

Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize Nominating Statement

Michigan Humanities (MH) is pleased to present *Third Coast Conversations: Dialogues about Water in Michigan* for consideration for the 2019 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize.

Program Summary:

Michigan is often referred to colloquially as the nation's "Third Coast" because it boasts the most miles of shoreline in the contiguous United States, bordering four of the five Great Lakes. Together, the lakes hold some six quadrillion gallons of water, 84 percent of North America's surface freshwater supply.¹ This setting gives Michigan a stunning natural landscape and a long story of human use beginning with the state's Indigenous peoples (Anishinaabe). An abundance of water also made Michigan a lucrative place to do business and develop industry, including a booming tourism economy. At the same time, access to safe, clean water has also been a scarcity. Michigan's heritage as an industrial place in the "rust belt" mean that the state faces distinct challenges related to its water supply, such as an aging infrastructure for delivering drinking water that has been particularly devastating in the city of Flint. Proposals to divert water from the Great Lakes to outlying areas of the nation have also put Michigan's access to freshwater in the national spotlight. In its paradoxical abundance and scarcity, water binds and divides our state and its people. For this reason, it is an important topic that was ripe for conversation among residents from all corners of the state.

With funding from the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH), Michigan Humanities (MH) embarked on a new way of exploring our communities, large and small. *Third Coast Conversations: Dialogues about Water in Michigan* was a series of statewide public conversations taking place in 18 communities over one year that focused on the cultural, social, historical, and environmental factors that connect Michigan's people to their water. The project provided points of entry into a complex contemporary topic and helped participants renew their appreciation for the way water impacts our state and its people. The project was led by Michigan Humanities in collaboration with their strong network of partner organizations across the state. This project also opened new relationships with environmental organizations that may not have otherwise had the opportunity to engage with Michigan Humanities. Rather than focus on the science behind water, Third Coast Conversations used six different humanities themes to create open dialogue and reflective conversations. Communities facilitated conversations based on Indigenous peoples' perspectives on water; access and rights to water; infrastructure, industry, and the challenges of urban water systems; the role of water in shaping Michigan's human history; recovery and resilience of waterways; tourism and a sense of place.

The development and implementation of the Third Coast Conversations (TCC) project presented a unique opportunity for MH to create spaces for open dialogue around a topic that impacts every citizen in the state of Michigan. At the time the grant was submitted to the NEH, the crises due to high lead levels in the city of Flint were familiar national conversations. During the project period even more water-related headlines began to surface throughout the state. Small towns began to wrestle with having PFAS in their drinking water, were faced with concerns centered on toxic waste burial leaching into their drinking water, or millions of gallons of water being pumped out of their community by large bottled water manufacturers. This required MH staff and grantees to stretch into territory that was often emotionally charged and political. It was important to be intentional about the skills and capacity that organizations needed to pos-

¹ Heasley, Lunne and Daniel Macfarlane, "Negotiating Abundance and Scarcity: Introduction to a Fluid Border" in *Border Flows: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship*, 2016, pp.3

sess in order to effectively lead their communities through these difficult, but important, conversations.

Introduction:

Grant-making is central to the way many State Humanities Councils provide public access to the humanities within their states. Amidst these broad transformations and crises related to water, the people most affected by changes to water systems, both natural and human controlled, often lack a means of being a part of the conversations about this resource. MH recognized the need to be intentional in our grant-making to ensure that the tools and resources were reaching communities that wanted to have an impact on these transformations. Communities are also facing the growing challenge of having to be prepared to be responsive as new local issues arise. Organizations that are able to build this capacity will prove to be invaluable to their communities.

To respond to this need, MH secured a grant from the NEH to design and implement a program called: *Third Coast Conversations: Dialogues about Water in Michigan* (TCC). TCC is rooted in MH's strong and long-time role as a grant-maker and builds on this history to create an innovative program that helps address pressing environmental issues by working with new partners and audiences. MH's aim in undertaking the project involved three primary goals:

1. Heighten the general public's knowledge of water and how their daily lives and culture are influenced by water.
2. Strengthen the general public's ability to contribute to conversations about the history, relevance, and challenges of water in our contemporary society.
3. Enhance and strengthen the statewide impact of the Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibition *Water/Ways*, which toured Michigan during the Third Coast Conversations grant period.

