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Two Reading Rooms and the Librarian's Office: The Evolution of the Centro Library and Archives
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This article provides an overview of the history and development of the Centro Library and Archives over the course of thirty years and its transformation from a core collection and a local resource to an extensive repository and a national resource. It seeks to establish that the work of the Library and Archives has made a unique contribution to Puerto Rican scholarship and above all to the preservation of Puerto Rican history and culture here in the U.S. The article tells the story of the repository in the context of the larger Centro mission, its role in documenting the Puerto Rican Diaspora and ensuring the preservation of Puerto Rican history.

[Key words: Libraries and Archives, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, Puerto Ricans in the U.S., Puerto Rican Studies, Documentation]
In 1969, after angry students and community supporters demanding equal access to higher education occupied buildings, the City University of New York (CUNY) adopted a policy to develop Black and Puerto Rican Studies and instituted an open admissions policy. This led to a dramatic leap in the numbers of Puerto Ricans entering the university system, climbing from 5,425 in 1969 to 18,570 by 1975. Puerto Rican faculty also increased. By 1973 there were Puerto Rican Studies departments in 17 of the 19 campuses, offering 355 courses (Rodríguez Fratecelli 1989). Born out of conflict, these departments were new and valuable institutions of learning for our communities. Interdisciplinary in nature, the departments created a wide array of courses in economics, history, culture, and political science with topic areas such as literature, folklore, family life, community organization, colonialism, law enforcement and social movements. Although at varying stages of development, each department had particular strengths with innovative curricula, and demonstrated dramatic growth despite the limitations in staff and resources (A Proposal for a Center for Puerto Rican Studies and Research at the University Graduate Center, Committee for Puerto Rican Studies and Research circa 1972).

It was in the context of developing strategies to strengthen the departments and the new academic discipline that the idea for a Center for Puerto Rican Studies arose. Despite the evident success of the early Puerto Rican Studies departments within CUNY and the excitement they generated among students and the broader community, the Centro’s founding document states, “Questions continue to be raised as to whether there is enough about ourselves that merits scholarly study and whether any of us have any genuine understanding of what constitutes scholarship...we must continue to seek a place within the university from which to articulate the social and intellectual problems of our community while reaffirming the intent to define and control our own intellectual agenda” (Committee for Puerto Rican Studies 1972). The document describes the proposed Center “as a resource for programs at the senior and community colleges—as a locus for research, for planning, for the preparation and testing of materials, for training, and for the coordination and communication not readily available within the capability of the existing departments.” Immediately under “research and field study” on the list of priorities enumerated in the proposal for this center was “library and materials development” (Committee for Puerto Rican Studies 1972). The Centro was conceived as a support to the departments—not as a competitor—to provide an undergirding of sound research.

Organizing a repository and providing library resources in Puerto Rican studies was an original and principal goal of the Centro’s founders. In fact, a library and materials development committee was part of the early Centro structure; its job was to set priorities and guide the growth of the library. A memo dated May 25, 1973 states that “among the first tasks to be undertaken ...is the mounting of a research library and data archive on Puerto Rican affairs. This facility should begin to provide significant services to students and scholars in the course of the fall, 1974 semester” (Bonilla 1973). The plans included a reading room in the Centro’s new quarters at 500 Fifth Avenue, and collecting and developing materials in the research areas that had been defined for Centro work. While the original proposal discussed key areas to be addressed, such as “socio-economic and political problems, studies in the arts and humanities, especially poetry and theater,” the research agenda was actually developed once the Centro was operational.
ORGANIZING A REPOSITORY AND PROVIDING LIBRARY RESOURCES IN PUERTO RICAN STUDIES WAS AN ORIGINAL AND PRINCIPAL GOAL OF THE CENTRO’S FOUNDERS.

In 1974, La Conferencia de Historiografía, sponsored by the Centro, brought together scholars, researchers and community activists from the U.S. and Puerto Rico to participate in intense culture and history workshops. Two volumes based on this conference’s deliberations, _El cuaderno de migración_ and _El cuaderno de cultura_, were published by the Centro in 1975, and it was here that the Centro’s research agenda was more fully defined. Various task forces or research teams were organized to carry out this agenda. They consisted of:

1. Puerto Rican Studies (later renamed the Higher Education Task Force)
2. History and Documentation (later renamed History and Migration)
3. Language Policy
4. Culture Studies (later renamed Culture and Arts Task Force)
5. Criminal Justice/Prisons

Also in 1974, Centro put out a call for a full-time librarian. Letters went out to legendary figures such as Pura Belpré and Lillian López, who pioneered services for the Spanish-speaking in the New York Public Library. In 1973, Tony Betancourt, Head of the Acquisitions Division of the Hostos Community College Library, and the only Puerto Rican librarian in the CUNY system at the time (he was nicknamed “el único” by the Centro staff), took a leave from Hostos to lay the foundations for the Centro library, making the first acquisitions, constructing the first bookshelves in the reading room and helping to set early standards and priorities.

