Occidental College

United American Indian Involvement Photo Archival Project

Kelsey Martin

June 1, 2019 to August 30, 2019

United States of America

Project background:

Sustainable peace manifests differently depending on the historical and social context of a given community. The United American Indian Involvement (UAII) is a Native American social services agency that has pursued sustainable peace for the urban Native American community in Los Angeles for over 40 years. UAII provides psychological, medical, spiritual, and cultural support to people from over 200 different tribal nations. For the past four years, a cross discipline team including Joseph Quintana, UAII's Development Director, Celestina Castillo, Director of Occidental College's Center for Community Based Learning, and myself, have collaborated to create UAII's Community Photograph Archive. UAII's archive is comprised of over 4,000 photographs documenting the history of their community from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. This project proposal aims to create sustainable community peace by allocating $5,000 dollars to fund professional digitization of UAII's archive and $600 to compensate community members with a livable wage stipend for their participation in photo identification meetings.

Project goal:

The highest priority of this community based research project is to construct and inform the archive by actively engaging with UAII's community in a reciprocal manner that deconstructs the hierarchy between academic and community knowledge. In order to meet this goal, the research team facilitates informal meetings with various community stakeholders in order to gather identifying information and stories in regards to the contents of the photos. These meetings involve showing a selection of digitized photographs to the community members and discussing the people, places, and events that the group members recognized. All of the information shared in these meetings is recorded and added to the archival metadata, which is the official repository for identifying information. It is highly uncommon for archives to be informed by the community that the archive documents, but this approach is fundamental to maintaining an equitable and community-centered archive.

Project obstacles:

The photo identification meetings are not always easy. The history of Native peoples in the urban center of Los Angeles is riddled with government-sanctioned economic marginalization, police brutality, and disproportionate incarceration rates. Thus, reviewing thousands of photographs, which document this history, is at times a trying task for the community members who dedicate their time to this project. Some photographs clearly depict Native people living on the streets in Skid Row. While others show community members who have passed on, frequently from substance addiction.

Despite the difficult memories that these photographs bring to mind, many community members encourage the research team to continue holding photo identification meetings. The older community

members want to guarantee that the larger UAII community is aware of the history of the organization and of the urban Native American experience. On a more individual level, the community members who participate in the photo identification meetings feel that reflecting on the variety of memories the photographs bring to mind helps them find peace with the past.

These photo identification meetings, despite their difficulties, are critical to creating a comprehensive archive that allows UAII's urban Native community in Los Angeles to reflect on their complicated history and ultimately heal. Unfortunately, the small number of currently digitized photographs inhibits the frequency of the meetings because many of UAII's community members are uncomfortable or unable to travel to Occidental College's campus in northeast Los Angeles to view the originals of the photographs. Currently, the meetings are on hold awaiting further digitization, which is a lengthy process when conducted by the research team.

Plan for creating sustainable peace:

Fully digitizing the archival photographs would allow the research team to bring digital copies of the photographs to wherever the community members are located within the city. The organization Home Archive Photo Scanning Services will conduct a comprehensive digitization of the archive at Occidental College where the archive is currently on temporary loan from UAII. The scans will belong to UAII and will be stored with the archive files.

Once the archive is fully digitized the research team will be able to continue holding photo identification sessions with more community members. The continuation of these meetings will bolster the content of the archive. A comprehensive archive will lead to a more complete understanding of UAII's community's history in Los Angeles. The organization plans to use the archive as an educational tool for youth, a way of memory sharing and reflection for elders, and as a method of informing people outside of the community about the nuanced experience of being Native American in an urban metropolis.

Project leader background:

As a second-generation Chamorro woman, it is my personal, academic, and professional goal to uplift and make space for Indigenous voices. I am a firm adherent to community based learning and research pedagogy, which aims to create positive sustainable change by working in equal partnership with community partners. Given my dedication to community based work, I aim to become a professor of Indigenous studies with a concentration in community based learning.

I began working on the UAII project two and a half years ago as part of my work at the Occidental College Center for Community Based Learning. As part of my work with UAII, I have been afforded the opportunity to present on the archive at two national conferences: The Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums Conference and the Imagining America National Gathering. At both conferences I was the only presenter discussing a community-based archive documenting the history of urban Native peoples. These opportunities allowed me to reflect on the importance of documenting urban Native histories and embedding a community's voice in the community's history.