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# Cuéntame tu historia: Archiving Florida Farmworkers' Histories

## Essential but Hidden

As a Mexican migrant, Dr. Margarita Vargas-Betancourt, director of the Archiving Farmworkers' Histories or the *Cuéntame tu historia* project, is acutely aware of the challenges immigrants face in the United States. As we struggle to survive, adapt, and assimilate, the tradition of sharing our stories with our children, a practice common in Latin America, is cast aside. At the same time, the U.S. media represents migrants, especially those from the Global South, as aliens in the best case, or as criminals, in the worst. Migrant communities, then, are misrepresented as well as being underrepresented. This was never more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Florida, like in many other places in the United States, Latin American and Caribbean migrants and their children make up most of the labor deemed essential: farmworkers, caregivers, service providers, construction, retail. Many of these workers perform their job in precarious conditions. Since the country cannot run without them, they never stop working, even when sick and overworked. The result is that they constituted a great percent of the people who died

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Photos courtesy of the authors.



Beatriz Domínguez Alemán

Interview with the founder members of the Farmworker's Association of Florida, sisters Gail Grimes and Anne Kendrick, Apopka, Florida, 2023.

because of COVID.<sup>1</sup> It was clear that 2020 was a historic moment, and that archivists and librarians needed to capture those stories.

At the University of Florida (UF), a team of librarians obtained funding from the Center for Arts, Migration, and Entrepreneurship to collect, describe, and preserve digital content on the impact of COVID-19 on Florida farmworkers. The resulting COVID-19 Florida Farmworkers Collection consists of thirty-two gigabytes of digital material such as websites, social media sites, newspapers, TV, and documents from the UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. As part of the project, we created a database of community-based organizations that serve Florida farmworkers. For one year, we followed and captured their social media content. We learned that these organizations were vital for the survival of migrant communities; they organized food and toy drives, COVID-19 testing events, public health programs, and vaccination campaigns. We believe that the history of these organizations is fundamental to understanding the history of minoritized communities in Florida, especially that of farmworkers.

UF's Latin American and Caribbean Collection (LACC) and the University of Miami Library System (UM) do not specialize in Mexico. Both focus on the Caribbean, with special emphasis on Cuba. In Florida, the third largest state in the United States, agriculture is of paramount economic importance; farmworkers have mainly been Mexican. Recently, Central American and Caribbean people have joined these ranks. Many farmworkers are seasonal; some fear

deportation, and recently more and more temporary workers are coming through the federal sponsored H-2A visa program. Last year, the U.S. issued 300,000 H-2A visas: 90 percent to Mexicans. Regardless of status, agricultural workers suffer work and human rights abuses.<sup>2</sup> These are some of the factors that prevent the preservation of their stories; language barriers and social isolation are other factors.

## Partnership

In 2022, LACC partnered with UM, and two community-based organizations, The Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF) and the Rural Women's Health Project (RWHP),<sup>3</sup> to design the project "Archiving Farmworkers' Histories." FWAF serves the broadest constituency through five offices that represent 40 counties from north, central, and southern Florida. FWAF's mission is to empower communities "to respond and gain control over the social, political, economic, workplace, health, and environmental justice issues that impact their lives." It does so through a model of grassroots governance, multiracial coalitions, labor organization, and community events that increase consciousness about farmworkers' rights. The RWHP is a health justice organization in north Florida that serves women, many of them indigenous migrants from Mexico and Central America. The mission of RWHP is to "use evidence-based strategies to build sustainable and replicable community programs and policies to strengthen communities' capacity to overcome health and social justice barriers." The RWHP's public health campaigns employ testimonial storytelling through *fotonovelas*, podcasts, and board games like *lotería*.<sup>4</sup>

With funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, we started implementing the project. The project's goals are to build trust with the communities, survey their archival needs, and design archival strategies that ensure their safety. The team brings together different expertise: archival, metadata, assessment, oral histories, outreach with agricultural communities, artistic photography, videography, multicultural experience, bilingual abilities, and experience using artificial intelligence (AI). To center the communities' needs and preferences, we constantly consult with FWAF's and RWHP's leadership. In addition, the project includes six national consultants: three experts in community-driven archiving, two from

migrant community-based organizations, and one professor of communication in agricultural sciences.