When I arrived at the Centro in 1975, fresh out of Columbia University’s School of Library Science, a fledging library already existed. In fact, the First Annual Report of June 1974 boasted “…at present the library occupies a large portion of the Centro’s space (two reading rooms and the librarian’s office)...the library already contains one of the most complete collections covering the subject of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in the city” (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños 1974). This was at 500 Fifth Avenue, an office building on the corner of 42nd Street where CUNY rented space for various programs including the newly created Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños. The Centro library’s sizable space consisted of two reading rooms and a librarian’s office, signaling the importance of the program.

Upon graduating, my expectation was to find work in an academic or public library, where I would have an opportunity to learn all aspects of the job under the guidance of more experienced people. As it turned out, I became the lone librarian responsible for this developing library, and I didn’t know where to begin. It was Lillian López, who had been helping out at Centro in the absence of a full-time librarian, who recommended me for the job. Fortunately she also
Anthropologist Rafael L. Ramírez, then Centro’s Visiting Researcher, addressing a panel at the seminal 1974 Conferencia de Historiografía. Other participants at the table include (left to right) Rafael Rodríguez, Milton Pabón and Jalil Sued Badillo. Photographer unknown. Records of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY. Reprinted by permission.

Jorge Soto’s *El velorio de Oller en Nueva York* (1975) graced the cover of the *Cuaderno de Cultura*. Records of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.
mentored me through the first months of learning how to be a practicing librarian. Adjusting to the Centro’s demanding experimental collective structure was another matter altogether! In addition to learning my job, I was required to participate in numerous meetings and activities and other Centro work.

AS IT TURNED OUT, I BECAME THE LONE LIBRARIAN RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS DEVELOPING LIBRARY, AND I DIDN’T KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN.

As the first annual report indicated, there were already over a thousand volumes of books, dissertations, and journals. These were mostly titles relating to the history and culture of Puerto Rico as well as literature in all genres. Additionally, there were materials about Puerto Ricans in the U.S. written by North American social scientists and some of the emerging Puerto Rican writers from the U.S. communities.

In 1974 there were fourteen programs and/or departments of Puerto Rican studies offering a variety of courses. Common to most programs were courses focused on the history, culture and politics of the Island, as well as courses addressing the migration experience in the U.S. communities. Sample courses included topics such as the Puerto Rican family, the Puerto Rican child in the urban setting, bilingualism and the reading and analysis of an increasingly rich body of literature produced by U.S. Puerto Ricans. By 1976, the Centro Library was making substantial progress toward the goal of assembling a core collection representing the basic works in the main areas of Puerto Rican studies instruction. There were many obstacles to overcome, among them the lack of models for such a library and the problems of acquiring Puerto Rican materials. There were no specialized bibliographic tools for this area. Trade publications such as Books in Print were only minimally useful because they contained few materials related to Puerto Rican studies. Puerto Rican newspapers and journals, networking with vendors and scholars, and Puerto Rican bibliophiles who shared their expertise became our resources.

Acquisition or collection building in the Centro Library was principally guided by the research needs of the task forces and the curriculum trends in the departments/programs of Puerto Rican Studies. For example, to assist the staff analyzing the political economy of the Puerto Rican migration, a team consisting of myself and members of the history and documentation task force conducted searches in repositories in the U.S. and Puerto Rico for the purpose of locating primary sources and reports about conditions in Puerto Rico that led to the migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. and other territories. Documents were collected on microfilm from the Library of Congress and the National Archives, from the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park and from the Archivo General in Puerto Rico. Included were reports and historical records such as letters and diaries. A retrospective collection of newspapers from Puerto Rico, beginning with La Gaceta...
of 1810, was purchased on microfilm. In fact, the majority of the materials in the collection at this juncture had to do with Puerto Rico’s sociopolitical history, reflecting the focus of the work in the history and migration task force and the numerous courses on the history and politics of Puerto Rico.