Following these goals, MH has used TCC to respond to a need across Michigan's communities for a responsive grant-making program that could focus attention on topics of water at a local level through open dialogue, when there are often not funds available for such projects otherwise. The success of this project has also launched the creation of nine additional tool-kits to assist in facilitation of reflective conversations around themes that align with the next Smithsonian traveling exhibition *Crossroads*, MH's next statewide read "What the Eyes Don't See" by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (centered on the Flint water crisis), and youth focused conversations addressing community engagement, making connections, and civility in 2020.

Financial structure:

Third Coast Conversations: Dialogues about Water in Michigan is made possible by a \$300,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. MH's partnership with NEH made grants of \$5,000 available to 18 organizations across Michigan. Importantly, these grants require no matching funds from the organizations or on the part of MH.

Programmatic structure:

To ensure TCC would reach underserved communities, new audiences, and push our existing applicants to expand from their typical areas of inquiry, MH forged new partnerships to create an outside advisory group, primarily composed of statewide experts with strong ties to environmental science and environmental public history work. These experts included:

- David Benac, Ph.D, Associate Professor of History at Western Michigan University and specialist in environmental history and public history.
- Dave Dempsey, M.S, environmental writer, historian, and advisor to the International Joint Commission. He has more than 30 years of experience working to shape conservation and Great Lakes policy.
- Stephanie Gandulla, maritime archaeologist at Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, the only fresh water marine sanctuary in the United States.
- Lynne Heasley, Ph.D, Associate Professor of History and Environment and Sustainability at Western Michigan University.
- Marty Kaufman, Ph.D, professor of Geography, Planning and Environment at the University of Michigan-Flint.
- Nancy Langston, Ph.D, professor of Environmental History, Great Lakes Research Center and Department of Social Sciences at Michigan Technological University.
- Eric Hemenway, director of the Department of Repatriation, Archives, and Records with the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians.

MH worked with the advisory group to:

1. Assist with the early stages of the program's development and outreach to groups and organizations across Michigan.
2. Design the RFP and scoring rubric.
3. Review the final application for funding. They made the recommendations to MH as to which projects should receive funding using the scoring rubric that focused not only on humanities themes and public impact, but also looked at how the projects responded to current local issues.
4. Serving as content experts for grantee organizations.

Another innovation that distinguishes the TCC project is the technical assistance provided to grantees, both in the application stage and throughout the life-cycle of their grant, particularly around facilitation and self-evaluation. The project involved extensive in-person and hands-on technical assistance for applicants and grantees, which differs from the way MH has made grants in the past. MH used a simplified online grant application to make the required questions, documents, and information as accessible to new audiences as possible. We also traveled the state extensively to attend at least one of the conversations in each community, which is significantly more outreach than done in the past. MH also implemented a reflective conversation facilitation training symposium that all grantees were invited to attend. During this two-day workshop grantees were trained in the art of reflective conversation with Adam Davis and Rachel Bernstein from Oregon Humanities. Time was given to plan projects and model community conversation facilitation. MH staff also went over effective evaluation techniques. Grantees attended this meeting in Lansing shortly after their awards were announced. Bringing the grantees together allowed them to not only build in-person networks, but to also see that the issues that their communities were struggling with were not isolated. Providing a space for grantees to share with other people who were experiencing the same things allowed collaboration and resource sharing. The cost to attend this convening was covered by MH and did not require grantees to use their grant funds, helping to ensure that the maximum amount of funds possible were dedicated to the project itself.

