**Discretionary Funding Proposal**

***El Museo del Norte* Virtual Museum:
A Community/University Research Collaboration**

Maria Cotera
Associate Professor
Department of American Culture
Women’s Studies Department

**Background**

In 2009 I initiated a public history project, ***El Museo del Norte***,in collaboration with a coalition of Detroit-based Latina/o arts and culture organizations. The objective of this project is to document the history of Latina/os in the Midwest and laying the groundwork for a museum and cultural center focused on community stories. Since the project’s initiation we have spearheaded a broad-ranging conversation around community expectations and desires regarding the purpose, goals, and responsibilities of a Latina/o museum in Southwest Detroit, and have designed a series of innovative “pop-up museums” that utilize oral history and local archives to tell the stories of Latina/os in Michigan. Through these events, as well as our upcoming “scanning days” (in which we will scan family archives and teach community members about how to preserve documents) the ***El Museo del Norte*** community/university partnership hopes to develop archival and museological literacy among both UM students and the Michigan Latina/o community, expanding the audience for our museum as well as its collection.

In 2012, ***El Museo del Norte*** joined forces with the University of Michigan School of Social Work and People’s Community Services (a Southwest Detroit social service agency) to create a community center in the heart of Southwest Detroit, The Boulevard House, which will serve a site for the development of local arts, culture, and history projects, and will be the first official home of ***El Museo del Norte***.

In 2013, I developed a model for a practicum-based community history course, Community Stories (for which I received a Quick Wins grant). The Community Stories course offers undergraduate students the opportunity to develop a local history research project (collecting archives and oral histories) and create a historical exhibit. Students from the course are currently working on an exhibit with students in the School of Art an Design for ***El Museo del Norte’s*** Spring 2014 season. For more on the ***El Museo del Norte*** project please see: <http://www.elmuseodelnorte.org>

**Proposal Narrative**

***Creating a “Virtual Museum” to Document Latina/o History in Michigan***

We would like to build on the successes of this community/university collaboration and develop an online interface that can facilitate interchanges between community members interested in the museum’s growing collection and students and faculty interested in learning more about archives, museums, and the history of Latinos in the Midwest. We believe that a “virtual museum” can offer both an opportunity for this exchange and an important site for the development of scholarly knowledge about Latina/os in the Midwest.

Last year the ***El Museo del Norte*** project and its team of student interns uncovered two significant archival collections with broad ramifications for Michigan Latina/o history: The Luci Cruz Gajec collection and the José Guadiana collection. Both of these collections include priceless photos, correspondence and artifacts that document the rich social and political life of Latinos in Southeastern Michigan. We have developed a partnership with the Bentley Historical Library, which will receive the bulk of the physical collection, but we are scanning and digitizing the materials before moving them into the Bentley so that we can insure that the community (whose history they document) can continue to have easy access to them. Indeed, we see these two substantial collections as an “anchor” for ***El Museo del Norte’s*** growing community history collection and an important resource from which scholars, students, and community members can build collaborative historical displays for the public.

We are requesting discretionary funding to accomplish four related goals:

1. **We want to build an online digital collection for *El Museo del Norte***
(our “virtual museum”) to provide a robust and user-friendly interface that will allow visitors to search the archive and even add to it. Our model is the South Asian American Digital Archive, an open-access digital collection that allows users to search an archive of images and documents, as well as upload their own stories to enrich the collection: (<http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/>). We see SAADA’s website as the “gold standard” for online interactive archival collections and we would like to build our own virtual museum that emulates many of its unique features. I have been discussing this model with Samip Mallick, SAADA’s founder, who will continue to advise us as we develop our own online collection.

Developing this online collection is vital to the success of our community/university collaboration for three reasons:

