



Seonaid Valiant, “Accessing the Archive: A Case Study on the *Popul Vuh*,” *New Area Studies* 5:2 (2026).

Accessing the Archive:

A Case Study on the *Popul Vuh*

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Abstract

This article will discuss the efforts of the Newberry Library to preserve and provide access to the manuscript of Mayan cosmology known as the *Popul Vuh*.

Here we will write. Here we will plant the ancient word of the beginning, the origin of all that was done in the citadel of K'iche', among the people of the K'iche' nation.

—*Popul Vuh*¹

Introduction

In the past thirty years, Special Collections departments in university and research libraries across the United States have undergone a transformation in which they have become more transparent about their holdings, acquisitions, and methodologies.² Many are now open to researchers, students, and the public and have

¹ Michael Bazzett, trans., *The Popul Vuh* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Press, 2018), 3.

² Thanks to Jennifer Wolfe, Jennifer Dalzin, Allison De Archangelis, Jo Ellen Dickie, Analú López, and Suzanne Karr Schmidt for assistance with images from the Newberry Library Archive. Sections of



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made strides toward cataloguing their backlogs of acquired Rare Books and Manuscripts, known as hidden collections.³ Many important records of diversity across the Americas are found in this backlog. Additionally, many archives have engaged in more active outreach to welcome patrons into the collections and have actively been working with marginalized and minoritized communities to add a greater variety of material to the archival records.⁴ A key aspect of contemporary archival work is digitizing documents or, at the most basic level, scanning and making them available to researchers free of cost.⁵ This approach is part of an assessment of the value of regional and area studies and makes available research materials that were not available to earlier generations of scholars. These activities desegregate area studies and incorporate them into the mission of archives.

The handwritten manuscript of the *Popul Vuh*, created in Guatemala around 1700, records the history and mythology of the K’iche’ Mayan people (Figure 1). Today, the *Popul Vuh* is housed at the Newberry Library in Chicago, part of a collection donated by the American industrialist Edward E. Ayer. For several years, I served as the Edward E. Ayer Librarian, tasked with its care and preservation, and in 2017, I was invited to Antigua, Guatemala, to discuss how the *Popul Vuh* traveled from

this research were presented at the following meetings: Rare Book and Manuscript Section of the ALA, Iowa City, 22 June 2017; Patrimonios culturales e identidades, concientización, lucha en contra del tráfico ilícito de obras de arte, Antigua, Guatemala, 29 September 2017. Patrimoines: un fait anthropologique et politique, un défi majeur pour aujourd’ hui en Amérique latine et dans le monde, Paris, France, 13-14 December 2018.

³ Allison Day, ‘Hidden collections—are there “hidden collections” in special collection libraries?’, *Against the Grain* 25, no. 6 (2013): article 40.

⁴ Adria Carpenter, ‘Recording the overlooked history of marginalized peoples’, 26 October 2023. <https://libnews.umn.edu/2023/10/recording-the-overlooked-history-of-marginalized-peoples/>. Last accessed 18 February 2025.

⁵ The Rijksmuseum was the first museum to allow patrons to download images free of cost and copyright (<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/research/image-requests#:~:text=Order%20beautiful%20images%20of%20masterpieces,averaging%204500%20x%204500%20pixels>). Last accessed 18 February 2025.



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Guatemala to Chicago and what has happened to it since it arrived in 1884.⁶ This invitation prompted me to investigate the ways in which the opening of archives has furthered our edification as area specialists. This essay will use the *Popul Vuh* as a case study to examine the ways in which the Newberry Library preserves and provides better access to the manuscript through conservation efforts, digitization, and teaching. Furthermore, I will discuss the ways in which this access has enabled other area studies and digital humanities projects that contextualize and popularize the document. These practices demonstrate the necessity of keeping such an important manuscript, which is a living document that is relevant to Indigenous nations and individual people, safe and accessible. These practices bring a new value to archival outreach by recognizing the importance of documents such as this to international and cultural groups.

Newberry Library

The Newberry Library opened in 1887. Originally slated to be a public library, it became a library of Special Collections once book collectors, such as the industrialist Edward E. Ayer and the journalist John M. Wing, donated their individual collections. Between 1900 and 1910, Ayer donated approximately 50,000 items concerning the history of Indigenous peoples across the Americas. This donation included the *Popul Vuh*. The Newberry Library is dedicated to making all of its materials as accessible as possible while at the same time ensuring their protection and preservation.

⁶ I presented on the provenance of the *Popul Vuh* at the conference Patrimonios culturales e identidades, concientización, lucha en contra del tráfico ilícito de obras de arte in Guatemala in 2017. I am grateful for all of the opportunities I had to share the *Popul Vuh* with students, scholars, and Guatemalan people. Seonaid Valiant, 'El *Popul Vuh* en la Edward E. Ayer Colección de manuscritos hispánicos de América' (presentation, Patrimonios culturales e identidades, concientización, lucha en contra del tráfico ilícito de obras de arte, Antigua, Guatemala, 29 September 2017).

