

Saqueo en el archivo: El paradero de los tesoros documentales Guatemaltecos. By Wendy Kramer, W. George Lovell, and Christopher Lutz. (La Antigua, Guatemala: Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica, Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, and Plumstock Mesoamerican Studies, 2014. xxxiv + 65 pp., preface, introduction, photographs, appendixes, bibliography. \$10.00 paper.)

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News of the discovery of the lost second and third sixteenth-century municipal council books of Santiago de Guatemala by Sebastian van Doesburg ignited important discussions about individual versus collective ownership of historical documents. Setting aside their value for the early history of colonial Latin America, the books, presently housed in the Hispanic Society of America in New York, are part of the systematic processes of the expropriation of cultural artifacts from the global South. Wendy Kramer, W. George Lovell, and Christopher Lutz interrogate the journey of the books not to indict those who had a hand in their disappearance but to illustrate ways that scholars might use imaginative approaches to uncover other ostensibly vanished manuscripts.

Kramer, Lovell, and Lutz begin their discussion with the Hispanic Society of America, an organization that, to its credit, has worked with researchers to expose the route traveled by the books from Guatemala to the United States. Tracing the dispossession of sixteenth-century documents requires tenacious dedication, as rarely do such materials move along easily identifiable paths. Rather, as in the case of the lost books, manuscripts often move from one country to the next, at times lying forgotten in one location for years until an interested collector purchases them. Valued less for their historical content than for their signatures of conquerors and other notable figures, the municipal council books experienced what Jorge Luján Muñoz (2011) identifies as “adventures and misadventures.” Indeed, Kramer, Lovell, and Lutz discovered that the books first traveled to Germany before eventually arriving in the United States as part of Archer Milton Huntington’s massive collection.

The authors demonstrate that dispossessed manuscripts follow tortuous routes: some books are taken by outright theft, others are given as gifts by functionaries to curry favor with allies, and others still are purchased from private collectors who came to possess them at a time when national archives and laws, intended to protect cultural patrimonies, did

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not yet exist. Despite laws prohibiting their sale, the lost books disappeared from Guatemala in the early twentieth century. Indeed, they appear in a 1913 sales catalog of the Leipzig book dealer and editor Karl W. Hiersemann. Yet, rather than attempt to condemn the illegal removal, Kramer, Lovell, and Lutz wisely concentrate on discussing how rare book dealers and bibliophiles viewed historical manuscripts and the transoceanic links between wealthy collectors. Deeply influenced by the racist ideologies of their time, early bibliophiles and collectors saw their libraries as a means to protect historical materials for future generations. Ironically, while manuscripts may have originated in the global South, European and US collectors did not trust subjugated peoples to care for them properly. In analyzing these attitudes and the links among collectors, the authors raise important questions about how manuscripts became highly prized commodities and the nature of collecting historical materials.

Kramer, Lovell, and Lutz have crafted a succinct and engrossing book that makes a strong case for researchers to investigate repositories typically ignored. Therefore, rather than rely on dated catalogs, they convincingly argue that researchers should thoroughly investigate archives and special collections such as that of the Hispanic Society of America. Given the tremendous value of the lost books for the history of sixteenth-century Latin America, one wonders how many other rich historical manuscripts lie dormant, awaiting the moment when they can reveal their secrets to modern scholars.

Reference

Luján Muñoz, Jorge

- 2011 "Aventuras y desventuras de los libros segundo y tercero de Cabildo de Santiago de Guatemala." Presentation to the Academia de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala, Guatemala City, 23 February.