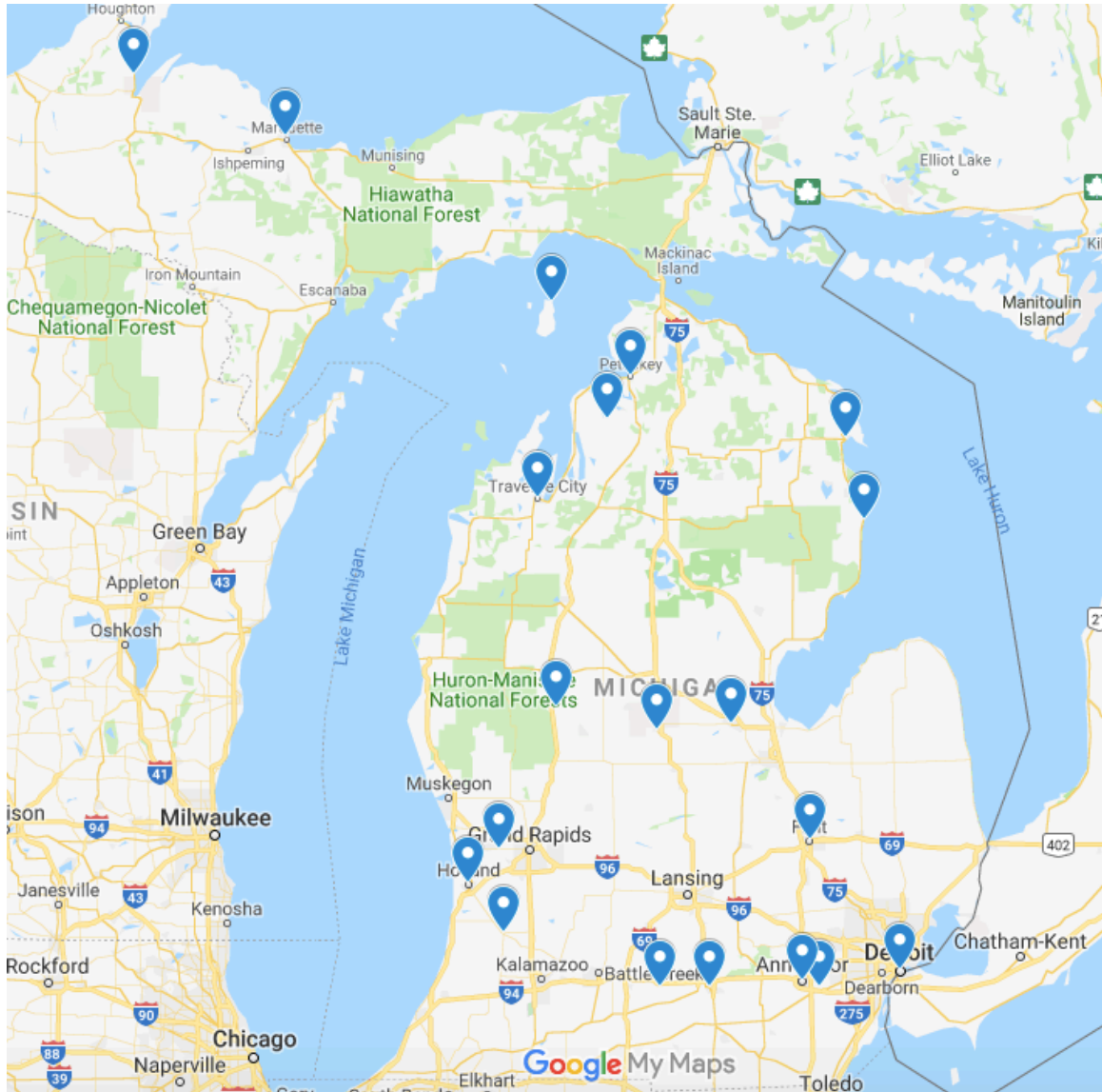
The individual grants to each organization support the development of community conversation projects that serve as public humanities programming to address local topics or act as supplemental programming to the Smithsonian *Water/Ways* exhibition. Due to the sensitive nature of some of these topics, and the desire to bring underrepresented voices to the table, many of the projects were not archived to foster a sense of trust and safety. Those projects that were documented however, received statewide attention and were broadcast on public radio station

WCMU and interviews with MH staff were broadcast on WNMU. Other partners documented the experience through exhibits and the creation of multi-media performance art.

