relation to the parallel and interwoven processes of development of mass-consumer capitalism and the emergence of research universities. Placing the origins of a regional knowledge within the context of capital accumulation and the materiality of 'book accumulation' contributes towards a better understanding of US–Latin American relations and, indirectly, towards a re-thinking of the true origins of multi-disciplinarity and area studies. Much before the Cold War, book-collectors, librarians and bibliographers had contributed to frame the foundations (the questions, interests and arguments) of what would become later the field called 'Latin American studies'.

Keywords  empire ● knowledge ● Latin American collections ● Latin American Studies ● libraries ● United States
Before the constitution of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the boom in Latin American studies, a sustained process of accumulation of books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts pertaining to Latin America took place at various centers of academic activity in the US. The process had originated in the mid-19th century, but was accelerated by the interest sparked by the ‘Spanish-American War’ and later sustained by the post-World War I expansion of US commerce and investment in Latin America. By the mid-1930s, several scores of universities had amassed substantial and quite valuable ‘Latin American collections’.

Implicit in these early enterprises of accumulation was the idea that in order to understand the region in all its dimensions, a previous collection of printed materials was needed. To the extent to which the possibility of regional knowledge was predicated upon the possession of printed materials, library accumulation was a precondition for the emergence of ‘Latin American studies’. The visions advanced by librarians, bibliographers, and book collectors anticipated that the contours of the new field would map out an overlapping terrain comprising all areas of inquiry: from economics to politics, from anthropology to literature.

Library collection is an important constitutive part of the enterprise of knowledge that demands scholars’ critical attention. In this instance, it was precisely in US centers of research, libraries, and language labs that the idea of Latin America as a possible field of knowledge was born. By critically examining this process of material accumulation and concentration of resources as the bases for the construction of a field of regional knowledge – ‘Latin American studies’ – this article addresses the role of the location and structures of knowledge in the construction of imperial visibility and governance. Through considering this issue of ‘knowledge’, I bring the discussion of comparative American studies closer to the question of empire. For it was in this territory – knowledge production and accumulation – that difference and coloniality were processed.

Librarians and early promoters of Latin American studies contributed to the collective task of rendering the region visible through printed works, images, and manuscripts. The age of Pan-Americanism (1890–1940) generated an interest in and a necessity to build Latin American collections. Librarians toured the region in search of primary and secondary materials. By donation or purchase, major university libraries acquired impressive collections of manuscripts and books pertaining to Spanish and Portuguese colonization. In addition, libraries began to accumulate journals, newspapers, statistics, and government reports published in Latin America. Stimulated by their universities or by publishing houses, bibliographers prepared and published guides, directories, and reference books about the region. As a result of this process, research materials to study Latin America grew in exponential fashion.

Ultimately, library accumulation implied the relocation of enunciatory authority to the places where books and manuscripts were located. Much before the formation of area studies, certain US universities began to
enjoy the prestige associated with their Latin American collections. This was the case of the University of California, Berkeley and its Bancroft Library; of the Newberry Library at Chicago for its collection on American ethnology; of Yale University, for its collection of books and documents on Andean South America; of the University of Texas, for its collection on Mexican history. Already by the 1930s and 1940s, these centers began to act as magnets for scholars interested in pursuing research topics related to Latin America. By purchasing valuable colonial documents or by accumulating long runs of national newspapers and national statistics, librarians contributed to the spatial concentration of research efforts in certain US institutions.

This article examines the formation of these early Latin American collections in the context of a significant expansion of US business and diplomatic interests in the region. During the age of Pan-Americanism, collecting became an important aspect of the enterprise of knowledge, a collective endeavor aimed at making the region ‘legible’ to US readers and producers. To understand better the relationship between libraries and informal empire, I read the formation of special collections on ‘Latin Americana’ against the forces of capitalist industrialization, neo-imperial ambitions, and knowledge production and accumulation. On the face of it, building library and archival collections seems distant from the preoccupations of businessmen, even those with interests in the region. Studied closely, book accumulation appears connected with the information and knowledge requirements of an expanding informal empire; a manifestation of a society increasingly dominated by mass production and mass distribution. Early Latin American collections were part of this general process for they were rooted on research and economic agendas that defined the region as an object of knowledge.

Tentatively, this article addresses several questions related to the relationship between knowledge production and informal empire. Why did US universities start to collect ‘Latin Americana’ during the period 1890–1940? What made the ‘early exploration and conquest’ period attractive to book collectors, library administrators, and historians? In what ways did the business need for practical and useful information intersect with the curiosity of humanists about ancient cultures, the history of colonization, and the customs of indigenous communities? What can we learn about the connection between business and knowledge during moments of neo-imperial expansion by looking at processes of ‘book accumulation’?

**Book accumulation and research universities**

Between 1890 and the mid-1930s, libraries for higher education grew in unprecedented fashion. In 1932, the US Office of Education estimated that 1460 universities, colleges and professional schools had built libraries
containing a total of 52.9 million volumes. These libraries served a college population of 1.1 million students and over 100,000 instructors. To maintain these libraries, universities and colleges in 1932 spent $11.3 million a year (Wilson, 1938: 131). Whereas in 1900 no library in the United States possessed one million books (the Library of Congress had 576,000 volumes and Harvard University 576,000 volumes), by 1935, 13 libraries had surpassed that mark. First on the list was the Library of Congress with 4.9 million volumes, followed by the New York Public Library with 3.7 million volumes, and then by Harvard with 3.6 million volumes. Yale University was fourth, with a collection of 2.4 million volumes (Wilson, 1938: 118–30).

