

Troy Davis and Ann Marie Stock

Making Cuba connections

A U.S. academic library builds bridges

After a political stand-off lasting more than a half-century, the United States and Cuba have begun to imagine and invent a shared future. With the reopening of the U.S. Embassy in Havana in 2015, individuals in both countries are envisioning opportunities for increased trade, expanded travel, and enhanced collaboration in culture and education. Enthusiasm has been tempered, however, by the fact that policies on both sides have limited the flow of information and exchange of ideas for nearly 60 years. As a result, few U.S. academic libraries hold a breadth of primary research materials related to the culture and history of this island located just 90 miles from Florida. And even where Cuba-related collections do exist, they tend to be exceedingly limited in scope—reflecting only the experiences and ideological biases of the communities in which they are located. Moreover, only a handful of U.S. institutions enjoy longstanding relationships with Cubans. So with U.S. colleges and universities seeking to develop study programs, expand course offerings, and create linkages with Cuba, many academic libraries are scurrying to “catch up.” William & Mary (W&M) Libraries constitutes one notable exception.

W&M Libraries has been actively engaged with Cuba for the past quarter century. Over this time our holdings have expanded to include an array of primary source materials in a variety of formats, we have supported visits by dozens of Cuban artists and intellectuals, and we have cosponsored and hosted in our spaces a range of exhibits, lectures, film

screenings, and receptions. More recently, we have helped design and teach an ongoing course that engages with Cuba’s artists and cultural practitioners, and have supported librarians, faculty, and students traveling to Cuba.

At this critical juncture in U.S.-Cuban relations, and as academic libraries are seeking to become ever more relevant to the learning enterprise, we are enthusiastic about the cadre of new initiatives we are undertaking and envisioning.

This article tracks the evolution of our Cuba engagement. We highlight the way in which a librarian-faculty conversation has been transformed into a partnership—one impacting W&M Libraries’ collections and instruction, enriching the university’s curriculum, and furthering institutional priorities—all the while connecting Cuban artists and their work with others far beyond our campus.

It starts with collaboration

In the early 1990s, W&M Libraries—like many other U.S. academic libraries—had little in the way of Cuban films and related items. When Ann Marie Stock joined the faculty in 1993, designing courses and conducting research related to Latin American cinema with an

Troy Davis is director of Reeder Media Center, William & Mary Libraries, email: troy@wm.edu, Ann Marie Stock is William & Mary Libraries Faculty Scholar and professor of Film and Media/Hispanic Studies at the College of William & Mary, email: amstoc@wm.edu

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emphasis on Cuba, she initially took responsibility for gathering necessary materials.¹ Soon, however, W&M Libraries stepped in, providing collections development assistance and funding. As a result, the library's holdings of cinema books and films grew dramatically. Cuba-related acquisitions then expanded beyond the circulating collection to include posters, rare books, journals, and ephemera for the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC). Primary resources in our libraries have been essential for this faculty member's teaching and scholarship.² Increasingly, they are sought by others from across the institution and beyond. These collections-building interactions paved the way for the next step, a foray into the area of instruction.

In 2009, we (a faculty member, Stock, and Troy Davis—a librarian specializing in media) met to discuss a possible assignment related to the subtitling of Cuban documentaries. A series of productive conversations ensued, resulting in the creation of a new

credit-bearing course analyzing the island's revolutionary culture while advancing students' media production skills and introducing them to modes of digital scholarship.

In our New Media Workshop (NMW) we have sought to engage students with Cuba through W&M Libraries' special and circulating collections, as well as through actual exchanges and conversations with island and diaspora artists. By emphasizing the "workshop" nature of the course, we have been able to re-imagine, together, ways of promoting cultural agency through interdisciplinary research and inventive modes of scholarship. In order to do so, all of us (students as well as librarian and faculty instructors) have had to

move out of our comfort zones and into new creative terrain. Undergraduates are active architects of assignments that have included generating multimedia biographies, translating essays and scripts, filming interviews, producing videos, and subtitling Cuban documentaries.

Since launching NMW, we have made multiple research trips to Cuba, amassing hundreds of hours of video interviews and tens of thousands of photographs. This "raw" material is made available to students in the workshop to "remix" into new media products that advance their expertise in modes of collaborative scholarship and their skills in media production techniques.

