Forward Thinking Strategies:  
Envisioning a Collaborative and Hybrid Library at Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Latino

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ABSTRACT

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During the summer and fall of 2022, I was a Graduate Latino Museum Studies Fellow (LMSP) with Smithsonian Institution’s (SI) National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL) and Smithsonian Libraries and Archives (SLA). I was tasked with conducting a deep dive exploration about how SLA and NMAL can create a hybrid Research Center Library in the nation’s newest and yet to be opened museum. Through a series of stakeholder interviews, a targeted literature review, and external environmental scans I assembled a written report of findings and recommendations and created a robust database visualization. This report and dataset were made in service of NMAL and SLA leadership and help them visualize a successful research services model for NMAL. The values of sustained collaboration and community-building guided this exploration with the intent to reveal the needs of both internal and external community stakeholders.
My fellowship with SLA began in July and ended in September 2022. At the beginning of this fellowship, I was anxious about my assignment with SLA because I am not earning an MLIS/MLS degree. However, as this fellowship has progressed, I believe my assignment was strategic and speaks to the direction of the museum. Originally, I was going to evaluate SLA’s collections and identify gaps related to Latino scholarship however, the practicum’s goals changed during the first week which required me to practice skills in flexibility and adaptation. At the request of NMAL’s and SLA’s director, I pivoted to gathering data related to US Latino institutions ranging from libraries to museums. I also was tasked with conducting qualitative interviews with SI staff to glean professional insights on how SI and SLA will support NMAL’s desire for a more public facing community research library center. Before I recount my duties, it is essential to provide backstory about NMAL’s origins as well as provide background about SLA’s function within SI.

Congress passed legislation in 2020 to create NMAL and the current Smithsonian Latino Center which is housed within the National Museum of American History became the first piece of the National Museum of the American Latino. And beginning on May 2nd, 2022, Jorge Zamanillo became the inaugural director of NMAL. The Smithsonian Latino Center (SLC) was led by Eduardo Díaz who is now Acting Deputy Director of NMAL. Deputy Director Díaz has been a leader in Latino arts and culture institutions throughout his career. Many of these institutions are successful examples of hybrid and collaborative spaces such as the National Hispanic Cultural Center. Director Zamanillo shares the same trait having left HistoryMiami to join Smithsonian and lead NMAL. Even SLC is an example of a hybrid model within SI as it offers fellowships and internships separate from those at SI. For example, one is in conjunction with an external museum located in Los Angeles, CA. This information is essential to mention
because these directors want to explore creating a space that is simultaneously collaborative and hybrid. My main task was to conduct a broad research of US institutions that are hybrid and collaborative.

Secondary yet as important was to conduct qualitative interviews SLA staff to glean their professional and expert opinions on how SI can and cannot achieve this visionary goal.

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives is as complex as NAML. In some respects, they operate as a traditional model with a physical presence in museum spaces and are also present in virtual spaces. SLA is part of SI and, therefore, a public institution. However, SLA historically has not been public facing, its primary users are SI staff and researchers. SLA does not deny the public entry, however, should a member of the public wish to access SLA materials they must make an appointment. Collections at SLA fall under Smithsonian Directives (SD) 500 and 600 which gives them a federal collection designation similar to that of a museum object. It is here, interviewing SLA staff that I began my research journey.

The primary role of SLA librarians is to support curators and researchers at SI, they also assist SI educators and outside researchers. Also, any staff member of SI is allowed to have a library card and access their digital and physical collections. SLA provides access to digital resources such as JSTOR, they also have archives, special collections, and vertical files. Through my interviews I learned that SLA has struggled with their identity within SI, many of the librarians felt as though they have always been guests of the museums and not members of the family. However, they are under new leadership with Tamar Evangelista-Dougherty being appointed as director of SLA. She desires to create new, collaborate relationships, especially with NMAL. Leading by example Directors Evangelista-Dougherty and Zamanillo are
embarking on a new path that encourages relationship building and calls for collaboration at all levels.

During the first six weeks of this fellowship, I conducted fourteen interviews which totaled to eighteen hours and I filled two notebooks worth of interview data. I interviewed many SI professionals including, librarians, curators, archivists, and directors. I asked them questions related to institutional history, historical librarianship at SI, emerging trends, and most importantly, asked them about the idea of a public facing library at NMAL. Almost unanimously the responses I received were that a true, 100% public facing library cannot be done at SI. They also stated that collaboration must be at the center if this vision is to succeed. Some opined that a dedicated partnership between museum educators and the librarians could be a way forward to lasting success. All cautioned about the attempt and failure of both National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) to create public facing libraries. These failures came down to not having dedicated resources, namely embedded labor and dedicated funding. However, there is desire for change and the librarians think there can be a public component if dedicated resources in the form of space, labor, and resources are provided. About midway through this process, I then began my external research/environmental scan of US Latino cultural institutions.