The late 19th century had witnessed the consolidation of a number of specialized collections (Folger, Huntington, Crear, Newberry, and John Carter Brown, among others) that brought unique primary sources for US researchers, dramatically reducing the gap that separated American and European libraries. This was in part the result of changes in the US model of higher education. Between 1875 and 1920, US universities followed the path of German universities, concentrating efforts on research. The transition from the classics-oriented college to the research university was one of the most salient developments of the period. Johns Hopkins pioneered this transition in 1875, and was closely followed by Harvard, Cornell, Columbia, Chicago and Michigan.1 These leading colleges opened up graduate schools, founded research labs, and revised their classical curricula to incorporate new disciplines in vogue in Europe. As the emphasis shifted from teaching to research, a new competition in the field of knowledge ensued. A few research universities started to concentrate the best faculty, putting them in charge of recently created research labs and graduate programs (Shiflett, 1981).2

In part, the demand for technical and scientific education came from industry. Yale and Harvard were first in responding to this demand, setting up ‘scientific schools’ to complement the classical education in the 1840s. But it was only in the late 1880s and 1890s that colleges started to refashion themselves into research universities.3 Besides the need to emulate German universities, the new impetus projected an imperial desire that permeated the field of knowledge. Implicit in the discourse of the leaders of the ‘university movement’ was the belief that, with basic organizational changes and the concentration of physical and human resources, US universities could embark on the adventure of science, pushing the frontiers of knowledge to unimagined limits.4 Such advocacy for the creative powers of scientific labor was in perfect tune with the ambitions of industrial leaders. As US industry embarked upon a decisive competition with European industrial powers, there was a need to generate innovations in mass products, raw materials, ways of extracting natural resources and methods of production (Shiflett, 1981: 108). This was the time when John D. Rockefeller and other industrial tycoons financed and supported the transformation of colleges into research
As new money poured into research labs, science chairs, and new graduate programs, the interconnection between the university and industrial corporations consolidated.

As the university shifted towards research, the library became a crucial instrument and locale for academic work. Students – graduate students in particular – no longer followed textbooks; they had to read specialized journals, books, and reference sources. As a result, book accumulation proceeded at a remarkable pace – the rate of library accumulation outpacing the rate of accumulation of industrial capital. Also at work was a rapid process of geographical and institutional concentration of ‘book wealth’. Between 1900 and 1940, 129 major universities accumulated a total of 41.6 million books and pamphlets. Their collections grew 7.2 times during these four decades. By the end of this period, seven universities had stockpiled more than a million volumes each in their libraries: Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Chicago, Illinois, Michigan and Berkeley (Edelman and Tatum, 1977: 50–5). And they were followed closely by other leading institutions: Princeton, Pennsylvania, Cornell, and Stanford. Prestige came to be associated with research and the latter with huge library collections.

As a consequence of the rapid growth in university library holdings, specialized librarians had to classify and supply bibliographic and other guides to a complex, diverse and growing mass of materials. Hence, both the organization and the nature of the labor process within libraries changed. Students were gradually allowed to walk into library collections (the open-stacks system); new services were established (reference, rare books, manuscripts, films, etc.). New administrative procedures, such as the introduction of the ‘call slip’, marked the beginning of a process that would soon transform the library into a factory of information. New buildings for central libraries embodied the new space requirements as well as the need to impress the public. In their external appearance and arrangement of light, the new library buildings replicated Gothic, Venetian, or Romanesque churches. Within these modern cathedrals of knowledge, space was divided into several floors and functional areas in ways that resembled the modern department store (Kaser, 1986).

Initially, the building of massive collections was due to the work of private collectors. These were bibliophiles or book traders who had purchased extensively in areas endowed with cultural prestige: English literature, medieval and early modern tracts, Americana, Spanish incunabula, archaeology, and oriental civilizations (Cole, 1915). Great collectors, such as A. Sutro, H.H. Bancroft, E.D. Church, A.H. Huth, J. Lenox and R. Hoe, were men of fortune who, through decades of perambulations through European auctions, booksellers, castles and monasteries, had amassed unique treasures of books and manuscripts in the humanities. These collections were later sold or donated to university libraries. Thus, the great libraries were in reality assemblages of different private collections. Such was the case of Huntington Library at
Harvard, made up from scores of private collections, most of them accessed during the heyday of Pan-Americanism (Huntington Library Collections, 1931).

Private capital was at the source of book accumulation. Men of wealth had transformed money into cultural capital, through a sustained effort of accumulation. These private collectors consummated a massive transfer of the textual records of European civilization and thought to the new territory of empire: the United States. In a sense, what research libraries did was to concentrate this privately accumulated capital and to put it at the service of the new organization of scientific work. It was not clear at first how humanist collections would serve the purpose of creating new theories in the physical and natural sciences and of stimulating the rate of technological innovation. Only later, with the development of the ‘comprehensive library’, would librarians redirect this dual project to a fruitful convergence.

Library development in a mass-producing society

The development of the ‘comprehensive library’ and of institutions that turned book accumulation into a cooperative and gigantic enterprise was a cumulative process that coincided with the construction of US hegemony in Latin America (1890–1940). At its roots were two crucial developments: the consolidation of a professional community of librarians and the formation of a national library. The growing influence of the American Library Association (ALA) and the reshaping of the Library of Congress (LC) into a national library were two aspects of a trend towards rationalization and global legibility that characterized the development of library collections in the age of informal empire.