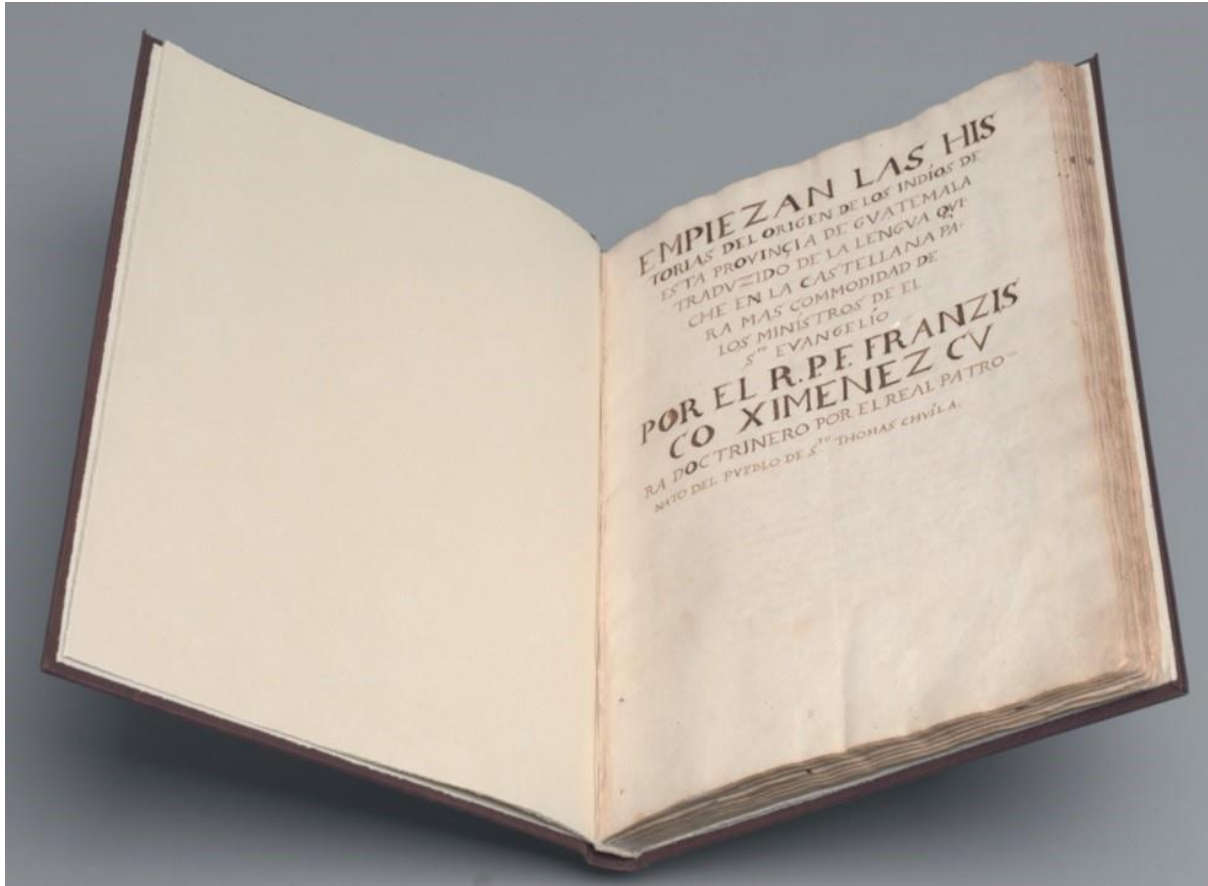


Figure 1: The manuscript *Arte de las tres lenguas, Kaqchikel, K'iche' y Tzutujil* (1703), records the cosmology of the people of the Mayan highland in Guatemala and is known as the *Popul Vuh*. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library.

The Newberry Library's treatment of the *Popul Vuh* provides a prime example of the value of an archive providing access to a document, not only in its physical form, but also digitally.⁷ Jennifer Wolfe, the Digital Scholarship and Outreach Librarian for the Newberry Library, states that:

The purpose of digitizing archival material is to democratize access to the world-class collection at the Newberry. Traveling to an archive requires the funding to travel, and not everyone has those resources. Open-access digital archives, such as the Ayer Digital Collection, allow access to anyone,

⁷ Francisco Ximénez, manuscript, 'Arte de las tres lenguas, Kaqchikel, Kiche y Tzutujil', 1703. Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.



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permitting them to see the materials for themselves to read, interpret, and repurpose. Our library is trying to reach the widest audience possible.⁸

In the 21st century, multiple projects from institutions such as the Library of Congress and the University of Chicago have been digitizing Indigenous language materials from Mexico and Peru, emphasizing the need for archives that hold Indigenous-language materials to be transparent, and partnering with libraries in Latin America to provide access to materials held in the United States by prioritizing digital access.⁹

The Newberry Library is the caretaker for more than 4000 manuscripts related to the history of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and Latin American history. Many of the documents in the collection were created by Indigenous people, while others were written in cooperation with Spanish priests. One of the most requested items at the Newberry Library is the manuscript officially catalogued as *Arte de las tres lenguas, Kaqchikel, Kiche y Tzutujil*, and known colloquially as the *Popul Vuh*, which loosely translates as the *Book of the People*.¹⁰ This document is shared with visitors, many of whom are from Guatemala, nearly every week.

⁸ Jennifer Wolfe, Scholarly Digital and Outreach Librarian for the Newberry Library, in-person interview, 29 May 2024.

⁹ American Library Association presentations by Giselle M. Avilés, Library of Congress, ‘Interconnecting Worlds: Weaving Community Narratives, Andean Histories & the Library’s Collections’, Heather Sloan, Library at Indiana University Bloomington, ‘The Midwest Indigenous Cartography Project’, Jennifer Wolfe, Newberry Library, ‘Digital Collections, Crowdsourcing, and Curriculum: Strategies for Outreach With Ayer Indigenous Materials’, and David Woken, University of Chicago ‘The Mesoamerican Languages Portal at the University of Chicago: Indigenous Knowledge and Academic Data in a Digital Language Archive’. American Library Association Americas subcommittee panel ‘Sharing Knowledge: Projects and outreach for Indigenous Patrons, Languages, and Documents’, Chicago, IL, 25 June 2023; Seonaid Valiant, Alex Mada, Heather Sloan, Giselle M. Aviles, and Michelle Guittar, ‘Sharing Knowledge: Projects and Outreach for Indigenous Patrons, Languages, and Documents’, *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, Volume 24, no. 4. (2024): 725-736.

¹⁰ Francisco Ximénez, Manuscript, ‘Arte de las tres lenguas, Kaqchikel, Kiche y Tzutujil’, 1703. Newberry Library, Chicago, IL. Digital copy: Newberry Library, <https://www.newberry.org/collection/research-guide/popul-vuh>; Ohio State University Libraries, <https://library.osu.edu/projects/populwuj/>. Last accessed 18 February 2025.



