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Recuerdos Hablados/Memories Spoken: Toward the Co-Creation of Digital Knowledge with Community Significance

MARY M. SOMERVILLE AND DANA ECHOHAWK

ABSTRACT

Collaborative relationships among libraries, archives, and museums can fruitfully engage cultural community members in collaborative construction of digital knowledge. A continuum of co-creation approaches in the Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library illustrates the value of working together. The most mature community-generated initiative produces digital images with contextualizing metadata of cultural “significance.” Examples suggest that inclusive, community-generated digital knowledge activities can shape interpretations and narratives of the past and present, thereby influencing construction of the future, as community members express their contexts, concepts, and truths. Concluding remarks consider implications for community-generated digital knowledge activities that give “voice” to underrepresented populations and suggest new directions for organizational purpose and professional practice.

INTRODUCTION

Global consciousness emerges from the “memories” collected and available through libraries, archives, and museums. These organizations have long served as the societal institutions responsible for the preservation of primary sources, documents, and objects, reflective of individual and collective endeavors. Because history is written by “winners,” the dominant societal paradigm typically defines what is to be remembered, and how it will be remembered (Lloyd, 2007). As a consequence, current collecting practices and professional assumptions often fail to acknowledge different contexts, different concepts, and different truths (Lloyd, 2005). The

concept of “significance,” therefore, is replete with ideological, political, economic, cultural, and social influences that shape the interpretations and narratives of the past. This serves to perpetuate outdated assumptions and entrenched hierarchies, which limits the potential of contemporary civic discourse to co-create imaginative and inclusive futures.

“SIGNIFICANCE” IN CONTEXT

Since 1992, the United Nations’ Memory of the World Program has encouraged documentary heritage projects that reflect a diversity of languages, peoples, and cultures and thereby seek to avoid a “world without memories” for historically disenfranchised peoples. As the UNESCO website notes, “this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear forever.” Mirroring this philosophy, the European Union and the Library of Congress have also funded memory institutions and heritage programs. Despite considerable financial investments, much work remains to be done in developing meaningful stories of the past and meeting the social needs of present communities (Manžuch, 2009).

In response, the authors advance a digital content co-creation theory that aims to provide inclusive representation of cultural memories. It assumes that the concept of “significance”—which conveys importance and consequence—must be negotiated and expressed *with and for* members of the communities served by these institutions. This requires extending the boundaries of organizational purpose and professional practice to acknowledge information sources important to disenfranchised communities (Partridge, Bruce, & Tilley, 2008), thereby enabling “the poorest to help themselves to create richer and fuller lives that express and affirm their own distinctiveness in an increasingly interconnected global village” (G8, 2001, p. 24). This requires careful and consultative reconsideration of collection policies and practices, including prevalent assumptions for determining “significance” in formats traditionally disregarded by the larger society—for instance, folk art, traditional stories, and oral histories.

This professional reorientation presumes that “the act of assigning significance is a social action that is constituted through a symbolic need to establish or maintain a social thread or connection, to preserve a footprint that is deemed important, and to ensure the continuity of a community’s memory” (Lloyd, 2007, p. 54). Therefore, curation activities must engage cultural community members in the expression of their worldview to “determine what is, and what is not, important, and which sources can be trusted” (Hersberger, 2005, p. 80). Because memory is inherently social (Piggott, 2005), the determination of significance commits to memory an intentional rendering, interpretation, and narrative that will have long-lasting implications, both in understanding the past and constructing the future. As Lloyd (2007) writes, “the reasons and consequences underpinning the assignment of significance should be carefully examined and

considered . . . as . . . involvement in the process has an indirect impact on future interpretations and shared narratives of history. In this respect, the process of identifying material as significant has a symbolic function; it creates knowledge about an object's importance" (p. 54).

CULTURALLY AUTHENTIC SIGNIFICANCE

Libraries, museums, and archives routinely negotiate questions of significance for members of communities served. A continuum of projects conducted since 2009 in the Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library suggests the efficacy of enhanced consultation—and ultimately collaboration—with cultural populations. These “working together” highlights suggest reconsideration of traditional assumptions guiding institutional collection, dissemination, and preservation strategies (Somerville, 2009).