Since its foundation in 1876, The American Library Association promoted the formation of libraries that incorporated three defining aspects of industrial capitalism in the progressive era: democratic access, rational order, and mass production (Wiegand, 1986: chp. 5) The main leaders of the library movement – M. Dewey, G. Baker, J.C. Dana and H. Putnam – believed that the common man should be able to enter into any library and rapidly find and locate what he was looking for. This required uniformity in classification rules and an orderly arrangement of collections (Goodrum, 1974: 39–40). But, more importantly, a democratic, mass society generated an immense number of inquiries in a vast number of fields. Therefore, to be at the service of such a society librarians needed to build comprehensive collections that included all sorts of materials. As John Russell Young, Head Librarian of the LC, stated in 1897:

Public documents, newspapers, serials, pamphlets, manuscripts, broadsides, chapbooks, ballads, records of original research, publications illustrative of the manners, customs, resources and traditions of communities to which our
foreign representatives are accredited, the proceedings of learned, scientific or religious bodies, the reports of corporations such as railways, canals, or industrial companies, legislative records and debates, public decrees, church registers, genealogy, family and local histories, chronicles of country and parish life, folklore, fashions, domestic annals, documents illustrative of those various nationalities now coming to our shores, to blend into our national life, and which as a part of our library archives would be inestimable to their descendants – whatever, in a word, would add to the sum of human knowledge, would be gratefully received and have due and permanent acknowledgement. (Goodrum, 1974: 34, emphasis added)

It would be hard to find a better example of the imperial ambition embodied in the project of the nation's library. Because it was the 'people's library' and also an auxiliary of congress and government, the collections of the LC had to be comprehensive, global, and useful to any type of enquiry. Modernized under the leadership of Herbert Putnam,13 the LC was the epitome of these ideals: rationality, mass service and democratic access. Putnam wanted the LC to follow the model of the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale. To this end, the library engaged in 'comprehensive acquisitions' of a truly global scope (Rosemberg, 1993). Between 1899 and 1939 Putnam transformed the LC into a center of information, providing cataloguing services to other libraries and materials to researchers of both Americana and world matters. When Putnam left office in 1939, the LC had accumulated 6.3 million volumes and had 1300 employees. The library had become a giant storehouse of information, collecting the 'records of those societies whose experience is of most immediate concern to the people of the United States' (Goodrum, 1974: 52).

This imperial library was also a mass-producer of bibliographies and cataloguing services. Already in 1901, the LC was producing cards at a rate of 225 titles a day. Between 1903 and 1910, cataloguers reclassified in the LC system 68,000 volumes per year (Rosemberg, 1993: 39). The emphasis on quantitative accumulation and mass services soon spread to other major public and university libraries. Library directors placed upon themselves book accumulation targets.14 Unwittingly, university libraries adopted the logic of big business: integration, specialization of services and mass production methods.

In 1939 Robert M. Lester, Secretary of the Carnegie Corporation, equated college and research libraries with big business. This was an industry that required a large number of specialized workers and investment to store, process, and deliver to the reading public the massive information required by industrial capitalism. Libraries, in the end, constituted only a chain in the mass production of college graduates, in turn a crucial input (human capital) for the success of US industrial capitalism in the world market (Lester, 1939). The idea of university education as 'big business' was probably not new. What was impressive was the
magnitude of this industry and its high capital intensity. According to Lester’s figures, there were 1300 colleges teaching 1.2 million students. The system ‘produced’ annually 145,000 BAs, 18,000 masters degrees, and 2800 doctorates. For this purpose, college libraries were using 63 million books (Lester, 1939: 72). This meant that each undergraduate student had at his/her disposal 52 books and each graduate student, 3029 books – impressive figures indicative of the success of US universities in book accumulation. This ‘treasure’ was used to generate an annual crop of qualified technicians and experts for industry. Beyond that, it was expected that the great stock of books would contribute to the expansion of a still more general and diffuse form of capital: knowledge.

Leading librarians and the foundations that supported library development (mostly the Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller Foundation) coincided that in the age of mass production the library could not escape adopting the rational organization of corporate industry. And though private humanist collections had formed the core of the most prestigious libraries in the country, the business or practical imperative continued to influence the development of collections. In this regard, libraries never resolved the tensions between ‘academic’ (humanist) and ‘practical’ (business) knowledge. To carry to fruition the goal of comprehensiveness, libraries themselves became like mass-producing factories. In these ‘factories’, the bibliographer assumed the role of harbinger of the legibility of empire.

The need to process the mass of information and materials generated by modern (industrial) society had brought into being the modern ‘practical librarian’, concerned with the more practical affairs of production, distribution, and circulation. Practical librarians generated specialized bibliographies on topics of interest to the businessman: petroleum, rubber, advertising, railways, metal corrosion, etc. Their work was quite similar to that of the workers under mass production. Like raw materials, books and pamphlets piled up in the library-factory, and it was the work of the ‘practical librarian’ to transform this chaotic mass into useful products (bibliographical lists) according to the demands of users. The indexed, specialized catalogue was the main tool of the ‘practical librarian’ (Meyer, 1916).