ACQUISITION OR COLLECTION BUILDING IN THE CENTRO LIBRARY WAS PRINCIPALLY GUIDED BY THE RESEARCH NEEDS OF THE TASK FORCES AND THE CURRICULUM TRENDS IN THE DEPARTMENTS/PROGRAMS OF PUERTO RICAN STUDIES.

At the same time, the culture and arts working group was actively engaged in examining what was old and new in the cultural expression of Puerto Ricans in New York, particularly as manifested in popular music and art, but also in the study of Nuyorican literature. The Centro organized a music workshop called “The Lexington Avenue Express” and a “Feria de expresión puertorriqueña” in East Harlem. The 1976–77 Annual Report (library section) concludes: “...we see the need this year to focus efforts more directly on rounding out the collection of cultural materials (literature, music, the arts), now that the historical and social science sections has a solid foundation” (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños 1977).

An important aspect of the collection policy was embedded in the founding proposal, which emphasized that “a primary aim of the Center will be to promote integral analysis of Puerto Rican society that establish clearly the links between island structures and phenomena and their reciprocal extensions among Puerto Ricans living in the United States” (Committee for Puerto Rican Studies 1972). All information about Puerto Ricans, regardless of place of origin, was to be included. From the start the Centro’s research looked closely at the situation on the island of Puerto Rico in order to help interpret the experiences of Puerto Rican communities in the U.S. The library collection reflected this integral approach and the growing volume of books, dissertations, journals and newspapers represented all areas in Puerto Rican studies.

Although an important resource for Centro staff, more students and researchers from within and outside CUNY were finding their way to the library. Faculty sent students to do research for their papers and other assignments. Special holdings such as the dissertations, the microfilm collection and the films were also an attraction. The Centro’s ground-breaking research and publications also brought attention to the small but growing collection. Accommodating these users and expanding the collection in the small quarters at 5th Avenue had become a challenge. The Centro
was also growing as a research institution. As it turned out, CUNY had to give up its rental space at 500 Fifth Avenue, and a search for a new home was begun. With few options to choose from, the Centro moved to John Jay College in the spring of 1977. This was an oppressive and unattractive basement space, but the larger quarters allowed for a more spacious reading area, more room for stacks, storage for audiovisual materials and room for two microfilm reader printers. Besides the additional space, there were other advantages to being in a college setting. The John Jay Library staff was friendly and helpful, and with their support we began to automate our cataloging process. They helped train me in the use of the OCLC system for cataloging and shared their cataloging equipment. This was an important first step for us, as it not only made our work more efficient, but also made our holdings available for the first time on a national bibliographic system. Now it was possible to disseminate information about our holdings to a broader audience.

John Jay also afforded us more access to students, and the expanded space made it possible to provide library orientations to diverse groups from the community, as well as students throughout CUNY and beyond. We were quickly becoming a safe zone for Puerto Rican students, who were in a university environment that was at best indifferent and at worst hostile to their presence. For many of the students, the Centro library was their first encounter with a space totally dedicated to their culture and history. Our main activity, in addition to the task of making materials available, was providing direct services to students.
and working closely to guide them through assignments and library research in
a friendly and non-threatening setting. This was made possible by an expanded
staff. We’d gone beyond the two reading rooms, and now we had also gone
beyond a lone librarian. I was joined by another professional librarian as well as
a trained library assistant.  

Up to this point, most of the holdings consisted of secondary sources except for
selected primary sources bought on microfilm from other repositories. There was also
a smattering of ephemera and first-hand sources—things such as flyers, programs,
posters and pamphlets, mostly about Puerto Rican activities in New York City,
which we collected and kept in metal cabinets. As of yet, we had not consciously
committed to gathering primary sources documenting Puerto Rican community history.

