

## **Conference of Latin American Geography**

### **Final report for the Field Study Grant**

*María Guillén-Araya, PhD student*

*Graduate School of Geography, Clark University*

My doctoral dissertation interrogates the relationship between the geopolitical changes that drastically transformed Central America during the 1980s and 1990s (the peace negotiations and neoliberal restructuring) with the touristic boom that came afterward. To do this I focus on the entanglements between the ideological and material processes that produce tourism on the ground. My application to the Field Study Grant was focused on doing archival work in Guatemala and Costa Rica, which was the first stage of fieldwork in my research methodology.

Archival research is key to my research for several reasons. First, tourism is a relatively understudied topic in the region, meaning that primary sources gain weight when it comes to gathering data. Second, because I'm studying the ideologies of these geopolitical transformations, my methodology was guiding me to texts where I could trace the ideas, meanings and interpretations of reality that were shaping that past when it was present. After being in the archives of the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA), the Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (INGUAT), and the Central American Parliament in Guatemala (PARLACEN), as well as the "Intermediate Archive" of the Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, I have over 3900 scans of documents that are invaluable for my dissertation. These documents include, among others, peace accords documents, diplomatic meetings proceedings, journalistic cables, international cooperation agreements, letters between public officials, institutional budgets, reports on institutional reforms, structural adjustment documents, and regional sustainable development policies on tourism. I'm now in the stage of coding these documents and analyzing them.

Doing archival research in Central America proves to be very challenging methodologically and institutionally. Methodologically, the types and amounts of documents each institution preserves are widely different, which poses challenges to comparison because the information gathered for each country varies greatly.

In the Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, the Intermediate Archive preserves documents from public institutions that are no more than forty years old (from the year 1990 onwards), most of the documents are official letters sent to and from institutions and official reports about things such as reforms, loans, official meetings' proceedings, public policies. According to the assistant at the archive, the Archivo Nacional has an institutional commission of specialists that decide what to keep from the documents public institutions send to the archive, what is not "substantive" is discarded. All the documents of this archive are coded, staff lent me folders that I revised in situ and could scan freely at no cost. As such, the documents that I had in my hands went through at least two filters: the selection done by the archivist at the institution of origin and the institutional commission of the Archivo Nacional.

Institutionally, there are big gaps as well. Guatemala does not have a national law regulating the archival patrimony of the country, so the regulation of documentation falls under the law of access to public information which is very weak and not enforceable. In the case of INGUAT, I made the request to the office of public information, which seemed relatively easy at first, but it got complicated when I was asked to specify things about the documents I could not know because I had no access to a catalogue nor to the archive itself. Everything was mediated through the public information window or over email. Because there was the supposition that I had to know each exact document I were to request, there was no element of surprise, as it happened to me when I was given folders to examine at CIRMA

or the Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, where I found documents I didn't even know existed. Speaking to Guatemalan friends about this experience at INGUAT, some attribute these deficiencies to a political culture that is not only related to corruption but also to the legacies of secrecy and censorship of the internal war that ended formally in 1996. I also consulted the library at INGUAT, this was useful for finding information on the Mundo Maya project and other archives regarding economic policy on tourism.

On the one hand, the National Archive of Costa Rica centralizes most of the archival patrimony of the country, both historical and intermediate. On the other hand, Guatemala has an uneven landscape of documental preservation, especially when it comes to materials from the recent past. This makes a private initiative like CIRMA an important locus of archival research in Guatemala. However, this comes at a cost for researchers. Because of the nature of funding in non-profit foundations like CIRMA, they charge for the rights of reproduction of the documents (photocopying and digitalization). This is pricy. I paid almost US \$300 for reproductions. If I had not had the CLAG field grant I could not have paid this amount without making cuts to basic needs like accommodation and meals.

The funds from the fieldwork grant of CLAG were used to pay for the reproduction rights of documents, to pay for the airfare from San José to Guatemala City, for ground transportation locally, and for accommodation in Guatemala City and Antigua.

The findings of this portion of my methodology will be used for writing a historical chapter in my dissertation where I will explore the particular neoliberal birth of the touristic boom in Central America. From the work in the archives, I found out that the political economy of tourism was structured differently from sectors such as agriculture and finance, and that understanding this neoliberal restructuring requires attention to the geopolitics of the peace process and the role of emerging regional elites (now transnational and with investment in the service sector). Furthermore, once I start the ethnographic portion of my project, I'm certain that the findings I drew from the archives will be helpful to have a greater understanding of what I will be seeing in the field.

Thanks to CLAG for this enriching fieldwork experience!

Picture 1. In the corners of the Intermediate Archive. Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica. San José, 2022.



Source: Photograph taken by the researcher.

Picture 2. Me going through the documents at CIRMA. Antigua, Guatemala, 2022.



Source: Photograph taken by Thelma Porres of CIRMA for the researcher.