Within research libraries, useful and practical knowledge coexisted in tension. Libraries employed two types of experts. On the one hand, there was the traditional librarian, ‘the servant of the muses’, devoted to the arts, literature, culture, and aesthetic pleasures. On the other hand, there was the practical librarian, the ‘servant of the planner and doer of the world’s work’ (Meyer, 1916: 107). Increasingly, as libraries enhanced their collections and services, both types of enquiry (scholarly and business) had to be served. The tools were the same: systematic catalogues, bibliographies, and other reference works that could order the vision of information-seekers. In the end, libraries had to serve two entangled interests: science and business; two interests that in the expansionist project
operated like one, as business-knowledge. Mass societies require information on a massive scale. Information-seekers (scholars and businessmen) needed order to facilitate their search. It was only natural that, sooner or later, publishing companies would enter into the business – already pioneered by librarians – of supplying an ever-growing demand for readers’ guides and cumulative indexes.

Grouping materials by regional areas was one way of attaining ‘order’ and legibility. Librarians, even before World War I, were aware that they had to divide their acquisitions into areas of study or specialization. As librarian Guy Stanton Ford acknowledged in 1912, libraries were already ordering purchases according to the imperative to collect in great areas, such as ‘South America’ and ‘the Orient’.17 Later, the emergence of the specialized field, Hispanic American history, led libraries into further specialization. Historians demanded, in addition to the materials relating to the contemporary political and economic realities in Latin America, a greater number of sources about the central areas of the Spanish empire: Mexico and Peru. For at the center of the enterprise of knowledge – at the core of research universities – were scholars intrigued by a remote past event: the conquest of America. For reasons that I explain below, the era of informal empire created an immense curiosity about this early period and, consequently, collectors made special efforts to bring back home the best textual ‘nuggets’ of Spanish colonialism.

**Early Latin American collections**

In 1934 bibliographer A. Curtis Wilgus presented to the Inter-American Conference on Bibliography in Havana a survey of libraries, archives, and other institutions collecting ‘Latin Americana’ (Wilgus, 1934). The survey, reporting information about 41 repositories belonging to major universities and US government agencies, allows an assessment of the wealth and specialization achieved by these repositories before the advent of Latin American studies. At the time, Latin American collections were not large; only three libraries had holdings exceeding 50,000 volumes (Bancroft, Columbus Memorial, and the Hispanic Society). But they were highly specialized and valuable. Only a few of the repositories collected general materials on ‘Latin America’. More commonly libraries specialized in certain countries or regions, or in certain types of materials.

The best collections concentrated on the age of exploration and conquest (the 16th century in particular). This included Spanish and Portuguese chronicles, colonial administrative papers, documents pertaining to Native American cultures, and narratives of exploration and travel. While some repositories attended to the practical needs of businesses, foreign relations experts, or the liberal professions, the vast majority contained books and manuscripts of academic interest. There
was a growing interest in collecting sources about contemporary Latin America (legislation and treaties, statistics, geological surveys and maps, labor relations and welfare, government finance and contemporary literature). But the prestige attached to these ‘modern’ sources paled in comparison to the lure of colonial collections.

The John Carter Brown Library (Providence, Rhode Island) contained one of the richest concentrations of books, prints, and documents of colonial Spanish America. One of the most comprehensive collections of aboriginal cultures for the whole hemisphere, the Edward E. Ayer collection, was deposited at the Newberry Library (Chicago). The Harkness collection at the Library of Congress contained invaluable materials, some of them incunabula, dealing with the conquest of Mexico and Peru. This repository also housed the papers and library of E.G. Squier on Central American archaeology and the dictionaries of Indian languages collected by R. Schuller. At the New York Public Library the researcher could find valuable imprints relating to the conquest of Mexico, some of them in Indian languages. The Henry E. Huntington Library (San Marino, California) possessed a magnificent set of early imprints about discovery and exploration that included the famous Pizarro-La Gasca papers. Also notable were the collections of early Spanish American imprints (1550–1800) at the American Antiquarian Society and the collection on the history of California, the Southwest and the Americas built at Berkeley by H.H. Bancroft.

Many librarians understood that to build strong Latin American collections they had to begin with the colonial period. But, in fact, many libraries stopped there. The curator of the American Antiquarian Society acknowledged in 1919 that most of its 4500 books and pamphlets on Hispanic America related to the colonial period and that little effort was made to secure materials after 1860 (Blakeslee, 1919: 13). Most of the holdings of the University of Texas about Texas, the Southwest and Mexico pertained to the period 1520–1836. The same could be said of the Bancroft Library, Boston Public, Cornell, John Carter Brown, New York Public, the Southwestern Museum, William Clements Library and other repositories. The textual jewels of the colonial period – librarians agreed – were their most valuable possession.

In the effort to understand the Spanish colonial system, librarians reproduced important portions of Spanish and Mexican colonial archives. Historians and librarians regularly visited Seville and Simancas to duplicate colonial records. This was done at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), the Newberry Library (Chicago), and the Catholic University (Washington, DC), among others. To the extent that libraries followed this procedure, they could bring home the records of the Spanish colonial system, contributing thus to the study of one of the most powerful empires in history.18

Modern Latin America was also on the collectors’ minds. The Hoover War Library had collected all sorts of materials relating to the conduct of
Latin American republics during World War I. Stanford General Libraries had a unique collection of pamphlets, broadsides, and journals relating to the 1927 church–state controversy in Mexico. And the Labor Department had recently started to build up a collection on labor relations and social welfare in Latin America. Following Professor Kammerer’s tour to South America, Princeton University started a collection in government finance.

