This past summer, I traveled to Mexico City on June 9th, 2015 and stayed for two weeks until June 23rd, 2015. While there, my fieldwork involved visiting the exhibition installed at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo de la Universidad Autónoma de México (MUAC UNAM), which was on display from May-September 2015. The exhibition, titled *Traslaciones topográficas de la Biblioteca Nacional*, was an attempt by contemporary Mexican artist Jorge Méndez-Blake to map the spatial similarities and dissimilarities between La Biblioteca Nacional and MUAC UNAM (located next to each other on UNAM’s southern campus area, “Zona Cultural”).

Prior to visiting the exhibition and experiencing the artworks in person, I was unsure of how the artist would be able to conceptually map the links between both cultural institutions through the art objects presented in the show. Upon reading the curatorial text provided on the museum’s website prior to my physical visit, I thought perhaps the exhibition would be too much of a conceptual reach, more so focusing on the architecture and spatial mapping of both sites, whilst paying less attention to the possibilities of exploring the intellectual and cultural significance of both of these institutional sites.

Crucial to my investigation was spending time (multiple days) with the works in the exhibition, along with interviewing the exhibition’s curator, Amanda de la Garza, and experiencing the performances that took place throughout the duration of the show.
Of the art objects on display, many showed the kind of humorous relationship between the visual and the literary as a way of illustrating the vast divide between the two media. One example, a book created by Méndez-Blake, consisted of large-scale color swatches on each page, representing the colors of book bindings from books of 20th century Mexican poetry in La Biblioteca Nacional. The book, which contains no words, but is simply a compilation of color, abstracts the literary to a point where it is illegible, but maintains the kind of pompousness (the book is displayed on a pedestal, with delicate white gloves the museum visitor must put on in order to touch the object) often devoted to the “great works” of literature revered by institutional bodies like La Biblioteca Nacional and UNAM more broadly.

The performance that took place each day that the exhibition was open, which I would have never experienced had I not gone to see the exhibition in person, was a collaboration between the artist and students at UNAM. Once an hour, a student would select a book at La Biblioteca Nacional from their 20th century Mexican poetry collection, walk from La Biblioteca Nacional to MUAC UNAM. Once inside of the museum halls, the student read verses from the book aloud, attempting to memorize as much as they could during that time. Back at the exhibition gallery space, each student participant would sit down at a typewriter, and would type out as much as they could remember from their time with the text. The clacking sounds from the typewriter would then be amplified through a microphone projected throughout the entire museum sound system, rupturing the experience of all museum-goers with mysteriously unsettling noise. The typed project that would ultimately be the result of the students’ writing, was titled El gran poema del siglo XX (México), highlighting the absurdity of writing a “grand poem of the 20th century”. The impossible exercise of El gran poema del siglo XX (México) also mocks the attempts at compiling “grand” (or encyclopedic) collections by museums, libraries, and other official cultural institutions.
Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of my exploratory research on this artist’s work and the exhibition was my interview with the museum’s curator, Amanda de la Garza. She explained several aspects about the exhibition planning that were absent from the curatorial text on the museum’s website, on the exhibition walls, and even within the published text on the show. The interview revealed that MUAC UNAM had contacted the artist to produce new artworks for an exhibition that specifically connected the museum to La Biblioteca Nacional as institutional sites. Whether this commission would include institutional critique, or participatory intervention in these spaces, would ultimately be up to the artist, but de la Garza explained that MUAC UNAM was not opposed to an artist taking critical stances on issues of institutional power and knowledge. The interview revealed that the museum institution’s specific willingness to commission a self-critique of its own spatial power, and its relationship to La Biblioteca Nacional, reflects a specific contemporary moment where institutions must be willing to partake in institutional critique, otherwise suffer through the popular understanding of museums and libraries as “former modernist utopias, but currently vestiges of ruins, and obsolete” (de la Garza, 2015).

This exploratory research will help me to realize my professional career goals of working as a curator at an art museum. This experience helped sharpen my skills in producing the kind of critical research and writing that informs intellectual work in the arts. In my future endeavors, I am specifically interested in the ways in which museums must willingly incorporate institutional critique into their exhibitions and programming, especially in a digital age where information and critique travels exceptionally fast and museum-goers feel democratically inclined to exercise their stake in the museum’s prosperity and/or demise.