Starting in week four I began compiling a Word document list of external US Latino focused cultural institutions. My practicum supervisor and I utilized Google searches and our own knowledge of Latino cultural institutions and we agreed to cap the list at 150. We chose this cap because the goal was to conduct a broad scan and gather data that could be analyzed within the length of my fellowship. My list is by no means exhaustive and is meant to be used as a starting point for further in-depth research. I reviewed each site entry by scanning their website
for data related to hybridity and collaboration, I also noted where they were located to include community, if they were public or private, and the focus of their collection, and anything of interesting note. During this review I entered the data into an Excel spreadsheet and the finalized site list contains 112 entries and is evenly distributed among two set upon categories. As I entered the data I noticed a trend, my sites fell into two main categories, Museums/Cultural Centers (MC) and Libraries, Archives, Research Institutes, and Special Collections (LARS). I found that entries in the MC category tended to be individual, non-profit institutions that were not connected with larger institutions. An example of this is Museo de las Americas in Denver, Colorado. Contrastingly, the LARS category skewed having connections with institutions of higher education as well as local government. Two examples of these external connections are The Texas Collection at Baylor University and The Caroline B. and John H. Kampmann San Antonio Public Library Portal at the Briscoe Western Art Museum. It should be noted that while the library at the Briscoe could be entered in the MC category the distinction of it being a public library location makes it more appropriate for LARS. In cases such as the aforementioned example, I determined the site’s primary category based on information available on the individual institution’s website. After entering each institution into these broad categories I refined the data by looking for themes. After this refining I began to play with data visualization and created bar charts and pie charts. I wanted to further visualize this data in a comprehensive and interactive manner and found that a dashboard was the best way to accomplish this goal. The creation of my dashboard took approximately forty to fifty hours to complete and it is a product I am proud of. During the last three weeks of my fellowship my practicum supervisors and I crafted a written report of findings and submitted my data. This final deliverable is meant to
serve future leaders and fellows of NMAL as they embark on the creation of the nation’s newest museum.

An additional small component of my practicum included attending presentations given by SI staff, and other leading museum professionals many of whom are LMSP alumni. I attended eighteen unique LMSP presentations ranging from exhibition development at SI to seminars about PhD programs that intersect with the museum profession. A highlight was attending a presentation about data science development at SI given by librarians who utilize Wikidata to connect SI objects with external digital sources.

My fellowship with Smithsonian was enlightening and challenging. I got to peek behind the curtain of one of the USA’s most respected cultural institutions. I am also honored to be part of LMSP as I am part of the first cohort who were directly connected with NMAL. Having participated in this fellowship I feel more confident and prepared moving forward in this profession.
Models of Engagement at SI and US Institutions
Agenda
1. Jargon Crash Course
2. Overview of Practicum
3. Components of Practicum
4. Audience Interaction
5. Questions
Jargon

- **SI** = Smithsonian Institution
- **NMAL** = National Museum of the American Latino
- **LMSP** = Latino Museum Studies Program
- **SLA** = Smithsonian Libraries and Archives
- **NMAAHC** (Nuh-Mach) = National Museum of African American History and Culture
- **NMAI** = National Museum of the American Indian
- **SD** = Smithsonian Directives = Policies
- **The Castle** = Executive Administration
- **Unit** = SI museum, library, etc.
- **Latino** = Latinx, Latin@, Hispanic, Mexicano, Dominicano, AfroLatino/a/e, Hispano, Chicano, Raza, etc....non-exhaustive and not inclusive of all peoples, beliefs or identities
PRACTICUM GOALS

Using collection development assessment principles, and conducting environmental scans and researcher interviews, create an American Latino research and reference collections profile for SLA which will support current and future NMAL research and program initiatives.

OUTCOMES:
• Developed report of collections and library model recommendations for new American Latino Library
• Analyzed salient data points and created accompanying data visualizations
• Presented findings of report to stakeholders
• Crafted SLA blog post
INTERVIEWS AND PRESENTATIONS

- Attended 18 LMSP presentations
- Attended 4 SLA staff & summer-fellow presentations
  - Wikidata, rare book room, DEAI
- Conducted 14 interviews of SI staff
  - Librarians, curators, archivists, and museum staff
- Logged 17.5 hours of interviews
- Filled 2 notebooks 😊
Overview

- 112 Organizations
  - Museums
  - Archives
  - Cultural Centers
  - Libraries
  - Research Institutes
  - Special Collections
- Compiled data spread sheet
- Analyzed data
White Paper Inspired

1. Smithson
   - Hybridity
   - Collaboration
   - Shared Stewardship
   - Advocacy
2. Abstract
3. Summary of Interviews
4. Analysis of Data
5. Recommendations
Let’s Have FUN with DATA!
¿Preguntas?
Questions?