Most of these endeavors were guided by academic interest. But there were also a few ‘practical libraries’ that catered to the needs of professional and business interests. The Columbus Memorial Library (CML), belonging to the Pan American Union, acted as a collector of information for prospective investors and merchants in Latin America. The Association of the Bar of the City of New York had a collection of legal statutes, codes and jurisprudence from Latin America. The Bureau of Railway Economics gathered books, pamphlets and maps relating to the railway business in the region. The Commerce Department stockpiled official documents published by Latin American governments dealing with questions of trade, tariffs, and customs.

Some of the collections were already tailored to area studies. At Tulane University, for example, the Department of Middle American Research built an impressive collection dealing with Mexico, Central America and the West Indies. They collected materials on a wide range of disciplines (law, history, geography, ethnology, archaeology, art, cartography, etc.) focused on this particular geographical area. By 1940–1 Duke, Tulane and the University of North Carolina divided responsibilities country by country when, assisted by Rockefeller funds, they established a cooperative library program. Other university libraries collected indiscriminately, without a clear definition or choice of the area to study.

The only true ‘colonial archive’ was the library of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, belonging to the Department of War. This repository gathered materials from countries that had been, at one time or another, direct dependencies of the United States. Save for this exception, most libraries aimed at enhancing knowledge about the whole region: Latin America. Only to this extent could they be said to be engaged in the imperial project – that is, as an integral aspect of the process of making Latin America legible.

Though understanding modern or contemporary Latin America was a concern for many collectors, the colonial question dominated the field. Librarians were concerned – some of them obsessed – with the conquest of Spanish and Portuguese America. Why was this so? Why did libraries compete for the possession of early colonial imprints, texts in indigenous languages, and Spanish and Portuguese incunabula? One of the reasons was clearly strategic: the possession of certain crucial documents would attract researchers to the repository and hence generate scholarship that would further increase the prestige of the university. Collectors and library administrators acknowledged the centripetal attraction exerted
by conquest narratives. Placing a large collection of early Spanish and Portuguese imprints in a single library building, suggested the director of the John Carter Brown Library, turned that building into a Mecca for future scholars (Cole, 1915: 88).

Over time, the scholarly pilgrimage to these precious collections became a necessity. If a scholar wanted to review the conquest of Peru, he or she needed to visit the Huntington Library and the Library of Congress. If a researcher wanted to understand social life in Lima in the early 18th century, it would be best to work at the Lenox Library (New York) or at the John Carter Brown Library (Providence), for they housed the best selections of Lima newspapers for the period 1700–60. Over time, scholars’ interest in the ‘colonial question’ reinforced the centrality of certain sites. Their insatiable curiosity for the conquest of America, however, had much to do with increasing US economic, military, and cultural expansion in Central and South America.

The fascination with collecting American antiquity was old. But the great expansion of US influence over Central and South America in the years 1900–20 turned this early provincial concern into a passion of continental scope. Scholars and collectors redefined the concept of ‘American antiquity’ to include the whole of the Americas, which they referred to as ‘our continent’. Expectations and anxieties created by US expansionism became embodied in the development of Latin American collections. These repositories reflected the need for an increased legibility of Latin/South America and, at the same time, provided sources for examining the crucial questions posed by the expansion of informal empire. Would the US prove to be a more successful imperial power than its predecessor, Spain? Could Latin America adopt the basic tenets of US mass-consumer culture?

To understand these questions, scholars found it useful to interrogate the colonial past. This came from an established way of conceiving Spanish America. Since the early 19th century, Hispanism had helped orientate the quest to understand the ‘Spanish-American mind’. Scholars and librarians assumed that, by understanding Spain and its culture, they were better prepared to apprehend the mindset and culture of Spanish America (Kagan, 2002). The new interest in colonial history indicated a significant displacement of this old paradigm. Now the colonial experience itself provided the great laboratory to examine the ‘Spanish Americans’ in relation to their former Iberian masters. As Hiram Bingham admitted, for example, the Spanish chroniclers had guided him towards the Urubamba valley in his search for the hidden citadel of the Incas. These old texts were the ‘maps’ he used to read nature and culture in the Peruvian Andes (Salvatore, 2003). Although in his prior adventures in South America he had tried to follow in the steps of Simón Bolivar, when he contemplated a more serious and sustained research effort in the Peruvian Andes he focused on the colonial period. Here were the keys, he thought, to understanding modern South America.
The timing of Latin American collections further confirms the idea that collections and informal empire were related. Although some of the private collections had been built between 1860 and 1880 (the G. Ticknor and J.C. Brown collections), the bulk of Latin American collections belonged to the period 1890–1930 – the time of the diffusion of Pan-Americanism and the expansion of US influence in the region. Acquisitions made by Berkeley, Yale and Cornell in the early 1900s pointed the way, anticipating the efforts of the institution most compromised with the project of Pan Americanism: the Pan American Union. In the 1910s official and university libraries made important efforts to expand their collections of 'Latin Americana'. The Hispanic collection at the Library of Congress rose from 3900 volumes in 1901 to 15,000 volumes in 1918. In 1910 the American Antiquarian Society included South America as a target of collection activities, acquiring in 1915 a valuable selection of South American newspapers (Blakeslee, 1919: 11–13). The Sutro collection was donated in 1913 and the Ayer collection in 1911. Yale University acquired Bingham’s private collection between 1907 and 1916. The acquisition of the Oliveira Lima library by the Catholic University of America was made in 1916. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s, other research universities (such as Texas and Duke) joined the group. These early repositories configured an ‘interest’ in the region and provided the materials for the development of what later would become the field of ‘Latin American studies’.