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Popul Vuh

Few Mayan documents or books survived the encounter with the Spanish colonial priests. Most notoriously, in the mid-16th century, the Franciscan Father Diego de Landa befriended Mayan elders and nobles, gained their trust, and acquired access to their books, which he then burned; only a handful of codices are known to have escaped destruction.¹¹ Consequently, much of our knowledge of Mayan history and cosmology relies on documents created during the colonial period. The most significant of these is the *Popul Vuh*, handwritten by Father Francisco Ximénez between 1700 and 1703, while the Dominican friar was the parish priest of the pueblo of Santo Tomás Chichicastenango. The *Popul Vuh* records the cosmological beliefs of the Mayan people in the Guatemalan highlands and is considered one of the most important texts to emerge out of the encounter between the Mayan people and the Spanish priests. It is from this text that the Mayan creation myth and the story of the competitive Hero Twins, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, are known.

The physical copy of the *Popul Vuh* at the Newberry Library is the oldest known handwritten copy of the document. This copy is composed of two volumes of bound manuscripts, each about 12 inches by 8 inches by 1 inch. Written bilingually in Castilian Spanish and K'iche' Mayan, the document contains a grammar for the Cakchikel-Quiché-Tzutuhil languages, a letter relating to Indigenous questions on the doctrine, a catechism, prayers, the Ten Commandments, discussions of the meanings of sacraments and sins, the Beatitudes, and matters relating to the procedures for the sacraments of baptism and marriage.¹² The opening line of the Spanish text is '*Empiezan las historias del origen de los indios de esta provincia of Guatemala.*' ('Here begins the history of the origin of the Indians of this province of Guatemala.') Michael Bazzett poetically translated the opening lines of the K'iche' as, 'The root of the

¹¹ Diego De Landa, *Yucatán Before and After the Conquest*, trans. William Gates (New York: Dover Publications, 1978).

¹² Newberry Library, catalog record for *Arte de las tres lenguas, Kaqchikel, Kiche y Tzutujil*. https://i-sharenby.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma991370838805867&context=L&vid=01CARLI_NBY:CARLI_NBY&lang=en&search_scope=MyInstitution&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=LibraryCatalog&query=any,contains,tres%20lenguas&offset=0

ancient word starts here, the root of this place called K'iche', thus enforcing a more local understanding of whose history is being recorded.¹³

Travels of the *Popul Vuh*

In the late 17th century, after nearly ten years in Guatemala, the Spanish born Ximénez bemoaned the Dominican Catholic missions' lack of success in converting in the local people in the highlands of Guatemala to Catholicism. By 1700, the highland mountain people of Guatemala were not fully converted to Catholicism and had not forgotten their cultural traditions or religion, despite a certain amount of syncretism between Mayan and Catholic beliefs.

In an early ethnographical attempt, Ximénez approached conversion with the perspective that the best way to convert people was to understand their pre-existing belief system. To that end, Ximénez gathered historical pictorial documents and transcribed them.¹⁴ Around 1700, he also gathered community members and documented their belief system, collecting and then translating and transcribing this information into two languages. On Italian paper, Ximénez crafted two columns side by side, one in K'iche' and one in Castilian. In the *Popul Vuh*, Ximénez describes grammars, three Mayan lineages, and the cosmology of the Mayan people.¹⁵

Ximénez's manuscript of the *Popul Vuh* remained in the church archive in Guatemala until the middle of the 19th century, at which point it traveled first to France and then to Chicago, where it remains today. In 1855, the *Popul Vuh* was removed from Guatemala by the French Abbot Charles Étienne Brassier de Bourbourg (1814-1874), an avid collector of church documents (Figure 2). A missionary, historian, and early ethnographer, Brassier de Bourbourg traveled throughout Mexico and Central America for more than twenty years collecting manuscripts and artefacts. Having become fascinated with pre-Columbian civilizations, he at first traded books that he had brought from France for antiquities and documents; when he ran out of those materials and needed funds with which to purchase more manuscripts, Brassier de

¹³ Bazzett, 3.

¹⁴ These documents are now lost.

¹⁵ Newberry Library, <https://www.newberry.org/collection/research-guide/popul-vuh>.

Bourbourg returned to the profession he had practiced before joining the priesthood—writing novels.¹⁶ In Guatemala, Brassier de Bourbourg attempted to use a primitive ethnographical approach, documenting the verbal portions of a ‘*bayles*’ dance performance in 1854, and like Ximénez, he also gathered early modern documents and copied them by hand.¹⁷



Figure 2: Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg arranged to take the *Popul Vuh* from Guatemala to France to create a facsimile. Photographer unknown. Photograph courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹⁶ Jean-Marie Lebon, *Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, premier grand mayaniste* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), 64-65.

¹⁷ Katia Sainson, ‘Introduction,’ *The Manuscript Hunter: Brasseur de Bourbourg’s Travels Through Central America and Mexico, 1854-1859*, ed. and trans. Katia Sainson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 11-17.

On seeing the *Popul Vuh*, Brassier de Bourbourg requested that the church allow him to take the document to Paris for study and publication. In 1861, he published a French translation of the text, accompanied by a K'iche' grammar and his observations on Mayan religion and cosmology. Shortly before his death, rather than return the *Popul Vuh* to Guatemala, Brassier de Bourbourg sold it to the French linguist Alphonse Louise Pinart (1852-1911), who was renowned for the Aleutian masks he had collected in Alaska (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Alphonse Louis Pinart, linguist, acquired the *Popul Vuh* after the death of Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg and sold it to Edward E. Ayer in 1884 due to financial pressure. Photographer, José Benito Recuero, 1884. Photograph courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Pinart had met Brassier de Bourbourg when he was only fifteen years old and credited this meeting with changing the direction of his life.¹⁸ At nineteen years old, Pinart abandoned his family's expectation that he would join them in the family firm and,

¹⁸ Ross Parmenter, 'Zelia Nuttall and the Recovery of the Mexico's Past', vol. 1-3, in the Ross Parmenter Papers, unpublished MSS, Tulane Latin American Library, undated. 76-77.

inspired by a fascination with Indigenous cultures, travelled to Alaska, where he collected masks and other objects that remain in the Musée Quai Branly in Paris.¹⁹