For our methodologies, we planned to use participation and sponsorship of community events and oral histories. Based on RWHP success in using storytelling, we added video stories. The project spans two years. In Year 1, UF worked with FWAF's headquarters in Apopka, a suburb of Orlando which used to be more rural than urban. We are now in Year 2, with UM leading the project with FWAF's office in Homestead, a suburb of Miami and a major agricultural area. Our project's model of partnership provides a prototype for other repositories to ethically preserve the histories of underrepresented groups.

## Fiestas and Video Stories

The project includes two community events in Apopka and two in Homestead. Upon suggestion of FWAF's leadership, on December 18, 2022 we presented the project at the FWAF posada (traditional Mexican Christmas celebration) in Apopka. We handed out bookmarks with a QR code to a video produced by the project coordinator, historian and videographer Daniel Fernández Guevara. The video, titled "Cuéntame tu historia," presents the family story of the director of the project, Margarita Vargas-Betancourt. In a heartwarming scene with her son Roberto, Vargas-Betancourt insists on sharing her family's past because "to know who you are and where you are going, it's important to know where you came from, and we come from Mexico."

Our sponsorship of the posada follows the Mesoamerican collaborative pattern of *padrinazgo* (godfathership). This consists of relatives' sponsoring each other's social events. Our participation and sponsorship of the food, drinks, cultural program, piñatas, and toys served to create trust with the community. Later, we were able to conduct several oral histories and to participate and document key community events like FWAF's 40th anniversary. We will sponsor the 2023 posada with funding from the Rare Book School-Mellon Fellowship for Diversity, Inclusion and Cultural Heritage as part of Vargas-Betancourt's participation in the program. To obtain the funding, we explained to a traditional LIS organization the necessity of centering minoritized communities' needs and traditions to bear fruitful collaboration and a common understanding. In the case of Florida farmworkers, this means to *join la fiesta*.



Beatriz Domínguez Alemán

Interview with Ethan Maia de Needell, from Rural Women's Health Project, Gainesville, Florida, 2023.

For the event, we will present a new video titled “Why is it important to preserve your history?” The video uses LACC videos, newspapers, and children’s books of the story of Cesar Chavez to exemplify how well-known stories are included in academic libraries. It shows the ways that archivists take care of materials, and how patrons use this material in the library. The purpose of the video is to invite community-based organizations to work with academic libraries to preserve their own history. UM will premiere this video at FWF’s End of Year Dinner in Homestead. The UM team will have a table at the entrance of the event to promote the project by offering informational bookmarks and flyers. Their team will also have a separate audiovisual space to record brief interviews, recording FWF members’ history with the organization and with farm work in Florida. Community events, then, not only serve to build trust, but also to recover hidden histories.

### Lend Me a Hand

In our first meeting with Robin Lewy, RWHP Director, she explained that to work with the organizations, you *have* to *lend a hand* to the communities. On November 5, 2022 in Ocala, Florida, we volunteered at a Covid-19 vaccination event assisting farmworkers to fill in their forms. It was our first contact with the community. After the event, we joined the RWHP organizers eating tacos from a food truck. Food again cemented the beginning of a partnership.

Since then, we have volunteered in more than twenty events, lending a hand in vaccination and public health campaigns, community events, health fairs, mental health

education, heat awareness workshops, and distribution of COVID-19 relief food and funds. According to team member Beatriz Domínguez, an intern in the project, the most difficult experiences were at the power of attorney events. After the Florida government passed a bill to restrict public services to migrants and to criminalize people who assist them, community-based organizations held workshops to help the community fill out power of attorney authorizations that would enable other people to take care of their children in case the parents were deported. Volunteering with the communities allowed us to discard colonialist practices, in which the “colonialist savior” continues to ignore hidden voices.