Readers, bibliographers and legibility

Readers’ curiosity, George Pendle suggests, rises and declines with the success of foreign business enterprise abroad (Pendle, 1957: 9). In principle, the same logic could apply to the US informal empire in Latin America. In the early 20th century, growing expectations about business opportunities in the region produced anxiety and curiosity among the US reading public (Salvatore, 2001). The Panama Canal brought ‘closer’ to the United States markets that prior to its opening had been dominated by European interests. During World War I, exports from Europe to Latin America dwindled, giving US business firms an expanded market. To maintain and consolidate this accidental success, US merchants and industrialists realized they needed to understand the region better. Therefore, they promoted a series of undertakings destined to sensitize the business community about the peculiarities (backwardness and modernity) of Latin America.

Alongside the business or practical interest in the region, there emerged a curiosity grounded on some widely publicized scientific explorations. Hiram Bingham’s discovery of Macchu Pichu in 1911 was one of these critical moments. An American man of science had found the location of an ancient Inca citadel, hidden for centuries from the view of
white colonizers (Salvatore, 2003). This discovery – combined with those resulting from the expeditions to Lake Titicaca, the Amazon basin, the Colombian llanos, and Paraguay – created the public expectation that South America had many hidden treasures waiting to be discovered. These ‘discoveries’ could provide keys to understanding critical questions in science and the humanities. In addition, a growing number of travelogues and business guides contributed to create the impression that ‘South America’ was in a process of rediscovery – adding each year new images, information, and curiosities to the US informed public. Illustrated magazines such as the National Geographic brought to the reading public colorful images of Chilean railroads, Brazilian coffee fazendas, the Argentine pampas, Patagonian natives, and Peruvian Inca ruins (Salvatore, 1998: 82).

This relationship between the formation of informal empire and the expansion of readership in a region is best exemplified by the request made by Gilbert Grosvenor to Hiram Bingham in 1911. The director of the National Geographic Society expected the Yale Peruvian Expedition to produce, in addition to high-quality colored pictures of the Inca ruins, a series of ‘popular stories’ about ‘mummies, lost cities, and bones’ that would appeal to the US reader (Salvatore, 2001: 28). The commercial and industrial conquest of South America was accompanied by a scientific conquest that, due to the presuppositions of the printed press in mass-consumer society, had to be shared by the American public.

Economic incentives, scientific explorations, and travel and business literature shaped the US reading public’s interest in Latin America. The growth of Spanish courses around the time of the World War I evinced this expanded public curiosity in the region. Federico de Onís (Spanish professor at Columbia University) acknowledged at the end of the war that:

Since 1916 the study of Spanish had grown with such speed and in such proportions that it cannot be measured by the criteria we are accustomed to in Europe. The universities witnessed the arrival of thousands of students to their Spanish classes, the high schools, hundreds of thousands. (Fernández, 2002: 126)

Publishers had to feed this ‘interest’ with growing numbers of publications in diverse fields: travelogues, business advice books, geography readers, history tracts, and language textbooks. Leading publishing houses launched series destined to assist the business traveler, teachers, and the common reader to become acquainted with the economies, societies, polities, and culture of the Latin American republics.

As language was crucial to the enterprise of understanding Latin/South America, publishers sped up the publication of ‘Spanish language readers’. These were used in high schools, commercial schools, private institutes and clubs created to teach Spanish courses. At some point – around the time of World War I – the traditional ‘Spanish readers’ turned
into ‘Spanish American readers’, signaling the shift of interest of potential readers. Though Hispanists still dominated the production and translation of these language textbooks, it was clear that the old wisdom, that it was best to learn Spanish literature in order to understand Hispanic America, was rapidly losing ground. Now the very Spanish textbooks had to incorporate the specificity of Latin American language and culture.

Next in importance to ‘Spanish readers’ were the bibliographies. The mere accumulation of books, pamphlets, maps and statistics about Latin America could not ensure the formation of educated readers. It was necessary to organize this massive volume of readings into areas of interest, classify them according to degree of difficulty and specialization, and provide ways to grasp the literature of the ‘new republics’ in English. Crucial in this regard was the work of bibliographers and translators, and of institutions publishing their work. A brief examination of the publications of bibliographers and translators related to the Columbus Memorial Library (CML) provides a sense of the magnitude and direction of this enterprise.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, the CML had published a number of reading guides and bibliographies that helped readers interested in Latin America. Some were directed to elementary or high school students; others were intended to be useful reference books for professionals and scholars. CML librarians indexed 288 Latin American journals devoted to economic subjects, 209 Latin American magazines and journals devoted to literature and culture, and an important set of periodicals relating to legal institutions in the region. Seeing its function as to promote the study of Inter-American affairs, the CML compiled all the research produced by universities about the region and published several guides to new publications in areas of history, geography, and politics. Finally, its bibliographers made available references about English versions of Hispanic American writers.

The CML bibliographers helped to enhance readers’ abilities to visualize the region, guiding their specific interest to a particular collection or repository. In short, the librarians of the Pan American Union reassembled the treasures of 40 years of ‘book accumulation’ into guides and bibliographies that made the legibility of Latin America a little easier. They provided the ‘order’ sought by readers to understand Latin America.