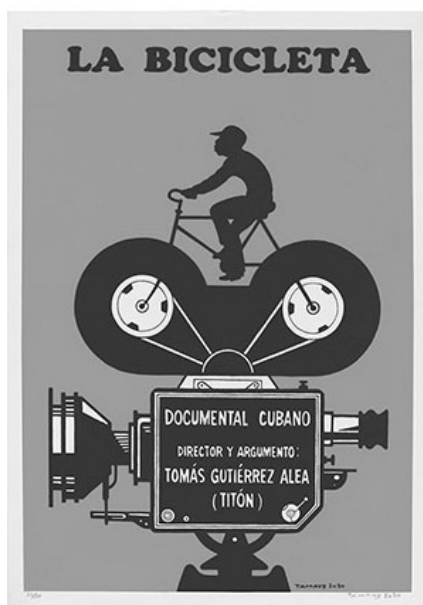
It grows with connection

We have cotaught this hands-on course multiple times over the past several years. Each installment has grown out of and responded to precise circumstances. The most recent iteration, in spring 2016,

was no exception. We re-imagined NMW to engage with this unique moment in the national imaginary and at the institution.³ At the national level, Cuba was in our minds and represented in our mass media. More locally, our university was implementing a new curriculum.

So we aligned the learning objectives of this offering with those of COLL 300 courses that seek to forge connections "with people, places, and ideas that lift" students out of their "familiar surroundings and deepen the way" they see themselves in the world.⁴

What better way to experience the "unfamiliar" than to visit a country that our government had deemed to be "off limits"



Poster for an unmade film by world-acclaimed director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea.

for more than a half century? And so we introduced a week-long trip to Cuba as a key component of this offering.

By activating Stock's contacts on the island, we succeeded in exposing our students to various libraries, artists' workshops, and cultural institutions. A highlight was a visit to the Televisión Serrana, a community media organization in the Sierra Maestra mountains in eastern Cuba,⁵ where we observed first-hand the operations of an audiovisual collective—screening films,

conversing with audiovisual specialists, filming interviews, and touring the work spaces (including a small editing studio and library). This experience was



W&M students in the New Media Workshop in “class” at the Televisión Serrana in San Pablo de Yao, Cuba.

highly significant, for us and for them, as we were the first U.S. university group to be hosted by the organization.

The impact of this immersion component was evident in the superlative quality of the students' collaborative projects: an exhibit of film posters installed in our library gallery, along with a blueprint for an enhanced online version;⁶ a nuanced video capturing the rich learning experience; and multimedia material for inclusion in a textbook for Spanish-language learners; among others. Students expressed in numerous ways on multiple occasions how inspired they were to actually meet the makers of some of the works they were examining, and how impactful it was to experience the cultural context firsthand.

At semester's end, we hosted a showcase to share our collective discoveries. In

this way, the campus and local community were able to engage with cultural heritage materials from a country rarely represented or projected through a very narrow ideological lens.

This fruitful visit to the island, the productive experience of coteaching a course related to Cuba culture, and the successful display and dissemination of our discoveries have inspired an exploration. We are—with our dean of university libraries and numerous col-

leagues—considering new ways W&M Libraries can uniquely inspire student learning and contribute to institutional priorities of global engagement, crosscultural exchange, and open access initiatives.

It thrives with commitment

Our commitment to building on our strong base of Cuba collections and connections motivated a W&M Libraries team to travel to the island in the summer of 2015.⁷ The delegation met with information and archive professionals; observed practices of various libraries related to collection organization, preservation, and digitization; toured book arts workshops; and visited with graphic designers, curators, and others participants in Cuba's renowned film poster culture. Along the way, we enjoyed exchanges with street vendors, conversations with bookstore specialists, and visits to some of Cuba's numerous book fairs.

We seek to continue this productive cultural exchange between W&M Libraries and Cuba. To that end, we are retooling NMW

to function as an inclusive “incubator” for addressing and advancing W&M Libraries priorities through an active and ongoing connection with Cuba. We envision that students and librarians would engage with Cuban media artists, information professionals, and cultural institutions on issues of digitization and access infrastructure, preservation practices, and publishing to gain a greater awareness of Cuba’s information ecosystem. The focus would be on ways to continue to build our understanding of Cuban knowledge practices, advance student competencies in digital scholarship and media production, nurture and expand our partnerships, and ultimately help foster a more nuanced understanding of Cuba’s culture.