* First, it will create a **public access point** for our archive to serve community members who do not feel comfortable, or are not able, to travel to the University to view the archives we are collecting.
* Second, it will be an important **resource for scholars** interested in the history of Latinos in the Midwest, who can access otherwise unavailable archival materials that document this history through our website.
* Third, it will be an **important resource to teachers and students** who wish to learn more about the history of Latinos in Michigan and the Midwest. I am teaching my practice-based oral history and archive collection course in the Fall of 2014 (Community Stories) in which students will collect local archives and oral histories. *It is vital that a robust digital repository is up and running by the end of the summer in order to facilitate the organization and preservation of the archives and oral histories that our students collect*. Student work will not only help to build our online archive, it will also form the basis for our next exhibit at the Boulevard House (2015).
1. **We would like to create a set of interactive tools** that allow users of the collection to contribute their own stories to the archive, both in person (at one of our upcoming exhibitions or “scanning days”), and through our website. In particular, we are conceptualizing a tool that allows exhibit visitors to map their family stories of migration using the relatively simple technology of an Ipad and projection system. This interactive tool will be particularly important as we develop travelling exhibits for other locations across Michigan. We are working with students from the School of Art and Design and the School of Architecture and Urban Planning, as well as consultants at the Digital Media Commons to develop these interactive tools and we hope to premiere them at our student curated oral history exhibition in the Fall of 2015.
2. **We will develop a historical exhibition in the Fall of 2015** that will feature the oral histories and archives that students collect in my Community Stories course (Fall 2014). The exhibit will be designed in collaboration with undergraduates from the School of Art and Design (working with Professor Hannah Smotrich), and will feature interactive tools that we will develop in consultation with the Digital Media Commons (see above)
3. **We will produce a casebook on *El Museo del Norte*** for the University of Iowa Press “Humanities in Public Life” book series. The book would provide a rich array of visuals and writing documenting the project’s history, and will include contributions from both university and community participants. Given the high cost of publishing illustrated books, we would like to work with the press to create a publication that would have both an online and offline presence. Creating a robust website and a searchable “virtual museum” would facilitate a multiplatform publication strategy for our casebook.

As more and more of our scholarship shifts toward the digital in the “post-print” era, research and scholarly exchange is increasingly happening through collaborative spaces such as the “virtual museum” we are proposing. Such spaces, which are readily accessible to both scholars and the communities they study, represent vital new avenues for community/university collaborations, teaching, and research that should receive the same support as more traditional sites of scholarly exchange like academic journals, classrooms, and conferences. We see ***El Museo del Norte’s*** “virtual museum” as much more than a website or a database for images—we see it as a site for the production of new community-based knowledge, and a potential model for how our scholarship can enrich and reshape the public sphere.

**Budget Justification**

The majority of our costs will be incurred in the following activities: 1) building our website; 2) cataloguing existing digital archives and oral histories; 3) training students to use the archive (Summer/Fall 2014); and 4) managing the uploaded materials.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Virtual Museum Online Presence:**Materials currently in the El Museo del Norte collection do not have a permanent digital home. The bulk of the funds requested will be used to build a customized, open source-based website built on either Omeka or Drupal that will be the permanent home of these materials. This webspace will house *El Museo* digital artifacts in a safe repository space that will feature functionality for community members to register and become a part of the materials identification and description process. This site will also feature a digital display space for curated *El Museo del Norte* Collections. The webspace will provide easy functionality for approved members to curate exhibitions of original materials. This website will also provide other essential functionality such as an events calendar, public forum space, and public information about the *El Museo* project and mission.These funds will be used to pay a contracted web developer to design and implement the website. This contract work will cooperate closely with the digital archivist in uploading existing *El Museo* digital content to the web space once prepared. Costs have been estimated based on consultation with UM web developers | 10,000 |
| Functionality configuration and development – web development contract work rate $25 an hour for 200 hours | 5,000 |
| Interface content configuration and development – web design contract work rate $25 an hour for 200 hours | 5,000 |
| ***El Museo* Internships**An essential part of our mission is fulfilled when students work in the *El Museo* physical and virtual archives, where undergraduate and graduate students get to understand participatory community history-making first hand. These funds will pay for one work-study student for a term (three months), as well as provide basic support for archival consultation and management for the grant term (six months).  | 11,160 |
| Summer term (June-August) 10-15 hrs/week at $12/hr  | 2,160 |
| Archival consultant 6 months at 15 hours a week x $25 per hour | 9,000 |
| Hardware: Specialized equipment required for the 2015 exhibit as described above.  | 1200 |
| Digital Projector (for use with interactive tools in 2015 Historical exhibit) | 500  |
| Ipad (for use with interactive tools in 2015 Historical exhibit) | 700 |
| 2015 Exhibition Costs: | 1000 |
| Promotional materials, opening night refreshments and misc. expenses | 1000 |
| Total Requested: | 23,360 |
| IRWG CommitmentIn 2012 we secured a Collaborative Planning Grant from the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. We will use this money to cover expenses **beyond** the requested grant amount. | 7,000 |
| Quick Wins CommitmentA portion of our 2013 Quick Wins grant will be used to cover construction costs related to our Fall 2015 historical display | 2,000 |