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The Library, a Place of Ghosts

To talk about the library at the Center for Research on North America (CISAN) is to remember Mónica Vereá Campos. She saw it as a place from which you could see everything in the universe at the same time and that you need for writing. Or, it brings to mind the memory of Rosa Cusminsky, walking along the aisles as though she were moving through the agora; as you could hear her reflecting aloud, flanked by her disciples, hurrying ahead, scattering phrases from the classics in her wake, or outright giving advice in a tone of reproof, scolding as a way of giving advice in that firm, assured voice characteristic of her, crossing the small reading room of the first Center for Research on the United States of America, to go directly into the stacks, which she knew as well as the library in her own house—after all, she had donated a large number of the almost 2 500 books the library began with.

Even as she would take a book off the shelf, she was already explaining its content to those with her, who were listening like people intrigued by something. Unhurriedly, she recommended reading specific chapters, pointing out the importance of the number of the edition and the writer of the prologue—someone she probably knew—or simply suggesting that they take certain precautions with the translated version of the same text.

She always took a while to rest in the library, which wasn't very large, but was cozy. And then she would continue to explain the complex networks of political power in North America or the most important changes in the world economy and their consequences, just to cite an example. Despite being a senior citizen in the early 1990s, she had a masterful, energetic voice, with the intonation of someone who is completely convinced of what she

was saying; this put the mark of truth on her words, received by a group of students like a gift that invited them to reflect and analyze.

In those first years, the library was built like the *Aleph*.¹ Since it was the first institution in Mexico dedicated to the study of North America, it also became the country's most specialized library on the topic, whose collections showed the degree of interest in certain topics. At the same time, they sketched the guidelines for future research, marking out the agenda for areas of study.

The Rosa Cusminsky Library also held the first fruit of the research done by the center's faculty as it grew, trained, and transformed itself. If we look at the formation of its collections historically, the first thing we notice is the transition, evolution, and transformation of the research areas according to different moments in time and paradigms. That is to say, the library responds to, adapts, and promotes the development of book and periodical collections in accordance with researchers' needs for new topics.

If the history of the center for the last 30 years is somehow imprinted on its library collections, it should also be underlined that the library's human resources are part of that constant transformation: we have turned into a filter between the flood of books and research itself.

We can remember scenes of how intense our work was when the library had few books and occupied a small space on the eleventh floor of Humanities Tower II and we needed information: we sought out books from different institutions. We remember the agreements with the Benjamin Franklin Library first, and then the Canadian Embassy, who solved to a great extent the center's informational needs, as well as other public and private research and higher education institutions. Part of our work consisted of finding bibliographical and documentary information. Those were times when access to information was more difficult than now; we literally did it on foot, backpack over our

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shoulders. That meant that a lot of our work time was spent moving around to get information.

Making the circulation of information key for developing the different projects implied moving the materials to the library and then to the cubicles of Silvia Vélez, Sofía Gallardo, Mónica Gambrell, and Rosa Cusminsky when one of them was convalescing from an illness but continued working and needed recently acquired materials.

We were the ones who formed the collections and provided information; we kept the library up to date and transformed it; the books and their readers testify to that.

The history of our working and professional lives has also played out in its aisles, reading room, stacks, and other spaces. We have watched generations of students, changes in technological platforms, and they have allowed us to see our library with the subjective focus that brings with it our distinctive mark. It is one of the points of the space that contains all the points, where the Aleph made it possible to have at hand a world of information—it now

has more than 25 000 volumes and access to several data bases— and became a beacon of information.

Michel Foucault wrote, “The visionary experience arises from the black and white surface of printed signs, from the closed and dusty volume that opens with the flight of forgotten words; fantasies are deployed in the hushed library with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds.”²

For us it is truly exquisite to be able to develop day-to-day in a space where you must arrive with a basic tool to decant its wealth: imagination. And, it is a place where you cannot be for an extended period if you do not have enormous curiosity about enquiry. If that is the case, it becomes a custom even to live with its ghosts, including the ghost of Reason. **NM**

Notes

¹ This refers to Jorge Luis Borges's *Aleph*, the point from which everything in the universe can be seen.

² Michel Foucault, “La biblioteca fantástica,” *Revista Estudios* no. 9, (Summer) (Mexico City), pp. 97-113; *Fantasia of the Library*, <https://es.scribd.com/document/353808989/Foucault-Michel-1967-1977-Fantasia-of-the-Library>, p. 90.