In 1982, the Culture and Arts Task Force initiated an oral history project
in an attempt to “capture the undocumented aspects of the migration experience”
and to complement existing and ongoing research on the political economy of
the migration (Benmayor 1989). Together with members of the History Task
Force, they formed the Centro Oral History Committee. The project, titled
“Puerto Ricans in New York: Voices of the Migration,” recorded a series of
life history interviews with pione ros from Brooklyn and with women garment
workers. The testimonies collected from the earliest migrants revealed an
incredibly rich experience and uncovered a history that had barely been glimpsed.
Most significantly, a community eager to tell its story surfaced, and people began
delving into their b aules and all the places where memories are stored. This was an
important development in the work that was being produced at Centro, and would
also influence the future direction of the library.
From the work of the Oral History Committee flowed the first donations of archives to complement the library holdings. Thankfully naïve about the immense responsibility and the resources required to collect historical records, we enthusiastically accepted the donation of the Jesús Colón papers in 1982. The extraordinary Jesús Colón, a tireless organizer, journalist and writer, was discovered, and we were led to the treasure trove of papers Colón had left in the care of his friend Benigno Giboyeaux. They contained materials of all types documenting his life from the moment he arrived in New York in 1917. Because as an activist and a writer Colón participated in organization building and in many aspects of community development, the papers reconstruct a part of community history we hardly knew and represent an important record of Puerto Rican life from the 1920s through the 1940s, the period in which the bulk of the papers fall. At the time, all we had available to us about this early colonia was the intriguing Memorias de Bernardo Vega (1977), which was filled with references to early organizations, events and individuals. Here in the Colón Papers was the actual evidence of the creation and existence of organizations such as la Liga Puerorriqueña e Hispana and La Vanguardia Puertorriqueña in the form of minutes, bylaws, membership lists, programs, flyers, correspondence, and photographs among other materials. The first encounters with New York are described in Colón’s detailed letters to his sweetheart, Concha, in Puerto Rico. It's from the Colón Papers that we learn about Puerto Rican participation in organizations such as the Communist Party, the International Workers’ Order, el Club Cubano Inter-Americano, and el Club Obrero Español; we also see how Puerto Ricans figured in New York City politics. The significance of the Colón Papers for research on the early Puerto Rican communities cannot be exaggerated.

Also in the course of the Oral History Project another “pionero” came to light. He was an elderly Cuban gentleman named Justo Ambrosio Martí, a former merchant marine and photographer who through his images captured more than two decades of Puerto Rican and Latino life in New York City. Don Justo A. Martí had no family and adopted us as his heirs and declared us the guardians of his legacy, which consisted of thousands of photographic prints and negatives. Focused on the 1950s and 1960s, Martí’s images covered many topics, among them family life and rituals such as birthdays, baptisms and weddings (the photos which most fascinated me because they could have been my family’s celebrations); bodegas; sports such as baseball, wrestling and boxing; club scenes; performers including a young Tito Puente at the Palladium; and popular singers like Tito Rodríguez and Felipe Rodríguez (my father’s favorite). He also documented cultural activities such as La Fiesta de San Juan Bautista and El Desfile Puertorriqueño at its beginnings, political events involving Puerto Rican officials from New York and Puerto Rico such as Felisa Rincón de Gautier and Luis Muñoz Marín, and many other themes, all of which brought to life that period of time when Puerto Ricans were arriving in New York.

York in great numbers. For me, a member of the post-World War II migration, and a Puerto Rican raised in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, this was a transforming experience because I found myself in Don Justo’s photographs and the stories they told. The images evoked my own memories and connected me to this rich history.

Now we were introduced to trailblazing individuals whose life stories were told not only in the oral histories but were also contained in the cabinets, drawers, trunks and boxes, where they kept their most precious belongings: photographs, scrapbooks, programs, ticket stubs, letters, buttons and all those other items that chronicled their activities, their community participation, as well as their personal and family life.

Confronted with the riches of these collections, we could only imagine what other precious sources remained untapped, endangered and hidden. Beyond the production and dissemination of knowledge about our experiences
through research and publication, another aspect of our mission at the Centro—taking ownership of Puerto Rican history by gathering, protecting and making available for use the sources for its study—was suddenly foregrounded.

In truth, there was no written mission or collection development policy during this period, apart from the directives in the founding documents. Things evolved organically and serendipitously. By the mid-1980s it was apparent that we had more than a supporting role in this complex space called the Centro. We were becoming increasingly recognized as a vital resource. The Library and Archives was indeed developing into a special place.

Because we were entrusted with the responsibility of caring for primary sources, educating myself and the staff to take on this new work was essential. Handling primary sources requires knowledge and skills that differ substantially from library practice. While researching institutions in the city that offered archives training, I learned about the New York University master’s degree program in history and archival management, where I enrolled to acquire the archival methods necessary for the care and preservation of our new and future acquisitions.

NEGOTIATING SPACE FOR THE LIBRARY COLLECTIONS PROVED TO BE A COMPLICATED EXERCISE.