Program’s public impact, audiences, and content:

The TCC project has reached various areas of the state through the work of the 18 grantee organizations and the 36 conversation projects. A complete list and brief descriptions of the projects funded and groups of people served can be found using this link:

<https://www.michiganhumanities.org/third-coast-conversations-2/>



This map depicts locations where conversation projects took place. This visual representation illustrates that conversations about water were not limited to the coastal regions of the state. Many inland conversations focused on tourism/sense of place, heritage, aging infrastructure, and access and rights to water.

The projects took on many different formats, while still remaining true to the reflective conversation model. Below are several examples of projects that illustrate the breadth and depth of the programs, both in terms of people served and the topics discussed.

Projects encouraged students to participate and facilitate community conversations.

- Champions Owning Detroit's Environment (CODE) Green is a youth focused effort of Green Door Initiative. The project's main focus is to encourage the development of leadership among high school age individuals interested in having a positive impact on the local environment. CODE collaborated with multiple youth serving organizations focused on environmental issues in Detroit, including the Youth Energy Squad and We The People. Together, these organizations convened a series of four water-related discussions throughout the city to inform and develop a process of engagement among high school age leaders. A council comprised of young Detroiters and their mentors sponsored conversations among their peers with an aim to bolster their voice in the discourse around water access.
- Black River Public Schools: "Invasion of The Great Lakes Project" (ITGLP) has impetus in the development of teaching and learning materials associated with the history, science, and social impact of the Great Lakes. Students, their families, and the community need to be aware of the cultural heritage of water and how it has shaped the cultural community of the Ottawa County area. The ITGLP serves to produce a research-based graphic novel and curriculum, for public school students. The conclusion of the project will result in a staged production that features student work in the telling of the story of invasive species and the Great Lakes over the past 170 years.
- Artworks and its partners convened three meetings: two conversations and one placemaking charrette. The goal of the project was to engage the community, targeting the traditionally under-represented youth and student population, in a conversation about placemaking and stewardship of the Muskegon River. The project will include the historic uses, current condition, and future vision for placemaking, tourism, and stewardship of the Muskegon River.

Other projects addressed the sustainability issues around seasonal tourism and how local community members are struggling with the environmental and economical impact.

- Northern Michigan University: This project focused on tourism and sense of place. The team utilized networking as well as reflective conversation techniques to ensure substantive conversations occur leading to collaborations between Northern Michigan University, academic programs and students, business leaders in the Marquette and Munising areas, and community residents. Such conversations supported a sense of ownership; understanding of the power of sustainability; willingness to explore opportunities related to ecotourism and appropriate use of local resources; and facilitation of on-going efforts to guide these stakeholders toward a sustainable future.
- Artworks: a second conversation resulted in actionable ideas developed by citizens to help the city prioritize funding for public improvements, help the Downtown Business Association target new businesses, help the Muskegon River Watershed Assembly attract new supporters and volunteers, and develop a greater sense of our history and public responsibility toward Muskegon River stewardship.
- Alpena County Library: The program connected community members, leaders, and organizations through literature, the arts, history, and science. The overarching goal of the project is to inspire investment in the maritime landscape and a desire to protect and preserve that landscape through multiple activities presented by the participating organizations. These conver-

sations inspired both contemplation and forward action toward cultural and historical preservation, as well as a deeper respect towards the environment. Collaborators included: Friends of the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Art in the Loft, the Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan, Plastics FLOAT 4-H group, and the Alpena Downtown Development Authority.

We were encouraged that some projects focused on the healing that can be achieved through open dialogue and education.

- **Keweenaw Bay Indian Community:** The goal of this project proposed by the KBIC Natural Resources Department was to enhance Indigenous sovereignty, identity, and healing of water-rich homelands through open dialogue and various platforms of multimedia. The target audience are members of the KBIC and surrounding non-tribal communities. This project enhanced existing projects and fostered new dialogues to broaden understanding around water issues.
- **Fresh Water Future:** The goal of the project is to help Flint residents initiate healing, elevate their voices and concerns, create a vision for water and neighborhood improvements that can be accomplished in conjunction with infrastructure improvement projects. Freshwater Future, working in conjunction with local partners, hosted four neighborhood visioning sessions to involve residents. Key partners included Genesee County Hispanic and Latino Collaborative and Flint Development Center (to engage with families with youth).