The collections of informal empire

From the perspective of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the apparatus of area studies was in full swing, early Latin American collections might appear small, fragmentary, and disconnected. However, these collections contained treasures (Mexican codices, Spanish incunabula, colonial documents, narratives of early exploration and conquest, and many imprints in aboriginal languages) that presented to the researcher...
a challenge in the field of the comparative history of civilizations. The rarity and value of these collections reflected one strand of book accumulation in the United States, one geared toward humanities research. At the same time, many university and public libraries were collecting materials for the liberal professions, foreign relations experts and the business community. This reflected the other strand of book accumulation, geared to the demands of ‘practical knowledge’. Both strands were urgent in this period of US expansionism. The CML and the LC catered to the two types of demands. They possessed precious jewels of the early encounter between Iberians and native Central and South Americans and, at the same time, they collected a wide variety of materials to attend the needs of corporations doing business with Latin America.

Early Latin American collections partook of a more general process of book accumulation, a process connected to the transformation of the nature of the university and to the growing needs of US business corporations for trained technicians and experts. In this process, libraries turned into organizations governed by the rules of mass production. Their services affirmed a principle of ‘comprehensible knowledge’ that grew in intensity and scope over this period. Research universities’ need to attract graduate students to their programs converged with the demands from academics to accumulate library resources. In addition to providing information to business and sources to scholars, these special collections became centers for the production of bibliographies. They helped to organize the increasing accumulation of materials, guiding readers towards a greater awareness of the region’s culture, history and potential. In this way, these early collections enhanced the legibility of Latin/South America.

To what extent, then, can we say that the collection of ‘Latin Americana’ was related to the building of a US informal empire in Latin America? We can answer this question from several perspectives. The formation of special collections about Latin America must be placed in the context of the competition between old (European) and emerging (US) international power. This was a time in which industrial economies competed in world markets assisted by the power of scientific and technological knowledge. US universities had to prove, through their faculty, their research, and their collections, that they were up to the standards of European universities. But the US search for ‘American antiquities’ in South America and the accumulation of textual treasures about the colonial period aimed to contribute to a larger competition – one in which the idea of where civilization was centered was at stake. At the time, US archaeologists were trying to find an equivalent to Rome, Carthage, Athens and Egypt in Meso-America or the Andes. If they succeeded, US men of science could claim leadership in the solution of the puzzle about the origin and antiquity of human civilization.

Collectors of colonial rare books and manuscripts were following a similar logic: to displace the prestige associated with research to a novel
territory – the Spanish conquest of America. By accumulating archival treasures, they tried to establish the new research Meccas of the 20th century. If they succeeded, Latin Americans would have to travel to these new centers to know the ‘truth’ about their own past. But the relationship between collections and empire could be read in another way. Embedded in a library collection was often a comparative expectation or an affirmative principle. Collectors wanted to establish that certain materials were useful for a comparative exercise or to claim that certain areas of inquiry needed further research. Collectors who gathered documents and books about the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of America also collected imprints about the early colonization of North America by the English, Dutch, and French. The collection itself stood as a challenge for a comparative study between the two modes of colonization. Those who engage in this exercise could address basic constitutive differences about the two civilizations: Catholic-Iberian versus Protestant-Anglo Saxon.

Understanding these basic differences became a crucial objective for many historians of the period. Other collections imposed on the researcher an affirmative principle. The existence of ethnological collections called upon scholars to investigate this hidden aspect of Latin America: the question of indigenous peoples in relation to the prospects of modernity. Similar reactions were expected in regard to collections in the legal, demographic, or economic fields. The collections themselves presented scholars with the challenge of understanding the problems of contemporary Latin American societies and economies.

In the end, we come to a point of convergence: collecting ‘Latin Americana’ was part of a larger project of knowledge through which US scholars, businessmen, and publishers expected to incorporate Latin/South America to the orbit of US understanding and visibility. It was, in other terms, part of the quest for legibility that came with the expansion of informal empire. Though the collections themselves obeyed no particular logic, underlying these efforts in collecting ‘Latin Americana’ were broad prescriptions about the modes of understanding the region.

Library collections and bibliographies revealed changing strategies for understanding Latin/South America. The initial strategy was the one favored by American Hispanists: bringing from Latin America all the information possible about economic possibilities, but when seeking to understand the ‘Hispanic American mind’, looking for Spanish literary and cultural influences (Fernández, 2002: 11). Counter to this perspective was another, which argued that Latin America was a diverse collection of societies and cultures, different from Spain and profoundly fragmented. This was the view of many business travelers, who emphasized heterogeneity in ethnic composition and national character, and a radical mixture of modernity and backwardness among the region’s national economies (Salvatore, 2002). An intermediate strategy of knowledge-acquisition was that proposed by Hiram Bingham: Spanish sources could
help to decipher the mysteries of ‘American antiquity’ and pinpoint the failures of a regime of colonization no longer in tune with modernity. In this project, the United States needed to accumulate colonial sources and archaeological evidence if it wanted to understand its modern role as a global hegemon in economic and knowledge production.

Notes

This article draws substantially on an earlier version that will be published in Hybrid Americas: Contacts, Contrasts, and Confluences in New World Literatures and Cultures, edited by Josef Raab (forthcoming).

1 After Johns Hopkins (1875), Harvard (1877), Columbia (1883), and Chicago (1886) pioneered this transition towards a research university.

2 ‘The moribund classical colleges,’ wrote O.L. Shiflett, ‘had given way to the university. Though many small liberal arts colleges remained committed to undergraduate education, the best of their faculty could easily be lured away by others from Chicago, Johns Hopkins or Illinois’ (Shiflett, 1981: 271).

