NEOLIBERAL LOGIC AND POST-CUSTODIAL ARCHIVES

David A. Bliss
Digital Processing Archivist
LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, UT Austin
@davidallynbliss
Neoliberalism

“[Neoliberalism] holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.”

David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism

“The role of the state under neoliberalism has shifted away from a political register and to an economic register to become that of protector for presumed entrepreneurial and market freedoms, liberties, and rights.”

Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field”
Neoliberalism

1947: Friedrich Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society”

“[Hayek] seems to suggest [...] that since it is impossible for one body to compile and evaluate all information, society is best served and understood by looking to the market.”

Melissa A. Adler, “Broker of Information, the ‘Nation’s Most Important Commodity’: The Library of Congress in the Neoliberal Era”
Post-custodial archival theory

“Technological society is an uncongenial environment for the custodial archivist.”

_F. Gerald Ham, “Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era”_

“Custody only serves an archival purpose in the long term if it accommodates the people and events to whom the records relate as well as the collective memory that the records foster.”

_Jeannette Bastian, “Taking Custody, Giving Access: A Postcustodial Role for a New Century”_
Post-custodial archives at the Benson

- In practice for 10+ years
- On-site digitization of valuable but vulnerable records in Latin America
- Focus on mutualism, capacity-building, human rights records

Anthony Dest & Dylan Joy
Post-custodial partnerships as post-colonial practice

- Avoiding extraction
- Avoiding north-south dependency
- Addressing US imperialism

*) Colección Conflicto Armado, El Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen*  
@davidallynbliss
Post-custodial partnerships as neoliberal practice?

- Neoliberal tools
- Neoliberal rhetoric
- Commodification of cultural heritage
Neoliberal tools
Challenge #1

Build an archival community of practice around open-source digitization software
Neoliberal rhetoric

Hijuelas digitization workflow

Developing a low-cost, fast book digitization workflow for use in Michoacán, Mexico.

New custom workflow needed to disaggregate two versions of the collection before ingesting and processing the latest copy

- Significantly reduces the time needed to process and preserve each successive copy of the collection
- Uses SHA-256 hash values produced during the bagging process to reliably identify duplicate (processed) and new files

1. Manifest generation
2. Data cleanup and normalization in OpenRefine
3. fc command to compare manifests (looped)
4. Custom facet in OpenRefine to isolate unrepeat hash values and file paths
5. Targeted copy command to ingest only new files (looped)
6. Manifest of new files added to master manifest

Digitization workflow

- Cameras are mounted vertically on copy stands and tethered to the computer and controlled from within Adobe Lightroom
- Custom templates used in Lightroom to automatically name files
- Books are photographed in 6 sections: front cover, body, back cover, and each side photographed in recto and verso
- Batch editing (crop, color adjustment) and export into a single folder
- Workflow can digitize up to 200 pages per hour

Results to date

- November 2016 workshop in Morelia was successful: Team has digitized 45 books in 6 months
- Very little QC needed: team reviews images as they are taken and re-photographs as needed
- Minor modifications to the workflow communicated to the team over email and during May 2017 follow-up visit
Challenge #2

Stop saying “digital assets”!
Commodification of cultural heritage

Under neoliberalism, “if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created.”

David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism
Collections & contexts

- Collections from Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, Brazil
- Risk of decontextualization
- Active intervention needed to present context
Challenge #3

Recreate & reconstruct original contexts creatively and as often as possible
Conclusions