Stewardship and education were a main focus of several other projects that took place in communities that are experiencing or have experienced water related crises.

- **Kalamazoo River Watershed Council:** This project involved convening meetings in the upper (Albion) and lower (Allegan) sections of the Kalamazoo River Watershed to bring stakeholders and residents together to discuss our aquatic resources and the Kalamazoo River. These Third Coast Conversations were designed to meet a number of goals and engage a number of different watershed stakeholders.
- **The Discover Center Great Lakes (DCGL)** held a series of Third Coast Conversations in Traverse City. The first conversation was a half-day gathering with a meal, and included community thought leaders in the areas of arts and humanities, business and economics, environmental stewardship, and outdoor recreation, who were specifically chosen for their diverse points of view and their interest in water. Special effort was made to include historically underrepresented members of the community. The general public was invited through a public relations campaign. The events were free of charge and open to the public.
- **Communities First, Inc.** led a partnership with the Michigan Environmental Council and Flint residents to plan and direct three conversations with minority and underserved residents of Flint around Michigan water and shorelines. These conversations explored the personal connections these residents may (or may not) feel with the Third Coast, and the importance of the Michigan coast to the entire state and its residents.

Together, the sum of projects funded by the TCC project present a more comprehensive view of the issues facing Michigan residents and the many ways water impacts their lives. Using the humanities as a tool to open dialogue and begin to build trust between different segments of a community, TCC projects have been the catalyst for change at the local level. MH is developing a digital, and print, discussion guide that will serve as an archive of the projects completed and as a resource for organizations that wish to facilitate reflective conversations in their communities. This guide will be available toward the end of 2019. The significant public impact the

TCC project has had on communities around the state can then be shared and serve as a model for change.

The projects fostered empathy and created camaraderie around water issues as well as an optimism for finding solutions by becoming more involved. One youth from Flint shared with a student from Toledo how they “don’t have the luxury to be concerned about water in the environment because they are so focused on what is coming out of their tap”. Youth from Detroit also shared what it was like to not have water and have young family members removed from the home, due to the fact there was no longer running water. At one of the conversations facilitated by Green Door Initiative, a young woman spoke up about living without running water for over 6 months and not being aware of the resources available to her. Green Door Initiative was able to connect her to the resources she needed. Without the opportunity to have open dialogue in a safe space that young woman would still be without running water.

Stories and impacts such as these illustrate just a few of the ways the Third Coast Conversations project has worked to create a more open and safe space for communities to facilitate open dialogue, work toward solutions, and learn more about the environment in which they live, work, and play.

Links to media coverage of Third Coast Conversation projects:

WCMU:

- <https://radio.wcmu.org/programs/third-coast-conversations#stream/0>

WNMU:

- <https://www.wnmufm.org/post/interview-jennifer-rupp-michigan-humanities-third-coast-conversations#stream/0>

Traverse City Record Eagle:

- https://www.record-eagle.com/news/local_news/third-coast-conversation-focuses-on-water-humanities/article_4e283f01-fa60-53f0-8a4b-e62901d47386.html

Pioneer Media:

- <https://news.pioneergroup.com/bigrapidsnews/2019/04/19/area-residents-invited-to-final-third-coast-conversations-event/>

Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History:

- <https://livestream.com/accounts/2710797/19032michiganhumanitiescouncil>

GVSU:

- <https://www.gvsu.edu/kutsche/module-gallery-view.htm?galleryId=1AF08B96-A4A8-CA8F-6392EE299FED8F48&photoId=1BD62ACE-9DFA-54E3-50FD3C52CF11ED8B&siteModuleId=5E6DBEDA-F511-BA7E-CFCFF92AFF832A1E>

WILX:

- <https://www.wilx.com/content/news/Dialogues-about-water-equal-grant-money-for-groups-across-state-484714021.html>

The Albion Pleiad:

- <https://www.albionpleiad.com/2019/02/23765/>

Mining Journal:

- <https://www.miningjournal.net/life/wednesday-learning/2018/07/nmu-profs-receive-tourism-grant/>

Beaver Island Historical Society:

- <http://bimf.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EcoFestBrochure.pdf>