Pinart also became a passionate book collector, and the *Popul Vuh* found a home in his library in Paris. Pinart, newly married in 1880, showed off this library to his bride Zelia Nuttall (1857-1933) on their honeymoon.²⁰ Pinart continued to collect manuscripts voraciously, and by 1882, he had spent nearly all of his inheritance, and a large portion of Nuttall's as well, on books and manuscripts about the history of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. It is probable that Nuttall did not learn that Pinart had spent most of his inheritance until after they were married.²¹ Shocked at his profligacy, Nuttall filed for divorce in 1882, after only two years of marriage. At that point, finding himself destitute, Pinart was forced to auction off much of his beloved collection. Pinart spent more than a year crafting the catalogue, which featured many books from Brassier de Bourbourg's library, including the *Popul Vuh*, and the auction was held in 1884. Although Pinart was not present at the auction, the American timber magnate Edward E. Ayer (1841-1927) was in attendance, and he retained his copy of the auction catalogue, in which the title was marked with a star (Figure 4).²² Ayer purchased the *Popul Vuh* at the auction, and the document went to Chicago to join Ayer's growing library.

¹⁹ Ross Parmenter, *Explorer, Linguist and Ethnologist: A Descriptive Bibliography of the Published Works of Alphonse Louis Pinart with Notes on his life* (Los Angeles, CA: Southwest Museum, 1966), 4-7; Seonaid Valiant, 'Zelia Nuttall: The Complicated Legacy of a fin de siècle Indigenous Artifacts Collector', in *The Histories of Archaeology as they Happened and as they are Written: Questioning Centers and Margins of Archaeological Actors, Collectives, Research Trends and Topics*, eds. Sébastien Plutniak and Alessandro Guidi (Oxford: ArcheoPress, forthcoming 2026), figure 3.

²⁰ Parmenter, 'Zelia', 91. Zelia Nuttall would emerge as a leading scholar of Mexican pictorial manuscripts.

²¹ Parmenter, 'Zelia', 78.

²² Alphonse Louise Pinart, *Catalogue des livres rares et précieux* (Paris: Vve A. Labit Libraire de la Bibliothèque Nationale, 1883), 159.

Edward E. Ayer

Ayer left his father's home in Harvard, Illinois, at the age of 19, just before the Civil War. He hitchhiked west on a wagon trail until he reached California, where he took on laborious jobs in mining and laundry.²³

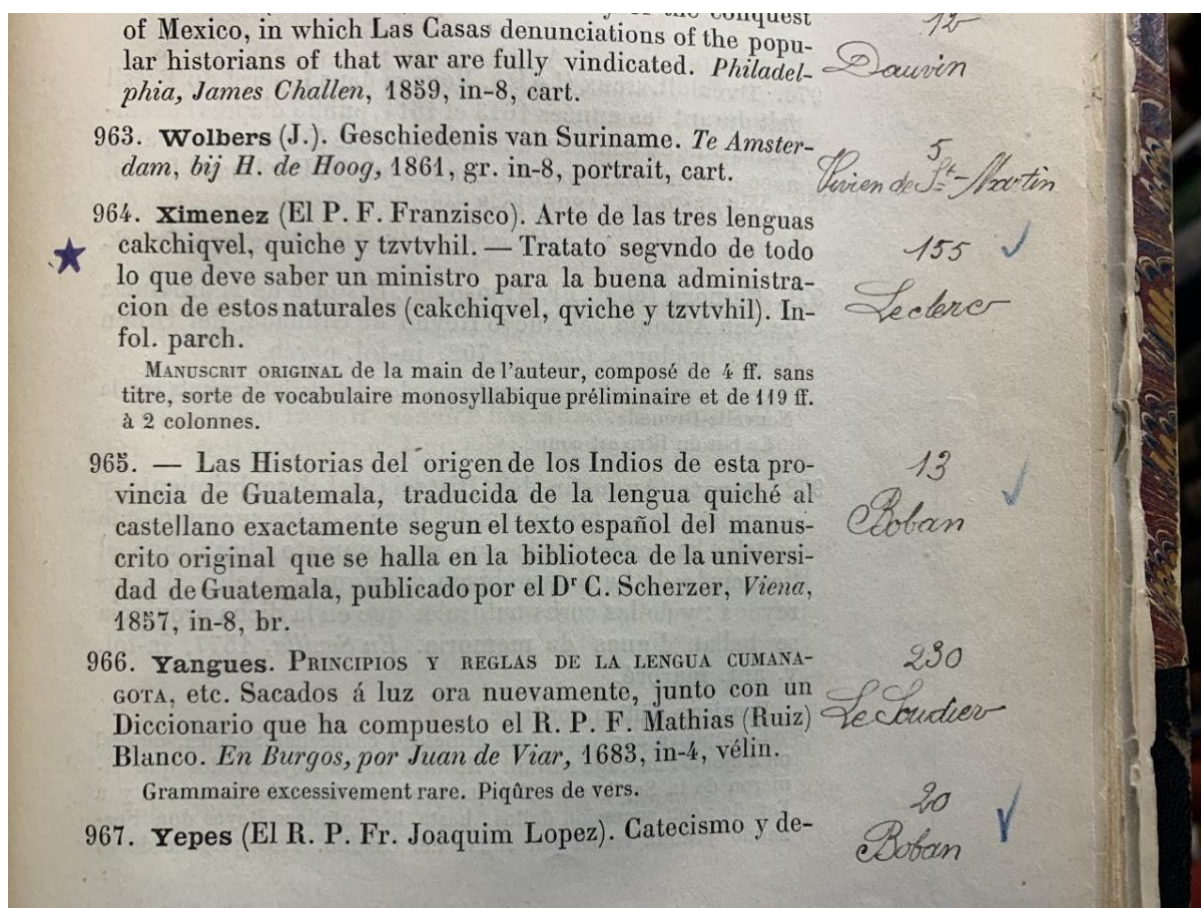


Figure 4: When Alphonse Louise Pinart auctioned off his personal collection of manuscripts, among them was the *Popul Vuh*, which was acquired by Edward E. Ayer. Ayer extensively marked his copy of the auction catalogue, shown here. *Catalogue des livres rares et précieux*. (Paris: Vve A. Labit Libraire de la Bibliothèque Nationale, 1883), 159. Photograph by Suzanne Karr Schmidt, courtesy of the Newberry Library.