Examples emphasize the medium of photography to illustrate the value of community engagement in curation activities. Since its development and adoption in the Western culture, photography has typically been used for illustration. Visual images, however, can also be considered through an entirely different lens, which markedly shifts their relative importance to text. “Analysis of images helps us understand social values and ways of perceiving past times. To some, photographs provide novel information about the culture portrayed; to others, the viewer’s knowledge of the larger culture gives the pictures meaning” (Levine, 2004, p. ix). Such ideas challenge the dominant cultural preference for text over image. This is important because “it is through perception, largely visual and auditory, that we respond to the humanness that surrounds us” (Collier, 1999, p. 1). Admittedly, “learning to see with visual accuracy, to see culture in all its complex detail, is . . . a challenge to those whose training is literary rather than visual” (Collier, 1999, p. 5). As the following examples illustrate, community-generated content—including metadata—can aid interested others in constructing an authentic understanding and knowledge of other times and other cultures.

Highlights from projects exploring the Hispanic experience in Colorado reflect a continuum of involvement and influence by cultural community members who progressively determined the narratives, directions, and values expressed in co-curation activities aimed at preserving their cultural memories. These examples illustrate the potential of new directions for organizational purpose and professional practice.

CONTINUUM OF ENGAGEMENT

Founded in 2009 and situated in downtown Denver, the Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library (CC&W) advances understanding of Rocky Mountain history through “Preserving History. Creating Knowledge” (<http://coloradowest.auraria.edu>). Signature projects recognize that

We need to ask this question: Is culture a renewable resource? When those individuals who are the sources of embodied knowledge and wisdom are gone, how can the culture be renewed? This is a wake-up call for archiving material while our elders are still with us. Culture is both resilient and fragile. We tend to think that these communal stories and this cultural material will be around forever. But culture is fragile—languages die off, people die off, stories die off. That gives us a trenchant reason to build archives. There is almost an “archival imperative” to preserve, conserve, and maintain historical memory so that we can draw sustenance from the past to envision our future. (Ybarra-Frausto, 2005, p. 10)

Given this guiding imperative, staff members have evolved an increasingly collaborative approach in working with cultural community members. The resulting insights are transferable to planning other digital knowledge creation projects.

Auraria: Community to Campus

The initial digital knowledge project involved librarians, professors, and students in interviewing Displaced Aurarians evicted from their homes in the 1970s so the tri-institutional Auraria Higher Education Center could be constructed. This higher education campus now accommodates three institutions, the University of Colorado Denver, the Metropolitan State College of Denver, and the Community College of Denver. After completing the interviews, without further consultation, this team selected *significant* images, generated descriptive metadata, and produced interpretative video. Lacking community involvement, the “Auraria Campus” project on the CC&W website remains largely ignored by potential campus and community viewers.

Displaced Aurarians: The Su Teatro Theatre Project

Learning from this experience, staff worked closely with Displaced Aurarians throughout the next project, which originated in a request from the founding director and resident playwright of the local Chicano theater, El Centro Su Teatro. He wanted images from the old Auraria neighborhood to enhance the theater’s production of *The Westside Oratorio*. The opera commemorates the sacrifices made by former residents who relocated so that future generations could earn higher education. From the outset, former community members were engaged in the project. Well-connected community leaders contacted their former neighbors, who are now dispersed throughout the Denver metropolitan area, and asked them to share photographs from shoeboxes and family scrapbooks.

Project outcomes now enhance productions of Su Teatro’s *Westside Oratorio*. In addition, a short promotional video was produced to promote awareness of the Displaced Aurarian Scholarship benefit, which offers full tuition and fees to three generations of descendents. To ensure community endorsement, the recruitment video was presented to first, second,

and third generation Displaced Aurarians at a viewing sponsored by the Displaced Aurarians Association, which organized to protest relocation in the 1970s. Multigenerational community members suggested content changes and recommended distribution strategies, including YouTube and high school college advisement offices, which informed final editing and distribution decisions. In addition, the audience committed to resume meeting again as the fortieth anniversary of their relocation approaches.

Latinos/Hispanics in Colorado

Building on the emerging co-creation concept, the Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library (CC&W) initiated a more ambitious third project. The Latinos/Hispanics in Colorado project originated with the discovery among community members that only 136 of the 100,000 images in the Denver Public Library (DPL) online photograph collection might represent a Hispanic experience. Metadata for these photographs provided little information; typically noting “unnamed person” or “may be Hispanic or may be Italian” (see tables 1 and 2, which compare DPL and CC&W images and metadata). Therefore, from the outset, the images in this DPL *subcollection* included names, dates, locations, and other significant historical information—from the perspective of the photograph owner and his/her cultural community.