Meanwhile, we had outgrown our space at John Jay. This time we had the good fortune to be invited by the forward thinking president of Hunter College, Donna Shalala, to become part of Hunter. Two new buildings were in the process of completion and almost ready for occupancy at the Hunter campus at 68th Street and Lexington Avenue. After negotiating an institutional agreement that was mutually acceptable, we made preparations to move. Centro research and administrative staff were to be housed in appropriate office space on the 14th floor of the East Building, and the library staff and collections were to be housed directly in the Hunter Library, which occupied nine floors of the East Building. Negotiating space for the library collections proved to be a complicated exercise. Hunter’s then Chief Librarian was less than enthusiastic about this arrangement and insisted that we get exactly the same square footage we had at John Jay. Only reluctantly did he surrender space located on the 7th floor, which at the outset was inadequate, with almost no room for staff to process materials, a very small reading area, and little room for growth.

Space would continue to be a contentious issue over the years. In addition to the amount of square footage, we had to negotiate access to our facility. From the start, Centro was committed to public access to the library. We did not want to imitate institutions that limited access to special collections to scholars and researchers with advanced degrees or other acceptable credentials. In the agreement with Hunter we insisted on an open-access policy to make our resources available equally to all communities. In the fall of 1983, the Centro’s tenth anniversary, we completed our move to Hunter College, where we have been housed ever since.

In the 1980s, the New York State Archives began to take an interest in New York communities that were inadequately represented in the state’s historical record. Consequently, the Documentary Heritage Program was
created with funding from the state legislature to provide support for records’ programs in areas where there were significant gaps, including what they termed “underdocumented” communities. In 1989 we applied for and received a small grant from the Documentary Heritage Program to carry out a survey project. The project’s objective was to identify records of permanent value in the New York City Puerto Rican community and to develop a long-range strategy for collecting, organizing and making them accessible. The funds paid for a part-time archivist to do the survey.3 Because we expected the survey to uncover a wealth of documents, we questioned our readiness to pursue a project that would inevitably grow into a full-fledged historical records program. Where were the resources? Where was the space to house materials properly? How would resources be divided between the library and this new archival component, especially when we knew full well that the budget would stay essentially the same?

The responses to the survey reinforced our belief that, regardless of our state of readiness, the time was ripe to build on what had already been started through the oral history project. Carrying out this first survey brought us into close contact with many people who had no idea why we were so anxious to examine and to protect their old papers and generally no awareness of the significance of their contributions to Puerto Rican and to New York history. “Why me? I'm not important,” was a common reaction. This survey and subsequent work in archives has been about respecting community memory and preserving a more complete and balanced historical record, about uncovering hidden history, the stories of individuals and organizations that would have otherwise remained obscure and unsung. Doña Genoveva de Arteaga, a widely traveled concert pianist and organist and a founder of the prestigious Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music, was ninety and wheelchair-bound when we visited her in Washington Heights. She welcomed us enthusiastically and regaled us with stories as she gathered her papers. When she signed the deed of gift she said to us “Ahora me puedo morir en paz” (Now I can die in peace). A remarkable but little recognized woman, she was happy to find a place that valued her work and promised to protect and make it available to others.

The initial survey inspired the donation of seven collections, and the information gathered became the foundation for a collection development plan. In today's Centro archives, there are 243 collections totaling approximately 5000 cubic feet. Local community activists such as Petra Santiago from Loisaida and Petra Allende from East Harlem share space with figures of national prominence such as the founder of ASPIRA, Antonia Pantoja. Celebrated patriots and writers like Clemente Soto Vélez are side by side with elected officials such as Assemblyman Oscar García Rivera, the first Puerto Rican to be elected to public office. And Puerto Ricans from the turn of the century agricultural migration to Hawaii, such as Blase Camacho Souza, find themselves alongside Puerto Ricans from large urban centers, a part of the post-WWII industrial migrations. The stories of educators, writers, musicians, labor and civic leaders and public officials can be found here as well as the stories of thousands of ordinary workers, who came looking for better opportunities and at some point passed through the doors of the office of the Migration Division of the Government of Puerto Rico, or came as contract workers under the auspices of the Puerto Rican Department of Labor.

