

## **Nominating Statement: The Manitos Community Memory Project**

The New Mexico Humanities Council would like to nominate the Manitos Community Memory Project for this year's Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize for Outstanding Public Humanities Programming. The Manitos Community Memory Project (MCM Project) is an initiative to establish a community-based archive, grounded in the living culture of the villages of northern New Mexico, southern Colorado and the Indo-Hispanic diaspora intricately connected to this region ("Manitos" is slang for *hermanitos*, as well as a play on *mano* or hand, reinforcing cultural values rooted in hard work and mutual aid). The project was launched at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU) in December 2018 with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The New Mexico Humanities Council (NMHC) joined as an active project partner in February 2019, in order to facilitate new partnerships and support public programs around the project.

The MCM Project is set within the context of a region that has been deeply impacted by historical trauma resulting from loss of land, language, cultural artifacts, and knowledge that has been continually mined by others with no reciprocity. Within this context of extractive practice, the project is focused on a restorative framework. Project managers have adapted the following steps from the principles of restorative justice:

- Recognizing the importance of cultural heritage to the health and well-being of communities and the individuals who live in them,
- Acknowledging the loss caused by culture-based institutions, academic researchers and collectors from over a century of extraction of objects, knowledge, and information from communities without reciprocal benefit.
- Accepting the responsibility of researchers to communities they study and the harm caused by loss of connection to cultural heritage.
- Appreciating the value of what individuals have managed to save from loss that reside in their homes (e.g., portraits hanging over fireplaces, in cardboard boxes kept under the beds, recipes, etc).
- Building equitable relationships between institutional and community-based partners.

The process of memory gathering itself can be a catalyst for recovery from historical trauma by reducing social isolation, increasing social cohesion, and creating a positive social identity. Our efforts to create a process that leads to community archives have included developing a network of partners and concerted events that are framed by connectivity. To facilitate memory gathering events, the MCM Project distributed six Storybox kits, developed by partners at Historypin/Shift Design, to community partners in Alcalde, Abiquiu, Dixon, Ghost Ranch (Abiquiu), Las Vegas, and Questa, and placed one at the NMHU Donnelly Library that can be checked out.

Participants in the planning process wanted a digital archive that was centralized and searchable across villages and collections, rather than separate archives for each village. Participants also wanted a digital archive that included community-generated content, but that also provided access to content that had been extracted and resides in institutional collections outside of the communities in church archives, in the New Mexico State Archives, at UNM Libraries, and in

other far flung collections such as the Huntington Library in California, making local access difficult if not impossible. Participants in the planning process did not feel they had the necessary administrative or technical capacity to maintain archives on their own and requested technical and administrative support from third-party partners.

In addition, a total of twelve libraries, museums, and other nonprofit organizations have received equipment and training in preparation for establishing memory labs, spaces where they can add items from their own collections to the digital archive, and where community historians and members of the public will have access to digitization equipment and technical support for uploading content. Recipients include Pueblo de Abiquiu Library & Cultural Center, Abiquiu; the Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Center, Alcalde; Amalia Community Center, Amalia; Chimayo Museum, Chimayo; Embudo Valley Library and Community Center, Dixon; City of Las Vegas Museum, Las Vegas; Land, Experience, Art and Place (LEAP), Questa; the New Mexico Acequia Association, Santa Fe; Little Globe, Santa Fe; the Menaul Historical Library, Albuquerque; and the Taos County Historical Society, Taos. Ghost Ranch Museums & Library in Abiquiu is using their own funds to buy their equipment.

To address the need for third-party support for administration, coordination and technical support, the New Mexico Humanities Council helped forge a partnership between New Mexico Highlands University and the University of New Mexico (UNM). NMHC, UNM, and UNM's Center for Regional Studies hosted all the Manitos participants, as well as others who were interested in building community archives, for a three-day intensive workshop that covered the entire process of digitizing materials and adding them to an Omeka-S archive, as well as topics like addressing copyright and privacy concerns. The digital cultural heritage archive participants created (and continue to build) is currently co-hosted through the UNM history department:

<http://nmdigitalheritage.org/s/manitos>.

Under the MOU, NMHU administers the funds from the Mellon grant, partners contribute in-kind time and services, and NMHC is using federal funds to match contributions, whether from project participants or outside sponsors like the Center for Regional Studies.

## **Building Capacity**

- **Fostering community, Nurturing and raising consciousness, Inspiring creativity**

The process of creating the MCM Project digital archive has changed our understanding of what we mean by community. Whereas preserving land and culture once depended on communities isolating themselves as a form of self-preservation, today it also depends upon connectivity of villages to each other, to their diasporas, and to the outside world. The MCM Project has broadened our definition of communities from hyperlocal terms—isolated villages scattered across a geographic region that extends from northern New Mexico into southern Colorado—to communities as virtual spaces inclusive of people living in the villages and those living in diaspora.

The MCM Project digital archive has nurtured and raised consciousness of historical trauma by heightening awareness that it is a major yet overlooked cause of present-day social and economic problems that plague Manito communities. Similarly, the project has also demonstrated that reconnecting to cultural heritage is an important factor in healing communities and individuals from the legacy of displacement and loss from extractive practices.