### Cuéntame Tu Historia

To this day we have completed fourteen of the twenty oral history interviews proposed: eight with FWF, four with RWHP. We are also expanding our work to other organizations such as the Human Rights Coalition of Alachua County (HRCAC) in north Florida and WeCount in southern Florida. HRCAC launched the first community identification program in the state. WeCount is an organization that has been increasingly active in shaping municipal policies on heat stress in the workplace and its impact on outdoor workers. Our collaboration and engagement in multiple events with WeCount, including attendance at local Community Health Board and Board of Commissioners meetings, has allowed us to introduce our project to their team and interview an active WeCount member.

We have begun the process of digitizing archival material, such as files and photos from the FWF Homestead office. We will soon begin working with RWHP to preserve, organize, describe, and provide access to their archives. RWHP fotonovelas are of special interest. For 30 years, fotonovelas, a very popular Latin American genre similar to graphic novels, have been “the RWHP’s most effective tool.”

We have used photography to document FWF and RWHP community events. Based on a previous oral history project, team member Kineret Ben-Knaan proposed that we give photographic portraits as a token of gratitude to our interviewees. Fortunately, one team member, Beatriz Domínguez, is an artistic photographer. She documented the

recording of the oral histories and created the portraits. The 2023 Florida immigration laws raised the ethical dilemma of visually representing migrant communities: does digitizing and sharing photos put members of these communities at risk? Is doing so a self-serving endeavor? For Dominguez's internship report, she chose to represent stories of migrant and at-risk communities using artificial intelligence (AI). Despite the limitations of AI, Dominguez's exploration shows innovative ways of depicting hidden stories.

### Alfredo Bahena: Florida's Cesar Chavez

Unlike communities in the West Coast of the United States, the deeds of activists for farmworker's rights on the peninsula have been obscured by indifference or outright contempt. Part of the healing and understanding necessary to halt the exploitation of this community is to disseminate knowledge about the community itself. To this end, former UF coordinator Daniel Fernández Guevara was inspired by project interviews to pen a short biographical essay on Florida's Cesar Chavez: Alfredo Bahena. Despite his premature death, Bahena's activism helped bring about the 2004 Florida bill named for him, also known as the Farmworker Safety Act.<sup>5</sup> Known as much for his exemplary qualities as a compassionate and collegial leader, Bahena worked to protect the rights of all Florida's residents. Uncovering how critical this Mexican-born figure became in ensuring the safety of Florida residents from a large swath of the peninsula's communities is essential to counteracting the misinformation circulated by U.S. media while simultaneously contributing to the literature on Latinx communities in the United States.

### Lessons Learned

During Year 1 of the project, we learned important lessons. First: to listen and learn from the communities. Our partners have expressed their need and willingness to share and preserve their stories, but they have also made us acknowledge the risks that the Florida 2023 immigration laws have imposed on their constituents.<sup>6</sup> The second lesson: to be flexible. The political and legislative landscape in Florida forced us to change and adapt the project

to mitigate risks to the communities but also to the students and librarians involved in the project. The third lesson: to organize small doable projects. Each team member has had different interests that resulted in multiple small projects, such as volunteering in community events, developing creative videos, producing publications, presenting at conferences, and the examples discussed above: illustrating stories with AI and further investigating a hidden figure in agricultural activism.

Outreach is an integral part of our efforts to make academic research archives inclusive and more representative, especially of essential but hidden communities. In sharing our results, we inspire and learn from others. We have presented our project to local, national, and international venues like the 2023 International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) World Congress. At IFLA we learned of UNAM Library's own interest in stories of Mexican emigrants. We are now discussing a potential collaboration with Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliotecológicas y de la Información (IIBI), UNAM to enrich our understanding of the impact migrants have on their communities of origin. We are thankful for the opportunity to share our project with Voices of Mexico, and we look forward to further collaboration with the UNAM, especially Vargas-Betancourt, a UNAM graduate who has several publications with UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas. **VM**

### Notes

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