Moreover, organizational history is well represented in the archives. Housed in our repository are the records of key organizations such as the
Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, ASPIRA, and United Bronx Parents, which have made invaluable contributions in the areas of civil rights, education, political participation and numerous other issues of significance to our communities in the Diaspora. The Records of the Offices of the Government of Puerto Rico in the United States, which we hold in custody, constitute the largest collection of Puerto Rican migration documents in the United States. Convincing the Puerto Rican government to leave these materials in New York was a long and difficult process. Pressure from a committee consisting of diverse individuals from the New York area calling itself “El Comité Pro Permanencia de los Archivos,” along with the intervention of Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez, eventually resulted in an agreement to transfer custody to the Centro archives of this immense, rich collection documenting migrant life from 1930 to 1993. It took over six years of work and more than one million dollars, as well as a staff of three full-timers and numerous part-time assistants, to organize these records, which occupy approximately 3,000 cubic feet.

WHEN SHE SIGNED THE DEED OF GIFT SHE SAID TO US “AHORA ME PUEDO MORIR EN PAZ” (NOW I CAN DIE IN PEACE).

Meeting and interacting with donors is one of the most exciting and fulfilling aspects of our work. At the same time, obtaining collections is often a laborious and sometimes extraordinarily complex process. From the first contact with the donor until the gift agreement is signed, there are many steps in a negotiation that can be highly sensitive because there are often many emotions involved as well as physical obstacles. For example, heirs making decisions to donate the papers of a loved one have great separation anxiety. On one hand they know that placing the materials in our repository is the best option, but they become concerned over their access to the collections, and letting go requires a great deal of courage and trust. From our end it is important that every aspect of the gift agreement is understood and acceptable, and much care goes into discussing it with all concerned. Sometimes the donor, instead of being extremely reluctant to let things go, is anxious to get them out because of an impending move or imminent space needs. The actual transfer of materials brings out a mixture of emotions on the part of the donor: tears, last minute doubts and/or relief. From our end, this is frequently a rescue operation retrieving materials from diverse storage spaces—basements, abandoned apartments, packed storage rooms. Once the archives arrive at the Centro space, they need to be cleaned (besides dust there are sometimes creatures dead or living, rusty staples and clips, melted rubber bands, etc.). Only then can the process of organizing begin.

Arrangement and description is the process of making an archives collection available to researchers. It is a labor-intensive process that involves both intellectual and physical work. Personnel trained in archives methods must determine how to sort and arrange the collection in a way that respects its original order, faithfully represents the life activities of an individual or the daily work of
an organization and is easily accessible to researchers. A guide is prepared where sufficient description is provided for researchers to understand the significance of the materials, their value for research, and the history of the organization or the individual. A list of access points is created to facilitate research, and a container list describing what is in the boxes and folders is provided. The boxes and the folders are all numbered for easy retrieval. Today most archives do the guides or create aids in encoded archival description to facilitate access through the Internet so that the materials can be searched more effectively and with greater thoroughness. Forty of our guides will soon be available in that format.

The physical labor involves the initial cleaning and re-housing, carrying out preservation measures such as copying brittle documents on acid-free paper and placing photographs in mylar sleeves, sorting and removing duplicates and non-archival materials, foldering, labeling and boxing. Most of this work is done by archival assistants, whom we train as well as mentor in the hopes of getting them interested in the profession.

The cost of organizing collections is high. The archival boxes, folders, etc. are expensive. Once a collection is processed, preservation microfilming is often desirable, especially for fragile documents where handling the originals would further damage them. Currently there is a great demand for and pressure to digitize collections for access. All of this requires levels of funding that are beyond our basic budget. Fundraising and seeking outside support for these diverse tasks became a necessity and is part of what we had to learn here at the Centro.

We have been successful over the years in securing grants from diverse sources such as the Andrew W. Mellon, Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, as well as from government sources such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historical Records and Publications Commission, the New York
State Archives and New York State Education Department. But it is a constant struggle since funding is given on a project-by-project basis despite the fact the work of archives is ongoing.

The end result of the training, preparation, proposal writing and negotiations with donors is a well-organized repository of unique and valuable resources. The personal papers assembled in these archives of the Diaspora can be mined for Puerto Rican biography. New heroes and heroines have emerged. The Records of the Offices of the Government of Puerto Rico in the United States contain a wealth of information on migrant history and are a rich resource for genealogy. There is a whole new body of sources accessible not just to academic researchers and students, but to a public still in search of its forbears and seeking to fill in missing pieces in family histories. Among other major resources in the archives is a significant collection of visual art containing posters, prints and paintings along with artists' files and exhibition catalogs. There is a good representation of New York Puerto Rican art such as that of the Taller Boricua, as well as the work of Island-based artists such as Rafael Tufiño, among others.

