This summer my CLAS research project took a different form than I expected because of travel restrictions due to Covid-19. Instead of visiting Mexico City to conduct research at three archives, I changed my plan to do remote research. While the downsides are obvious, this change had some positive results: I became more familiar with Mexican online archives and digitized materials and corresponded with researchers over WhatsApp and Zoom.

I spent most of my time using the digitized archives of the Hemeroteca Nacional de Mexico, part of the National Mexican Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), to read 19th century periodicals, but I also got to know other university-related archives like the Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon’s. My research focus is on costumbrista sketches, short humorous articles that examines the customs and habits of local types, and I am particularly interested in how humor is used as a didactic tool. I was surprised to learn that in El Mosaico Mexicano, a popular periodical of the period with costumbrista sketches, many of the sketches were reprinted from Spain, especially in the magazine’s earlier years. Though some of the articles covered subjects that were vague enough to apply to Mexico, like those about a dinner party gone wrong or an overeager poet, the Mexican readers of El Mosaico Mexicano in the 1830s were essentially consuming Spanish versions of reflections on nationhood as they were negotiating their own.

I was able to find digitized versions of some Spanish magazines to compare the content. Through this comparison, I learned that even as Mexican magazines began to produce their own content and moved away from reprinting universally appealing Spanish costumbrista sketches, Mexican periodicals would still use lithographs of social types and scenes produced in Spain. The magazine would print the lithograph but have authors write new content that was uniquely Mexican, a curious transatlantic connection. In many cases, the lithographic images went hand in hand with the texts, so I am certainly curious to track more images and eventually see if any lithographs—and articles—moved in the other direction, from Mexico to Spain. I wonder if these shared lithographs are the product of technological difficulties in Mexico, where the lithographic industry may not have been fully developed, so it would be easier to get an already-made one than have the artists and producers to create unique ones. If both countries had national debates about identity at similar moments, perhaps they were also more connected that literary historiography recognizes. In fact, in El Recreo, another magazine I found in the Hemeroteca’s digitized archive, there is an article in which a dandy influenced by French culture satirically examines Mexico City’s customs, much like articles from Spain and its concerns about having a unique identity after Napoleonic rule in 1814.

In some of the costumbrista humor periodicals published in the 1840s, later than the ones mentioned above which were in the 1830s, Mexican writers seem to focus on topics related to Mexico, but they still constantly referenced Spanish magazines and writers, like using pseudonyms that make reference to Spanish costumbrista writers. I eventually found some other magazines with humorous costumbrista sketches, and in my correspondence with archivists and librarians, I learned that many are not digitized. However, through the digital content which I was able to access, and a different approach to my research that was less grounded in a place, I was able to make these transatlantic connections that will be crucial to my research. My research this summer has pointed me towards a unique aspect of the costumbrista sketches I initially set out to study: while they tend to focus on local customs and insert themselves in national identity debates, the genre is transnational and transatlantic, and materials are often shared between countries. I am eager to take a step back and think about humor more broadly as a didactic tool.
not just in Mexico, but as a transcontinental trend at a moment in which countries in Latin America and Europe—and perhaps to an extent even in North America—were trying to construct national identities and reading communities. I also think that cosmopolitanism and more frequent travel enabled this type of transatlantic genre. Writers may have wanted to reference other countries in negotiating their own country’s national identity because it revealed a worldliness and a global consciousness as colonies were dissolving in Latin America, but the elites on both sides of the Atlantic sought ways to understand—and influence—their counterparts. While I was ultimately not able to focus my research as much on visual culture and caricatures, as was originally intended, this new direction will prove fruitful as I progress towards a dissertation.