Ayer joined the Union army on the western front and was stationed in Arizona. There, Ayer encountered Indigenous people who peaked his interest in their history. Additionally, he had access to a small library for the first time. Ayer had been sent to guard the Cerro Colorado mine, which was owned by Samuel Colt, the inventor of the

²³ Newberry Library Archives, Modern Manuscripts and Archives. 02/15/02. Frank C. Lockwood, *The Life of Edward E. Ayer* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Company, 1929), 22-35.

Colt revolver. Colt had sent the books to the mine for the benefit of the employees there. Among those titles, Ayer discovered William Hickling Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*, first published in 1843.²⁴ Ayer's first biographer, Frank C. Lockwood, declared that finding this book gave 'colour and direction to his whole life.'²⁵ Prescott's narrative, a sweeping romantic epic about the Spanish arrival in the Valley of Mexico in 1519, grabbed hold of Ayer's imagination.

Ayer was so deeply engrossed in Prescott's writing that he bought his own copy at the first opportunity. Ayer described this experience on the flyleaf of the first volume (Figure 5). He regaled his readers with the tale of finding the books in Chicago at the Cobb and Pritchard Book Store in 1864. He was astounded that the three-volume set was expensively priced at \$17.50 but followed the advice of the bookstore keeper and purchased all three volumes on credit.

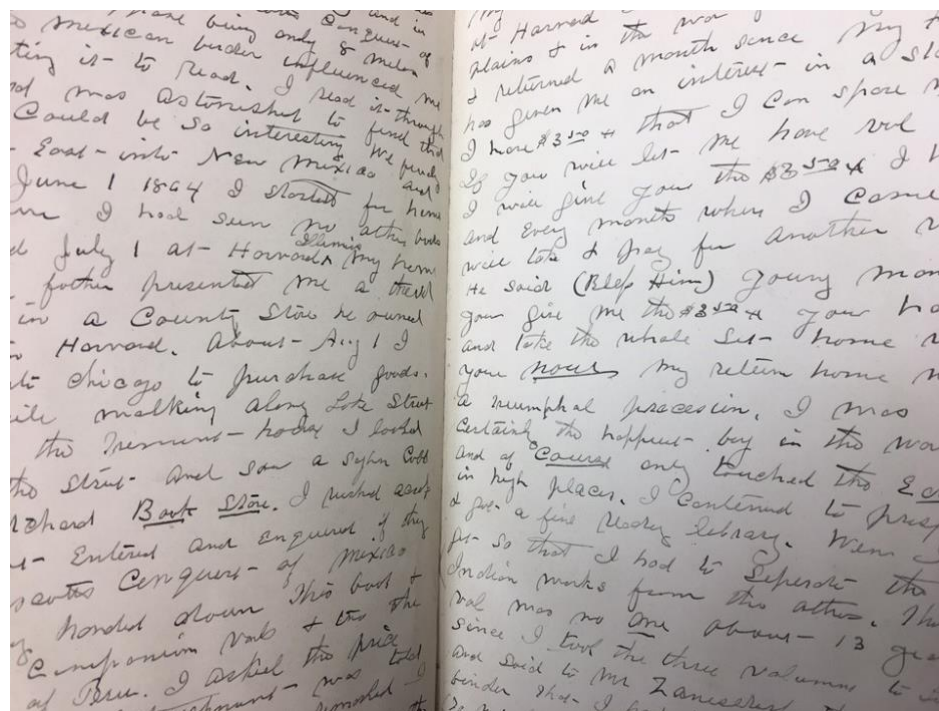


Figure 5: Flyleaf of Ayer's own copy of *The Conquest of Mexico* by William Hickling Prescott, with his personal note about its acquisition. Photograph by author.

²⁴ William Hickling Prescott, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Bantam, 1843; reprint 1964).

²⁵ Lockwood, *Life*, 47.

Ayer also details that in 1887, after he had become wealthy, he traveled with the books to London and delivered his copies to the binder Joseph Zaehnsdorf to be rebound in leather for \$180.00. Prescott's book ignited Ayer's interest in primary sources from Mexico, particularly items that were in Spanish, handwritten, and associated with the Catholic church. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his time in the military and his interest in Prescott's book, Ayer became especially interested in acquiring documents that reflected contact and conflict between Europeans and Indigenous people.²⁶

Ayer earned his wealth through lumber sales in the 1870s and 1880s. At that point, inspired by Prescott's book, he began collecting materials on Indigenous peoples from the Arctic to the tip of South America, later expanding his interests to include Polynesia, the Philippines, and other islands throughout the Pacific. Ayer's nephew, the painter Elbridge Burbank, painted his portrait in 1894 and depicted Ayer immersed in his collection of books and American Indian crafts and artefacts (Figure 6).²⁷



Figure 6: Edward E. Ayer in 1910, surrounded by his collections of Indigenous crafts and his library of materials about the history of Indigenous people. Painted by his nephew Elbridge Ayer Burbank. Courtesy of the Newberry Library.

²⁶ Edward E. Ayer, 'How I bought my first book,' *The Newberry Library Bulletin*, December 1950.

²⁷ Ayer sent Elbridge Burbank on extended trips to reservations in order to paint over 4000 portraits of Americans Indians.