**THE RECORDS OF THE OFFICES OF THE GOVERNMENT OF PUERTO RICO IN THE UNITED STATES CONTAIN A WEALTH OF INFORMATION ON MIGRANT HISTORY AND ARE A RICH RESOURCE FOR GENEALOGY.**

In addition to supporting Puerto Rican studies teaching and scholarship, the Centro Library and Archives has created links with community groups such as Puerto Rican genealogical associations, which have come to rely on our collection, and with visual artists, writers and musicians. In 1985 a number of friends and supporters of the Centro joined together to create the Friends of the Centro Library. The bylaws describe their goals: "... to focus public attention on library services and needs, to stimulate endowments, gifts of books, collections and educational materials to the library, to promote activities that will foster full community awareness and appreciation of the library as a center of learning, to promote closer relations between Puerto Rican and other interested people, to sponsor educational activities to help promote use" (Friends of the Centro Library 1985?). Book parties, a concert, small exhibits, and other events were organized by the group, as well as a membership drive, which brought in some funds to help buy equipment and supplies. One of the major accomplishments of this group was the dedication of the library to educator and community activist Evelina López Antonetty on December 12, 1986. More than three hundred people came out for this occasion to honor Evelina and show their support for the Centro Library.
Although no longer active, the small group of Friends were extremely committed to promoting the library as a resource for the community and provided an important link with a diverse community of concerned individuals, making a significant contribution to the development of the library.

**MEMORIES**

TRUE TO ITS ORIGINAL INTENT, THE CENTRO LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES HAS BEEN ESSENTIAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUERTO RICAN STUDIES BY PROVIDING A SPACE AND THE RESOURCES FOR THEORETICAL WORK IN PUERTO RICAN AND LATINO ISSUES.

True to its original intent, the Centro Library and Archives has been essential to the development of Puerto Rican Studies by providing a space and the resources for theoretical work in Puerto Rican and Latino issues. Scholars from various disciplines and several generations have used this facility to complete dissertations, books and articles. Certainly, the Library and Archives have influenced the production of knowledge about Puerto Rican reality and the incorporation of the diasporic experience into research practice.

Equally as significant, the Centro Library and Archives has impacted on the lives of generations of students, many of whom have made important self-discoveries in our reading area, coming in touch for the first time with identity-affirming sources and getting some nurturance in an otherwise indifferent university environment. A number of these students have remained in touch, coming back to the Library through undergraduate school, graduate studies and professional careers. The Library and Archives have mentored and encouraged students to pursue careers in librarianship and archives, areas where there is a dearth of Latinos.

Another of the Centro Library and Archives' objectives has been to raise awareness of the importance of documenting history among creators, custodians and users of records, and to provide leadership in this area. As a pioneer in ethnic librarianship and archives, the Centro Library and Archives has been at the forefront of documentation efforts throughout New York State and in other regions of the country such as New Jersey, Illinois and California. As archivists and librarians, we have gone beyond our original responsibility, encouraging projects to document the broader Latino experience. We collaborated with the New York State Archives to produce a guide to documenting Latino/Hispanic history and culture in New York State, whose purpose is "to help create a comprehensive,
equitable historical record of New York’s Latino/Hispanic population…” (New York State Archives 2002: 2). We have had a role in the creation of the New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center, housed at Newark Public Library, which is actively documenting New Jersey’s Puerto Ricans. The Centro served as a model for the Dominican Studies Institute at City College, where work has started on preserving the history of the Dominican community in the U.S. And as far away as California we have supported the California Puerto Rican Historical Society and the preservation of the records of one of the first Puerto Rican organizations in the U.S., the Club Puertorriqueño de San Francisco, founded in 1912.