As the project manager recalls, “With each photograph collected, countless stories and memories emerged.” These primary sources conveyed the diversity of Hispanic experiences excluded from general treatments of Colorado’s public history. The timeliness of this project also became clear. An elderly man, who had heard about the project while recovering from a stroke, delivered a box of photographs and other ephemeral material. Many items dated back before Colorado borders were established and the area was part of the New Mexico Territory. During his recovery, he recognized that these precious memories would be lost at his death, since his only child placed no value on the collection. In subsequent visits, he told stories that informed metadata co-creation. Another elderly Hispanic participant excitedly reported to the project manager that she had reconnected with four relatives who found her name when they searched the Internet after her photograph metadata was added to DPL’s online image collection. In a complementary effort to promote usage of the Latino/Hispanics in the Colorado photograph collection, community members worked with a Hispanic videographer to produce *Salvaje y Libre* (Wild and Free), in which the Spanish-speaking actress concludes: “Yo soy Colorado” (I am Colorado.)

“Recuerdos Hablados”/Memories Spoken

As this continuum of engagement illustrates, former subjects now determine significance for cultural heritage collections and interpretations.

Table 1. Comparison of DPL and CC&W images and metadata

| Denver Public Library | Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library |
|--|---|
|  |  |
| <p>Title Miners and Donkey Haul Beams Call Number CHS.X4921 Summary Three miners stand near a burro that is loaded with wood beams possibly in Las Animas County, Colorado. The beams are milled wood and some are shaped and notched. The men wear work clothes. Some of the miners may be Hispanic or Italian. A dog stands on a dirt road in the distance. Date [between 1880 and 1900?] Collection Colorado Historical Society, Trinidad collection Notes Title supplied. Number inked on original negative and reproduced in print: "690." Accession number: 84.193.172 Handwritten on envelope: "Mining-Miners-Misc." Medium 1 photographic print ; 18 x 13 cm. (7 x 5 in.) Condition Condition: discolored. Copyright Copyright restrictions apply to the use of this image. For more information or to obtain a photographic</p> | <p>Title Road Crew, Costilla County Call Number AUR-2119 Summary Hispanic American men, employed on a WPA road project, pose near a tractor and a road grader on a dirt road probably in Costilla County, Colorado. The men wear work clothes and broad brimmed hats. The man who stands on the road grader is identified as Diego Antonio Gallegos. Date [1935?] Notes Content derived from inventory prepared by Dana EchoHawk. From inventory: "Diego Antonio Gallegos (2nd from far right) worked on the WPA project driving a grader and building roads and bridges in the San Luis Valley." (Hispanic Pioneers in Colorado and New Mexico, Colorado Society of Hispanic Genealogy, p. 230). Scanned image from loaned collection. Scan of photograph from: Hispanic pioneers in Colorado and New Mexico / Colorado Society of Hispanic Genealogy, 2006. Source: Frank Gallegos.</p> |

Table 1. (continued)

| Denver Public Library | Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library |
|--|---|
| URL | Source |
| reproduction of this image, contact the Colorado Historical Society, 1300 Broadway Denver, Colorado 80203. | Title inked on original and reproduced in scanned image. loan; Colorado Society of Hispanic Genealogy; 2010. |
| http://photoswest.org/ cgi-bin/imager?20004921 +CHS.X4921</FONT< a>> | Copyright |
| | Copyright restrictions applying to use or reproduction of this image available from the Colorado Society of Hispanic Genealogy, Denver, Colorado. |
| | URL |
| | http://photoswest.org/ cgi-bin/mager?00152119 +AUR-2119 |

Table 2. Comparison of DPL and CC&W images and metadata



| Denver Public Library | Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| Title | Title |
| Wedding Portrait | Eusebio Chacón and Sophia Barela |
| Alternative Title | Call |
| penciled on glass negative : Faustino Costallo | Number |
| Call | Summary |
| CHS.X6009 | AUR-2087 Studio portrait of Hispanic American Eusebio Chacón, son of Rafael Chacón, and his wife, Sophia Barela de Chacón. They are dressed in their wedding clothes. Eusebio sits in a chair, he wears a suit and a white bow tie, he has a mustache and his hair is parted on the side. His wife stands |
| Number | |
| Studio portrait of two couples, probably Hispanic, the men wear suits and the women wear wedding gowns with lace, veils, and flowers. | |