We plan to share our extensive materials and expertise as

widely as possible. To that end, W&M Libraries has created a new position and invited Stock to serve as the inaugural W&M Libraries faculty scholar. Building on the model of embedded librarianship, this embedded faculty member will collaborate with W&M Libraries and others to create an open access repository of Cuban film and media culture. Envisioned as one of our institution’s signature digital humanities projects, this initiative will render the materials—and the undergraduates’ scholarship—accessible to a much broader audience.

We aspire to continue and indeed step up the ways in which W&M Libraries serves as a “hub” between the United States and Cuba. Conversations continue with our Cuban counterparts regarding possibilities for librarians and archivists in both countries to work with us in developing best practices for media preservation and digital archiving

and greater information exchange. We are actively exploring new alliances in the United States with academic and public libraries, with nongovernmental organizations, and with embassies and other government agencies. Our aim is to foster learning on both sides, whether through librarian exchanges, media literacy initiatives, or the preservation of materials related to Cuba’s rapidly changing audiovisual culture.

Aware of the costs of this ambitious endeavor, we are in the process of seeking

funds from government agencies and foundations, as well as through consortia partners and individuals.

In reflecting on our multifaceted partnerships with Cuba, we wish to highlight the fact that these exciting and impactful initiatives

began from a relatively simple place of risk, a richly textured and sustained experiment of librarian-faculty collaboration. We acknowledge the significance of an organizational culture (like ours) that values experimentation and risk-taking. And we underscore our conviction that relationships between the United States and Cuba, in moving forward, be characterized by solidarity and reciprocity rather than by colonizing attitudes and practices.

An exciting future beckons between Cuba and the United States. Our experience has convinced us that academic libraries are positioned to play a key role in imagining this future—promoting dialogue, permitting exchange, and fostering mutual respect and understanding through mutually beneficial partnerships.

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Filmmaker and poet Oneida González visits W&M Libraries for an interview.

circulates, and we are skilled in explaining to users how complicated systems and structures work. Many of us are doing important work to reform our individual publishing practices, and our field has made great strides in open-

ing up many of our journals. Editorial boards outside our field are promising places for us to leverage our experience and expertise. Another world is possible, and we might be the only ones in the room who know it. *ZZ*

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Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. The W&M–Cuba Connection, <http://globalvoices.wm.edu/2015/12/23/the-wm-cuba-connection-i/>.

2. Ann Marie Stock is a specialist on Cuban film and media culture and has developed relationships with scholars, artists, and organizations on the island. She is the author of *On Location in Cuba: Street Filmmaking during Times of Transition* (UNC Press, 2009), editor of *World Film Locations: Havana* (Intellect, 2015), and founding director of the nonprofit

Cuban Cinema Classics, making available subtitled Cuban documentaries on DVD for libraries and cultural organizations. To learn more about the initiative, visit www.cubancinemaclassics.org.

3. The College of William & Mary, The College Curriculum, www.wm.edu/as/undergraduate/curriculum/coll/index.php,

4. The College of William and Mary, COLL 300, www.wm.edu/as/undergraduate/curriculum/coll/300/index.php.

5. Estudiantes de Estados Unidos visitan Televisión Serrana, www.tvserrana.icrt.cu/index.php/noticias/177-estudiantes-de-estados-unidos-visitantelevision-serrana.

6. Unmade in Cuba, <https://libraries.wm.edu/exhibits/unmade-cuba>.

7. W&M Libraries visits Cuba, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjfjYcJPI1w>. *ZZ*

(“Cuba on our minds,” continues from page 487)

the Venceremos Brigades were composed of North American college students who thought the United States’ approach to relations with Cuba was misguided. They sought to create “people to people” connections and effect change in government diplomacy. The Sandy Lillydahl Venceremos Brigade Photograph Collection at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, provides an unusually candid look at what the members of these brigades did and had access to while in Cuba. The photographs document the sugar cane cutting season, a major driver of the Cuban economy. *Access:* <http://scua.library.umass.edu/ead/muph056.html>.

• **Granma, Official Newspaper.** This is the website of the official newspaper of the

Cuban government. In addition to current Cuban news and events, the website features stories and press releases related to topics of particular importance. *Access:* <http://www.granma.cu>.

• **14 y Medio.** This is an alternative, independent, digital newspaper founded on the island by Yoani Sanchez, a well-known Cuban dissident. The newspaper covers international issues, as well as reporting on everyday life in Cuba. One of the sections, for example, provides the price of produce on a supermarket in Havana. The newspaper is also available in English and in a print edition featuring the previous week’s reporting. *Access:* <http://www.14ymedio.com>. *ZZ*