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Katheryne B. Willock Library Research Award

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Robert Redfield once described anthropology as “the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities.” Today, his aphorism reminds us of the creativity and novelty involved in transforming armchair speculations about civilizations and “savages” into rigorous scientific inquiry on the organization of cultures and societies and the systems of meaning that make us all human.

Library services at the University of Arizona have fundamentally changed my research methods and enabled me to craft an original research methodology in the discipline of anthropology. The result is a two-part methodology of historical and ethnographic research. My presentation in the GPSC showcase demonstrates the historical research only, and how weaving together toolsets from economics, history, statistics, and GIS technologies can inform sounder ethnographic research questions.

Thanks to Inter-Library Loan, I have had access to an extraordinary range of extremely rare primary documents from the National Archives in Washington, DC. During the summer of 2013 alone, over 5,100 linear feet of U.S. consular “despatches” from Haiti’s 11 open ports were at my fingertips. Carefully reading the penmanship of early 1800s French, Haitian, and American writers on microform viewers required skills I developed specifically for the task of mining these sources for quantitative (and later qualitative) data on four key agricultural exports.

From this, I have produced a time-series at an unprecedented scale, representing, as close as possible, each of Haiti’s 11 foreign commerce ports from 1797 to 1915. Statistics, however, tell us nothing in particular about units of production or the organization of production in 19th century Haiti. To address these information gaps, I “pruned” other archival sources for information to construct a model for interpreting and analyzing the statistical data. Media and technology services at the library allowed me to pair export data in GIS software to historic maps of Haiti obtained from library databases, and experimentation with various map projections – intensity maps, heat maps, and animated maps – allowed for the discovery of unknown trends and regional variation. Without this qualitative framework, the time-series data would be meaningless to my research. And without the quantitative data, the interpretive framework would be mere speculation.

I came to the School of Anthropology after surviving the January 2010 Haitian earthquake. Part of what informed this decision was my adviser’s confidence that I would be able to make use of the faculty’s expertise and the library resources to create an innovative research project that moves us move away from the tired history of Haiti as the poorest nation in the western hemisphere to say something new and perhaps useful in helping leverage the Haitian people out of socioeconomic inequality. Library resources have been indispensable to my progress in this direction and the anthropology program to date. I am confident that the research skills I have acquired through use of the libraries will propel me to a career where I can apply my training and knowledge and continue this tradition of excellence.