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Ayer became a member of the Board of Trustees at the Newberry Library, and he was also one of the founders of the Field Museum. Many of the Native American arts and artefacts that were on display at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago were loaned by Ayer from his own collection.²⁸ Ayer could be cantankerous and threatened to resign from both the Field and the Newberry whenever he wanted to press a point, but he never left either institution, supporting them both financially and, beginning in 1900, through the donations of books, manuscripts, and artefacts.²⁹

Eventually, Ayer would amass a collection of 80,000 books and manuscripts on the history of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Ayer spent a great deal of time using his library for research but was hampered by the fact that he did not have a catalogue of the items that he owned, a problem which threatened to become overwhelming as his collection continued to grow. In an attempt to address this issue, Ayer hired a librarian specifically to manage and catalogue the collection. The first librarian that Ayer attached to the collection was his own niece, Clara A. Smith, who would remain Ayer's librarian for the next fifty years. She became the nexus of his collecting, as she became the contact point for book sellers and researchers, and also managed individuals who were sent out by Ayer to create transcripts of documents held in Spanish archives. Smith received hundreds of requests from researchers interested in accessing the collection, and this growing demand eventually encouraged Ayer to place his materials in the Newberry Library, where they would be more easily accessible to the public.³⁰ This was the first of the specialized collections to be donated to the Newberry Library.

In part, Ayer had been inspired to donate materials to the Newberry Library in hopes that someone would make a list of his books. His collection proved so vast, however, that such a list was not completed until long after his death, when the bibliographer

²⁸ Frederick E. Hoxie, 'Businessman, Bibliophile, and Patron: Edward E. Ayer and His Collection of American Indian Art', *Great Plains Quarterly* 9 (Spring 1989):78-88.

²⁹ Edward E. Ayer Collection, Correspondence, Edward E. Ayer Collection. Newberry Library, 1880-1930.

³⁰ Clara Smith, Correspondence with Edward E. Ayer, Edward E. Ayer Collection. Newberry Library, 1880-1930.

Ruth Lapham Butler finally published a checklist of the collection in 1936.³¹ Ultimately, Ayer donated over one million artefacts to the Field Museum and about 50,000 books and manuscripts to the Newberry Library. The 30,000 books and manuscripts that remained in Ayer's own private library were either auctioned or lost after his death in 1927.³²

There are at least 4000 manuscripts from New Spain in the Edward E. Ayer Collection, including the *Popul Vuh*. Other important pieces include six documents by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, such as the *Lectionary in Nahuatl with Latin Headings*. The Newberry Library is dedicated to placing as many of their items online as possible. The lectionary is just one of the items that they have made available through the Digital Public Library of America. To date, they have made over 1200 documents accessible, including the *Popul Vuh*, which they digitized and made available online in 2010.³³

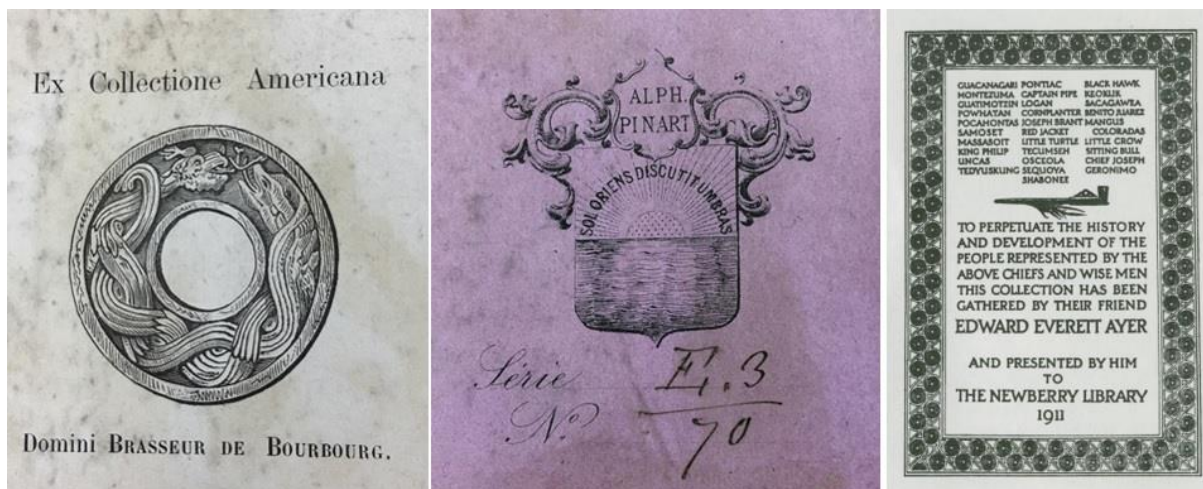


Figure 7: These bookplates provide the history of those who held the *Popul Vuh* in their personal libraries. The bookplates were removed during the conservation process.

³¹ Ruth Lapham Butler, *A Check List of Manuscripts in the Edward E. Ayer Collection* (Chicago: Newberry Library), 1937.

³² Edward E. Ayer Collection, Correspondence, Edward E. Ayer Collection. Newberry Library, 1880-1930.

³³ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Lectionary in Nahuatl with Latin Headings*: Incipiunt Eple et Evagelia, que in diebus dominicis p anni totius circulum legutr traducta in lingua Mexicana.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668109/>.

Conservation

In 2010, facing a growing demand for access to the *Popul Vuh*, the curators at the Newberry Library decided to have the manuscript digitized. To digitize the *Popul Vuh*, the conservators had to remove the old leather binding and then rebind the manuscript.³⁴

The leather binding retained the original book plates from Brasseur de Bourbourg and Pinart, and Ayer's bookplate had also been added (Figure 7), detailing the manuscript's provenance. Over time, this binding had become too tight, and there were eight places in the book at which the binding was too stiff to open the book and read it. The binding was also too tight for the book to be opened fully for the digitizing project. Wary that the manuscripts were being damaged by the binding, the Newberry Library curators and conservators decided to remove the 20th-century cover to scan the document.



³⁴ The conservation project for the *Popul Vuh* followed the ideals set forth by the Society of American Archivists: <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

Figure 8: Gisselle Simón removes the adhesive used in the previous binding of the *Popul Vuh*, 2012. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library.