3 Indiana adopted the departmental system in 1885, followed by Stanford in 1891. In 1893 NYU, previously a college, became a university.

4 Daniel Coit Gilman, president of Johns Hopkins University and leader of the transition to research universities, stated in 1885: ‘It is the business of a university to advance knowledge; every professor must be a student. No history is so remote that it can be neglected; no law or mathematics is so hidden that it may not be sought out; no problem in respect to physics is so difficult that it must be shunned. . . . No love of ease, no dread of labor, no fear of consequences, no desire for wealth will divert a band of well-chosen professors from uniting their forces in the prosecution of study’ (Shiflett, 1981: 85).

5 Industrial barons Ezra Cornell, George Peabody, Edwin Stevens, Paul Tulane, Matthew Vassar and Cornelius Vanderbilt provided higher education with grants of over a million dollars each (Hamlin, 1981: 47).

6 This intrusion of business ethics into academic life created some tensions. Thornstein Veblen (at Chicago) deplored the commodification of academic work while Charles Beard (at Columbia) spoke against the appointment of business leaders to university boards. But in spite of these protests, the new relationship between business and universities continued.

7 The library started to be considered, by both faculty and the board of directors, the ‘heart of the university’ (Hamlin, 1981: 48–9).

8 This explains the rapid rates of book accumulation. Michigan’s collection grew 6.8 times during this period, Yale’s collection, 7.1 times, Berkeley’s, 11 times, and Illinois’, 25 times.

9 By 1879 Harvard students were selectively given permits to enter the book stacks. Later, in the 1890s, Columbia’s library, under M. Dewey’s leadership, fully developed the open-stacks system.

10 Private donations and collectors continued to dominate the process of book accumulation into the 1920s. From then on, university libraries started to devote increasing allocation of funds to the purchase of books, as suggested by their faculty. From an average expenditure of $30,000 in 1920, libraries were spending $70,000 on average each year on the development of their...
collections. And the larger libraries were already spending more than $100,000 a year (Hamlin, 1981).

11 This was the case of Adolph Sutro, whose extensive collection on Mexico (particularly, on religion) was donated to the San Francisco Public Library in 1913 (Dillon, 1965).

12 After World War II, book acquisitions became a worldly and highly institutionalized process involving a network of libraries, government subsidies and specialization in ‘area studies’. The Farmington Plan, designed in 1942 and implemented in 1948, was the culmination of a process towards rationalization and comprehensive acquisitions.

13 In 1899, at the suggestion of the ALA, President McKinley appointed Herbert Putnam as head librarian. Putnam was a Harvard graduate who had worked as librarian in the Minneapolis Athenaeum and at Boston Public Library.

14 In 1921, Louis R. Wilson, head librarian of UNC, proud of the library for surpassing for the first time the 100,000 volume benchmark, promised that by 1930 the library would possess 250,000 volumes (Richardson, 1983).

15 About the influence of the Carnegie Corporation in the development of university libraries, see N. Radford (1984).

16 ‘We handle bulky commodities like coal and ore in great masses, emptying a car as easily as a workman tosses a shovelful’ (Meyer, 1916: 111).

17 G.S. Ford wrote in 1912: ‘The next decade will see us bidding and building against each other for South American and Oriental history, politics, and literature – not a selected country or period or phase – but all South America and the whole Orient’ (quoted by Edelman and Tatum, 1977: 40; my emphasis).

18 Irene A. Wright, a librarian at the National Archives, spent 24 years copying materials from Seville’s Archivo de Indias (Sullivan, 1938).

19 Celebrating the centennial of the American Antiquarian Society, Charles Grenfell Washburn (1912: 258) wrote: ‘Its immediate and peculiar design is to discover the antiquities of our continent and by providing a fixed and permanent place of deposit, to preserve such relics of American Antiquity as are portable, as well as to collect and preserve those of other parts of the globe.’

20 These early acquisitions came at the time of the construction of the Panama Canal, before the great expectations created by World War I about the immense opportunities of South American markets. In the three cases (Berkeley, Yale and Cornell), the initial step was taken by scholars.

21 Carlos Bransby’s A Progressive Spanish Reader, a 1907 textbook, guided the reader through pieces taken from Spanish literature. No mention was made of Spanish America. E. Bergé-Soler and J. Hatheway’s 1919 Elementary Spanish-American Reader, on the other hand, guided the reader exclusively through issues and readings relating to South America.

22 For the influence of Hispanism in shaping US knowledge of Spanish America, see Kagan (2002), especially the essays by James D. Fernández (pp. 122–41).

23 By 1933 US universities had accepted 1111 theses on ‘Pan American topics’ (Columbus Memorial Library, 1933).

24 The progress in this regard was remarkable. The number of Hispanic American works translated into English was impressive. Readers could find English editions of many Argentine writers: José Hernández, Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Roberto Payró, Ricardo Rojas, Leopoldo Lugones, and Rafael Obligado, among others.
In the postwar period, the Farmington Plan (1948) turned the acquisition of ‘Latin Americana’ into a national enterprise, coordinated among an important group of university libraries. Later, in 1956, SALALM took over this role, coordinating the acquisition activities of major US libraries possessing Latin American collections and promoting greater accessibility and specialization. In addition, purchases of Latin American materials were facilitated by the US Book Exchange program, in operation since 1949.

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