Table 2. (continued)

| Denver Public Library | Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library |
|---|--|
| <p>Date 1926, September 3.</p> <p>Collection Colorado Historical Society, Garrison collection</p> <p>Notes Pencil on sleeve: "BPF - group - bridal," "A4.J5," "G-150." Title supplied. Accession number: 98.217.135 Attribution for the Garrison collection is uncertain, photographed by either Fred Garrison or Ola Aftinson Garrison.</p> | <p>beside him, she wears a wedding gown and veil and holds a bouquet. They pose in front of a painted backdrop. Eusebio practiced law and was the Interpreter for the Court of Private Land Claims and a Deputy District Attorney for Las Animas County in Trinidad, Colorado. 1891.</p> <p>Date</p> <p>Notes Content derived from inventory prepared by Dana EchoHawk.</p> |
| <p>Medium 1 negative : glass ; 22 x 17 cm. (8 1/2 x 7 1/2 in.)</p> | <p>Scanned image from loaned collection.</p> |
| <p>Copyright Copyright restrictions apply to the use of this image. For more information or to obtain a photographic reproduction of this image, contact the Colorado Historical Society 1300 Broadway Denver, Colorado 80203.</p> | <p>Scan of photograph from: Hispanic pioneers in Colorado and New Mexico / Colorado Society of Hispanic Genealogy, 2006. Source: Denise Lavato. From inventory: "Eusebio Chacón married Sophia Barela in 1891 in the Chapel of San Francisco in Barela, Colorado. Sophia's father was Senator Barela. Their wedding celebration was held at her father's ranch, El Porvenir. Eusebio practiced law in Trinidad Colorado where he also served as an Interpreter for the Court of Private Land Claims and a Deputy District Attorney for Las Animas County." (Hispanic Pioneers in Colorado and New Mexico, Colorado Society of Hispanic Genealogy, p. 187).</p> |
| <p>URL <a href="http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?20006009+CHS.X6009/<FONT< a>>">http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?20006009+CHS.X6009/<FONT< a>></p> | <p>Title from inventory.</p> |
| | <p>Source Loan; Colorado Society of Hispanic Genealogy; 2010.</p> |
| | <p>Copyright Copyright restrictions applying to use or reproduction of this image available from the Colorado Society of Hispanic Genealogy, Denver, Colorado.</p> |
| | <p>URL http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?00152087+AUR-2087</p> |

Within the traditional Hispanic culture, *cuenteros* or storytellers served this role. Now, in the digital age, cultural community members working together with library, archive, and museum staff can preserve cultural memory and teach memory preservation through a cultural heritage lens. Active partnership agreements among cultural heritage institutions now ensure coordinated advancement of this *Recuerdos Hablados/Memories Spoken* initiative, a phrase selected by Hispanic community members. It encompasses the Displaced Aurarians and the Latinos/Hispanics in Colorado initiative, as well as future community-generated digital knowledge projects that will be introduced at the Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library. In response to the positive regard for these digital knowledge initiatives, other cultural organizations have now agreed to partner with CC&W, including the History Colorado/The Colorado Historical Society and Museo de las Americas, thereby building on the strong foundation established by the founding partnership with the Denver Public Library.

The involvement of multiple cultural heritage entities is reflective of the distinctive nature of Latino/Hispanic knowledge: “In Latino communities, archives exist in multiple forms. People have collected a compendium of embodied knowledge—information that is passed on by the body through rituals, cooking, dancing, and oratory. . . . It is an image bank of sources, concerns, and aspirations. In addition, many groups have established oral and written archives by collecting the stories of ordinary folk, asking them about their experiences and . . . traditions, particularly the vernacular expressions” (Ybarra-Frausto, 2005, p. 10).

Consequently, *Recuerdos Hablados/Memories Spoken* knowledge collection and interpretation activities are guided by value principles for authentic community information: receive the information with accuracy, store the information with integrity beyond doubt, retrieve the information without amendment, apply appropriate judgments on the use of the information, and pass the information along appropriately (Winiata, 2002). Therefore, community-generated judgments on cultural significance connect form, content, and context in an interplay among cultural community members and digital content viewers to foster vital and affirmative understandings of the past and visions for the future.