The MCM Project has made progress towards inspiring creativity by recognizing its importance as a major—yet overlooked—factor in healing from historical trauma and by beginning to explore how a digital cultural heritage archive can provide access to cultural participation that improves the health and well-being of communities and the people who live in them.

In order to accommodate the participation of villages that are not served by a library we have expanded partnerships with community-based museums, community centers and other types of nonprofit organizations. In addition, the geographic reach of the project now extends to San Miguel County, to Manito outposts in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, and will eventually extend into southern Colorado. Each participating community faces unique challenges and has unique aspirations.

## **Building Capacity**

- **Expanding the knowledge base, Strengthening the social base, Building the skill base**

The MCM Project digital archive expands the knowledge base of communities by documenting and preserving durable heritage, i.e., those aspects of history and traditional culture that can help maintain rural lifeways and support present-day livelihoods. We also envision the digital archive supporting the efforts of educators by serving as a resource for cultural heritage curriculum development and course design.

It is said that it is harder to hate someone when you know their story. The MCM Project memory gathering and storytelling activities help to ease social tensions, strengthen social cohesion, reduce social isolation, promote intergenerational communication, and instill a positive social identity and community pride.

MCM Project trainings build skills in interviewing techniques, audio/video production, scanning, adding metadata, uploading content to digital platforms, making interactive maps and timelines, and other skills depending on the level of interest, e.g., podcasting, game design, VR, and animation. While these are the skills necessary to building a digital archive, they are also highly transferable to a variety of academic pursuits, occupations and career paths.

Community partners received training in the digital field collection of community memory assets at archival quality, as well as training in archival skills required to complete the digital archival workflow, such as catalog management and metadata tagging. The development of these skill sets with a focus on mutual aid supplemented with mentor support, is designed for sustainability,

with the aim of making these skill sets a part of a community's collective knowledge.

## **COVID-19 Response**

Mellon funding for the project ran out in February, but NMHC and NMHU signed an MOU to continue the MCM Project through providing ongoing professional development to participating communities, as well as supporting two student interns and one graduate researcher. NMHC has pivoted to providing professional development to participants virtually, starting with reworking the original training on memory gathering to promote COVID-safe, remote memory gathering protocols. The partners also coordinated the printing and distribution of hundreds of activity sheets created by NMHU student interns, depicting archetypal village characters, along with activity and storytelling prompts related to that person's role in a village. These materials were distributed through free lunch programs to children, and in senior centers.

In addition to the ongoing professional development, current Manitos programs include an ongoing virtual *matanza* (community feast around livestock harvesting), exploring traditional foodways in Las Vegas, a study of the Manito diaspora in Wyoming, and a project by NMHU students to create a series of short publications, *Cuadernos* (journals) highlighting traditional culturally specific healing practices. The *Cuadernos* are based on a combination of archival research into the impact of the Spanish flu in New Mexico and community memory gathering about the generational impacts of historic epidemics, as well as the current one. The project illustrates the ripple impact of illness in these small, rural communities while celebrating their unique culture. At the request of participating librarians and teachers, the interns are also creating a blank book, so students who receive the *Cuadernos* booklets, can write their reflections on their experiences during the pandemic. Both publications will be available online for download and printing, and will be printed and distributed through community libraries.

## **Phase II**

NMHC has recently partnered to submit two additional grants to the Mellon Foundation. One, with the University of New Mexico, would be to expand on the Manitos project by using the model to bring in other communities around New Mexico, with Eastern New Mexico University, New Mexico State University, UNM-Gallup, and Western New Mexico University as hubs. The work would be part of a larger truth and reconciliation effort to advance healing from historic trauma. The other grant was submitted in partnership with NMHU, to continue the MCM Project for another three years, which will include an element of digital restitution.

To make it possible to create a space for both community-generated content and digital collections from institutions, institutional partners will need to buy into the idea of digital restitution. The Manito region is well-known for the production of religious artworks, Rio Grande weaving, wood carving, and colcha embroidery. We plan to target three or more repositories with major holdings of Manito items to develop a digital restitution project. Our prospects include the New Mexico State Archives, Santa Fe; Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe; and the Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

Many prize items have been extracted from communities by researchers and collectors and are now hidden away in institutional and private collections. But as Orhan Pamuk points out in his *Modest Manifesto for Museums*, the most important collections are in people's homes and thus are also hidden away. They are in the boxes of photographs under the bed, or the portraits of ancestors hanging in the living room. For the first time it is possible to use digital technologies to make all of this cultural heritage accessible in one space. Sharing allows for comparative analysis, information exchange, and amplification of content through creative and interpretative projects. We have only begun to scratch the surface of the depth and breadth of items we hope will be shared in the MCM Project digital archive.

### **Short Program Description**

The Manitos Community Memory Project (MCM Project) is an initiative to establish a community-based archive, grounded in the living culture of the villages of northern New Mexico, southern Colorado and the Indo-Hispanic diaspora intricately connected to this region.