

Piecing Together a 19th Century Mexican Archive
Tinker Grant Research Report

In the novel *Nombre Falso (Assumed Name)*, the Argentine author Ricardo Piglia writes that “a literary critic is always, in some way, a detective: he pursues the contours of the texts, the tracks, the traces that allow him to decipher its enigma” (124). The “detective-esque” nature of literary studies has always seeped into my research on 19th century Mexican literature. My project, “Building the Lettered City”, links civilizing discourses in the sciences to those in the humanities during the 35-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, the period of rapid modernization from 1876-1911 known as the Porfiriato. The ideological relationships between the nation-building projects of nationalistic Mexican literature and the infrastructural projects of Mexican engineers are especially evident in this time, as the Mexican state was in its incipient stages of consolidation and both technology and literature were posited as indispensable tools for socially engineering a modern nation. In the labyrinth of Mexico City archives, my plan was to locate documents related to the topics of infrastructure, city planning and engineering during the Porfirian regime, a crucial first step in my pre-dissertation research.

The 19th century Mexican archive is both overwhelming in its size and frustrating in its absences, and like a detective, one must be attentive to names, clues, and lines of possibility. Some 19th century literary sources were only ever published as weekly columns in newspapers; others are unassumingly tucked into old interdisciplinary journals like the *Revista Literaria y Científica de México*; and most all are written in a context, and language, that feels foreign from a 21st century vantage point. I had anticipated these challenges when I applied for the Tinker Research Grant. I had planned on visiting the Historical Archive of Mexico City, the Central Library of Water, and the National Engineering Library, to explore how engineers, architects, city planners, and politicians were approaching the question of modernity in Mexico. However, when the archives remained closed to the public through the pandemic, I was faced with an even more significant challenge.

Forced to look outside the institution of the archives, the pandemic limits turned my field research into a city-wide journey through *librerías de paso*, or used bookstores, in search of 19th

century sources. Unexpectedly, this methodological pivot brought me closer to the material infrastructures of Mexico City and led me into a deep economy of old and rare books that I had previously overlooked. Over the course of a month, I charted a network of old bookstores in Mexico City (of which there were hundreds) and went to as many as I could. I took an evolving bibliography of scientific, literary, political, and historical texts written during the Porfiriato to each bookstore, and shared the list with those working there, explaining my research interests.



Image 1. Looking through journals of 19th century scientific societies at La Niña Oscura, a used books library in Mexico City. Photo courtesy of Pool Contreras Mancilla.

Often, I left empty handed. But even at those bookstores that didn't have what I was looking for, I was regularly rewarded with a lead, a clue, a title, or an author's name. These leads would turn into paths that led me deeper into the city, into a constellation of different neighborhoods, each with their own web of bookstores. Contrary to my expectations, my field research during the pandemic became more interpersonal and spontaneous, and through my city-wide wanderings in search of books, I felt that the relationship between the literary world and the material city was playing out within me.

One special bookstore stood out during my trip: La Niña Oscura (Image 1, 2), in the colonia of Santa María la Ribeira. This bookstore was housed in a Porfirian era house, unremarkable from the outside, with instructions to ring the buzzer

scribbled on a small paper pasted to the door. I spent several days in that library reviewing an extensive collection of magazines and journals from the 19th and 20th centuries. At the end of the second day, to my surprise, I pulled aside a stack of 1960s humor magazines to find a source that I had only handled in white gloves at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. A full collection of the annals of the "Sociedad Científica Antonio Alzate", a prominent, yet understudied source in the history of Mexican science. Collecting dust in the darkest corners of the shelves, it was these



Image 2. The hidden bookstore La Niña Oscura houses an extensive collection of magazines and journals from the 19th and 20th century in an unassuming, Porfirian era house. Photo courtesy of Pool Contreras Mancilla.



Image 2. A selection of the original volumes of the *Sociedad Científica Antonio Alzate* that were purchased with CLAS Tinker Research Grant funds. Photo by Alejandra Decker.

annals that I used my Tinker Grant to purchase and ship to the United States once I had returned from Mexico. In that same library I found an old copy of Auguste Comte's doctrine of positivism, an influential text for Porfirian politicians and scientists, and a rare 1950s study of science and liberalism in Mexico by Eli de Gortari, more examples of the serendipitous discoveries that I made during my urban literary explorations. By adapting to the conditions of pandemic research, I ended up creating my own 19th century archive, pieced together from the most unexpected places.