The head conservator on the project, Gisselle Simón, spent thirty hours removing the glue and dismantling the old binding (Figure 8). She noted that the cream-colored paper was from Italy and that the brown ink was unlikely to be made from iron gall as it had not destroyed the paper, although the ink is slowly fading.³⁵

The curators made the decision to separate the documents into two volumes. The narrative, titled ‘Arte de las tres lenguas kakchiquel, quiché y tzutuhil,’ was bound as the first volume, and the grammars were bound as the second volume. The first volume of the *Popul Vuh* was then sewn back together by Símon with linen thread inside a concertina of Kozo paper, which is made of vegetable fibres. Símon then replaced the decorative end band with a functional one (Figure 9).

The new cover was made of flax paper that was dyed with walnut to approximate amate. Símon’s fittings of kozo paper wrap around the signatures of the manuscript to provide a flexible way to hold the pages should the document ever swell.



Figure 9: Giselle Símon fitted a new end band and the kozo paper around the signatures of the *Popul Vuh*. Photograph by the author.

³⁵ I am grateful for Giselle Simon’s willingness to walk me through her work process for her conservation work on the *Popul Vuh*. Information obtained from an in-person interview with Gisselle Simón and her unpublished work product notes.



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Sharing the *Popul Vuh*

Across the United States, archives are aiming to provide access to materials both physically and digitally. In addition, there is a push to balance the voices in the archives, increasing the accessibility of documents other than those of the dominant culture.³⁶

The goal of the Newberry Library is to make all of their collections accessible to patrons in multiple ways, and this is particularly evident with respect to the *Popul Vuh*. The Newberry Library is open to members of the public over the age of 14, a policy that sets it apart from most private libraries, which typically require letters of recommendation and fees. Patrons are able to drop into the Newberry Library without an appointment, although viewing certain fragile documents, including the *Popul Vuh*, does require an appointment. Everyone who uses the library registers with the library and can then make an electronic request to see any item in the catalogue. This helps to the staff to estimate the demand for the item and ensure that fragile items are protected from too much handling or exposure to light.

The majority of those who access the document are scholars, students, and visitors from Guatemala. In the time that I worked at the Newberry Library, I frequently shared the *Popul Vuh* with groups of professors and graduate students, among others. Typically, I shared the manuscript with individuals and groups about twice a week in my role as the Ayer librarian.

Giselle Símon, the conservator, also made a digital facsimile of the document, and this is available online.³⁷ Originally hosted by Ohio State University, it is now accessible on the Newberry Library’s own website, where all of the pages can be examined in high resolution.

³⁶ Michael Moss and David Thomas, eds., *Archival Silences: Missing, Lost, and Uncreated Archives* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021); Katja Müller, *Digital Archives and Collections: Creating Online Access to Cultural Heritage* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021).

³⁷ Newberry Digital Collections, <https://collections.newberry.org/asset-management/2KXJ8ZSQGH5XT?FR=1&W=1280&H=559>

The Newberry has also created a small number of paper facsimiles that they keep in the reference area so that library visitors can handle them if they do not have an appointment to see the original. Other paper facsimiles were given to the Guatemalan consulate in Chicago and to Mayan communities in Guatemala. Officials from the consulate have come to see the book and the way that it is housed on several occasions.

It is important to stress that the *Popul Vuh* remains a living document. In September 2011, the Guatemalan Consul and a group of civic and religious leaders from Chichicastenango came to the Newberry and performed a blessing ceremony for the *Popul Vuh* and the staff who care for it (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Giselle Símón, Former Director of Conservation Services at the Newberry Library receives a blessing for her work conserving the *Popol Vuh*. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library.

This was their way of showing respect for the book but also for the work that goes into conserving it, housing it, and making it available to the public for as long as possible. The blessing ceremony was meant to honour the book, those who helped to write it, those who have read it, and those who care for it. The entourage from Guatemala returned in the fall of 2015 and blessed the document in a ceremony with

prayers, roses, candles, and staffs; they also blessed all the library staff members who cared for the book, and they read parts of the K'iche' text out loud. Many modern K'iche' readers struggle to read the antiquated language recorded on the manuscript, but this group maintains the ability to read it.



Figure 11: In 2017, the Newberry was visited by many of the Latin American consuls posted to Chicago. Photograph by the author.



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Other visitors underscore the political and cultural significance of the document for a broader audience. For example, in 2017, the Newberry was visited by many of the Latin American consuls posted to Chicago (Figure 11). The visit was organized by the Guatemalan consul, who expressed his great pride at being able to share the *Popul Vuh* with them. Other visits reoccur every year, such as the visits by the students of the ongoing Spanish Palaeography workshop offered at the Newberry, and emphasise the document's ongoing value as a scholarly resource.

In 2018 and 2022, I co-taught a workshop at the Center for Renaissance Studies at the Newberry Library as a representative from the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. The daylong seminar, ‘New Spain at the Newberry Library: Demystifying Colonial Documents from the Ayer Collection,’ was co-taught with Claudia Brittenham, an art historian from the University of Chicago, and covered the history of the construction of rare book collections in the 19th and 20th centuries and the art of contextualizing, reading, and interpreting Indigenous documents created in colonial Mexico.³⁸ The *Popul Vuh* was one of the documents on which the seminar focused. The workshop brought graduate students of Hispanic studies to the documents to make them more accessible, providing greater contextualization and giving students a firmer understanding of primary sources from this period. Through this and similar efforts, instructors can bring area studies into the library, thereby shifting the focus of this field to the history of culture and deepening interdisciplinary collaboration.

Digital Humanities

In 2012, the Newberry library posted their digital version of the *Popul Vuh* online, and this gave scholars who were unable to travel to Chicago to work with it access to the document.³⁹ For example, a digital humanities project at the University of Virginia, known as the Multepal Project, used the digital edition of the *Popul Vuh* as a focal point to gather partners who could work on the document from different locations. Rafael C. Alvarado, Associate Professor of Data Science, and Allison Bigelow, Tom

³⁸ Guatemala was a part of Mexico at the time when the *Popul Vuh* was written.

³⁹ Popul Wuj, digital version hosted by Ohio State University Libraries.

<https://library.osu.edu/projects/populwuj/>. Last accessed 18 February 2025.