REFLECTIONS ON SIGNIFICANCE

The digital knowledge creation projects at the Center for Colorado & the West at Auraria Library reflect varying levels of community member involvement, culminating in collaborative curation and interpretation partnerships. The evolution of inclusive practices is timely because “We stand today at a critical point in the history of information. The means for creating and consuming information are increasing and evolving. The amount of information is rapidly expanding, while processes we used to qualify in-

formation truth are shifting from centralization to broader civic participation” (Cordes, 2009, p. 1). Rich anecdotal evidence suggests that engaged Hispanic participants experienced significant validation of their collective knowledge. Concurrently, their project participation challenged the hegemony of the dominant “legacy of conquest” memories recorded in standard textbooks on the American West (Limerick, 1987).

These opposing viewpoints with their dissimilar power bases suggest the authority of dominant social constructs, which represent a particular version of reality and construction of truth that regulates “what is said and written and passes for more or less orderly thought and exchange of ideas” (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 2). Such codified knowledge is viewed as ordering and structuring the world, including the collection, organization, and interpretation of knowledge within libraries, archives, and other memory institutions. Traditionally these organizations have served a “powerful and influential position as keepers of eternal truth, shapers of memory and guardians of sanctioned knowledge” (Lloyd, 2007, p. 56) in physical formats. Today these institutions must also ensure the recognition, survival, and preservation of cultural knowledge in digital form (Cook, 2001) so that this knowledge is accessible to present and future generations. In so doing, shapers of institutional policies and practices must challenge comfortable assumptions about significance, asking: “Whose social values? Which voices would determine them? Which interpretations should be deemed valuable?” (Cook, 2001, p. 61). This professional mandate recognizes that “the process of creating, locating, evaluating, and using information in various forms does not happen in a vacuum, away from community contexts where meanings and values are in play” (Harris, 2008, p. 250).

Were these ideas applied in institutions that build repositories of local knowledge throughout the world, the impact on collective global memory would be enormous. Therefore, it is unfortunate that the concept of significance has received little attention (Pymm, 2006). Rather, determining and assigning significance proceeds as a largely uncontested and unexplored practice.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

“While the great can speak for themselves, or by the tongues of their admirers, the humble are apt to live inarticulate and die unheard” (Antin, 1969, p. 88). Change in professional thinking is urgently needed in “guarding against collective amnesia” (UNESCO, n.d.). The new information landscape requires librarians, archivists, and curators to work collaboratively to ensure inclusive collection and interpretation approaches, working with and for underrepresented communities.

This mandate arises at a time when academic libraries are challenged to find a unique niche amid a rapidly changing environment in which us-

ers are changing, content is changing, higher education is changing, and research is taking new forms (Law, 2009). In contrast, despite the incremental growth in digital content in recent years, libraries' responses have been rather timid and oftentimes ineffectual. Libraries have tended to focus on commercially available materials, especially journals, necessitating considerable amounts of time and energy devoted to licensing and consortial negotiations, which are not basically different from the ones that publishers offer to consortia in other countries. Secondly, libraries have digitized quantities of the paper collections already owned (Law, 2009), creating "cabinets of curiosity" that rarely offer added value. Heritage museums and research archives also struggle to remain relevant today, as "relevance" is increasingly challenged by the omnipresence of Web 2.0 social networking and knowledge production technologies (Wawrzaszek & Wedaman, 2008).

In this dynamically changing environment, the identification and preservation of significant local knowledge, augmented by *authentic* community-generated metadata to establish context, can generate considerable value and advance *comparative advantage*. Throughout, arbitrators of value must vigilantly (re)think the concept of significance. Since this role is fraught with biases and subjectivities resulting from personal social, economic, historical, academic, and political influences, perhaps the wiser path is to avoid designations of significance altogether. Instead, "Should we focus on representation, which can be framed within distinct historical, social, or economic periods, and which actively recognizes both dominant and marginalized or silenced voices?" (Lloyd, 2007, p. 64). The dialogue necessary to consider these questions, including the significance of the construct of significance, positions heritage organizations as conveners of conversation (Lankes et al., 2007) "with all groups who claim a role in society as keepers of collective memory. . . . The consequences of not doing so will be narrow and structured remembering, which will fail to reflect the rich diversity of cultural life and will heighten the threat of collective amnesia" (Lloyd, 2007, p. 64).

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