Through a combination of vision and hard work, the Centro Library and Archives has progressed from a core collection to a comprehensive research collection and has been transformed from a local resource to a recognized national resource. The transformation from a support unit for Centro staff and Puerto Rican Studies Departments into the major repository for Puerto Rican diasporic history has been a fascinating journey. Many challenges remain, not least among them maintaining a level of funding that allows us to continue to thrive and do high-quality work. At the forefront of current initiatives is producing information in digital format to provide greater access to our holdings so as to ensure that our collections are searchable and usable to diverse audiences, on-site and remotely. At the same time a chief concern has been the systematic conservation and preservation of our holdings, including paper, audio and videotapes and film and vinyl recordings. Active collecting in all areas continues because ours is a rich and complex history, and many gaps remain to be filled. We have barely scratched the surface; subjects such as gay and lesbian studies, the arts, business history, and religious practices, among others, are still inadequately documented. There is still a great need for good community histories, textbooks for classroom use, for biographies, and for other materials in these and many areas. The collections of primary resources we have built are not yet being used to their full potential for scholarly research, in school curricula at all levels or for public programs. Promoting the diverse resources we house and encouraging the use of collections for furthering and deepening existing knowledge in Puerto Rican history and culture is an ongoing part of our work. There is a wall in the library covered with portraits called “The Faces of the Migration.” Many of the library surfaces are adorned with images from the archives—pictures of donors, facsimiles of documents, posters from the art collection. The small art gallery established for displaying our own holdings and those of local artists has become an increasingly visible and important exhibit space. There are traveling exhibits using photos and documents to tell a story—all products of a creative staff and volunteers that showcase the holdings and the work that is not always easy to grasp or describe in words. 7

In 1992 we moved to bigger quarters on the third floor of the Hunter College library. It didn’t take very long to outgrow that space, so that the Library and Archives operation is currently spread out among different sites on the Hunter Campus as well as off-site. Maintaining archives is an enormous task. Archival materials are labor intensive to organize and preserve and require a good deal of space for storage, for processing and for reference service. The Library has also grown, and there is hardly enough shelf space to accommodate new acquisitions. A solution to the space problem has to be a top priority for the immediate future.
Although I never intended to stay that long, the Centro Library and Archives was under my charge for thirty years. This has been my life’s work, although I never intended staying this long. The history of the Library and Archives has not only been shaped by me, but also by many others throughout the thirty-two years of the Centro’s existence. This brief essay does not do justice to the long and intricate history that is so deeply linked to the Centro’s overall development, as well as my own. Hopefully there will be time at some later date to expand it and analyze it with more depth. But the great thing is that this is a “living” project that will continue to unfold through time, making an impact into the future so long as a people’s need for self-knowledge and for understanding their history and culture remain.

THE TRANSFORMATION FROM A SUPPORT UNIT FOR CENTRO STAFF AND PUERTO RICAN STUDIES DEPARTMENTS INTO THE MAJOR REPOSITORY FOR PUERTO RICAN DIASPORIC HISTORY HAS BEEN A FASCINATING JOURNEY.

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Pura Belpré began working in the New York Public Library System (NYPL) in the early 1920s. A writer and folklorist, she published the book *Perez and Martina: A Porto Rican Folktale* in 1932 and numerous other books of Puerto Rican folklore. Lillian López worked in NYPL from 1960–1985 and, like Belpré, was a pioneer in creating library services and programs for Puerto Ricans and other Latinos.

There were also Chicano Studies libraries emerging in this period—a development that resulted in important collections. Key collections include the Chicano Studies Library at the University of California Los Angeles, The Mexican-American Collection at Stanford University and the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives at the University of California Santa Barbara.

OCLC is a worldwide union catalog with millions of online records.

Amílcar Tirado Avilés, with an MLS from the State University of New York/Albany and an MA in History from SUNY/Buffalo, was reference librarian until 2000. He made important contributions in collection development and bibliography throughout his tenure. Felix A. Rivera, with an associate’s degree in library technology from the Borough of Manhattan Community College, earned a BA from City College and continues to work in the library as the film and media librarian.

Nelly Cruz, with an MA in History/Caribbean and Latin American Studies and a Certificate in Archives Management from New York University, was the first project archivist. She helped in archival development and processing until 1993. Later she became the Director of the Archivo General in Puerto Rico.

In addition to various in-house digitization projects, Centro has partnered with the New York State Archives on “Ventana al pasado”—a bilingual web-based research collection containing over 3,100 digital images linking Latino-related records in ten New York State archival repositories—and on “The Electronic Schoolhouse”—a bilingual educational resource focusing on using historical records in the classroom.

Archivist Pedro Juan Hernández, with an MA in History from the University of Puerto Rico, is responsible for exhibits and for the creative use of the images from the Archives on view in many areas of the library. Architect Jose Vidal is a volunteer who came up with the idea of the Centro Gallery and is the curator of the art exhibits.

REFERENCES