Scully Discovery Chair Associate Professor in Spanish, developed the Multepal Project in a graduate seminar at the University of Virginia in the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese. The project derived its name from the Yukatekan word 'multepal,' which refers to a pre-Columbian model of collaborative political organization that the project sought to emulate through interdisciplinarity and collaboration with scholars in the United States, as well as through creating sustainable intellectual exchanges with Guatemalan colleagues. With the aim of creating a digital 'critical' edition of the *Popul Vuh*, the Multepal project sought to gather and integrate primary and secondary sources related to the document, making them broadly available to support teaching and research on Mesoamerican culture. The project created a critical edition by marking-up textual transcriptions, creating scholarly annotations, and linking the document to digital networks related to the topics, places, and characters identified in the *Popul Vuh*. This technique allowed for an expanded understanding of the document by contextualizing it within the culture, history, and philosophy of the highland Mayan people. The project has grown and is currently supported by the School of Data Science at the University of Virginia, thus demonstrating the importance of collaborating with colleagues across disciplines to make a digital humanities project sustainable.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Rafael C. Alvarado, 'Digital Resources: Multepal, Mesoamerican Studies, and the Popol Wuj'. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History (online publication: Oxford University Press, 2020). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.799>; Allison Bigelow and Raf Alvarado, 'Exploring the Popul Vuh', *UVA Data Points*, Episode 2, University of Virginia Podcast, 1 October 2022. <https://uvadatapoints.castos.com/episodes/exploring-the-popul-vuh-with-allison-bigelow-and-raf-alvarado>. Last accessed 18 February 2025.

In public culture, the *Popul Vuh* is currently in print publication, and seminars are still being taught about it. Most recently, the Mexican scholar Ilan Stavans had achieved a more fantastical and magical translation of the *Popul Vuh*, *Popul Vuh: A Retelling*, as a way to retell, possibly rewrite, the *Popul Vuh* in a 21st-century way. He led a seminar at the Latin American Center at Oxford University in England in 2020. In conversation with Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Stavans emphasized that the *Popul Vuh* is a foundational text that has a place in world literature next to the *Iliad* and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Illustrations by the Salvadoran artist imagine the fluidity and horror of the text in a contemporary style, rather than imitating the classical Mayan style as known from archaeological ruins. Ilan Stavans, *Popul Vuh: A Retelling* (Amherst, MA: Restless Books, 2020); video of Ilan Stavans with <https://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/event/lac-history-seminar-series-tbc>, last accessed 17 February 2025.



Figure 12: The Tucson Art Museum exhibited on visual elements related to the *Popul Vuh* in 2024. This exhibit included a tissue paper reproduction of images from Carlos Mérida’s lithographic portfolio, *El Popul Vuh e ye Arte Maya de la Narrativa*, from 1943. Photograph by the author.

Visualizing the *Popul Vuh*

It is widely believed that the narratives and cosmology recorded in the *Popul Vuh* were originally depicted in Mayan pictorial manuscripts. If so, those codices are now lost, and the *Popul Vuh* currently exists only in textual form. Many are surprised to discover that this is the case, although allowing access to the document online in digital form has helped to make it more widely known that the Newberry’s copy of the *Popul Vuh* is strictly a textual document. Nonetheless, in my role as a curator for rare books created in Latin America, I search for modern artists’ books that re-visualize the document to share with students. One of the more well-known examples

is Carlos Mérida's lithographic portfolio from 1943, *El Popul Vuh e ye Arte Maya de la Narrativa*, which visually portrays the *Popul Vuh* in a semi-surrealist, dreamlike manner (Figure 12).⁴¹ A more recent portrayal comes from Ticul, Yucatán, from the handmade book artist Alejandra Bolles. In *Ceh yetel ac*, she uses bright ink jet colours such as turquoise on Huun paper crafted from the sansevieria plant to illustrate the *Popul Vuh* in a Mayan folk art style (Figure 13).⁴² These visual reinterpretations of the *Popul Vuh* are yet one more way in which the living influence of the document proliferates, and they provide another avenue for area studies scholars such as myself to access and share the ancient mythologies that it contains.



Figure 13: An artistic visualization of a deer from the text of the *Popul Vuh* from the cover of the artist's book *Ceh yetel ac* by Alejandra Bolles, 2012. Photograph by author.

⁴¹ The Tucson Museum of Art exhibited the book along with four pieces of Mayan illustrative pottery and an artist's oversize tissue paper rendition of the book. 'Popul Vuh and the Maya Art of Storytelling/El Popul Vuh e el arte Maya de la narrativa', May 4, 2023–September 22, 2024.

⁴² Also see *El Popul Vuh*, by handmade book artist Mark Callaghan (undated). Callaghan helped to revive the art of making huun paper when the fig bark used for amate became scarcer. The source for huun paper, the sansevieria plant, is widely available in the Yucatan and is commonly known as mother-in-law tongue in the United States. Mulberry Paper and More, 'Mayan Huun Paper', <https://www.mulberrypaperandmore.com/c-598-mayan-huun-paper.aspx>. Last accessed 17 February 2025.



Seonaid Valiant, “Accessing the Archive: A Case Study on the *Popul Vuh*,” *New Area Studies* 5:2 (2026).

Conclusion

The *Popul Vuh* is an ancient document that continues to speak to people in the 21st century. In conserving, studying, and sharing this manuscript, archives and area studies specialists have expanded their roles as caretakers, educators, and members of a community. The Newberry Library’s dedication to making all of its materials as accessible as possible, while at the same time protecting and preserving them, provides a crucial example of the ways in which archives can promote an understanding of cultural and area studies for the benefit of all of us, particularly the descendants of those who helped to create the document. Furthermore, the broader work of archives to catalogue hidden collections and to collect materials by marginalized and minority communities has revealed a wealth of cultural and area studies materials that preserve original voices from Latin America, waiting for researchers in archives across the globe. These practices and methods are improving our ability to ‘address complex experiences of local life in the twenty-first century.’⁴³

⁴³ Susan Hodgett and Thomas Ruys Smith, ‘Welcome’, *New Area Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020), 5.



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