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John Fenn, Michelle Stefano

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JOHN FENN AND
MICHELLE STEFANO

Sustaining Support for Community-Led Documentation at the American Folklife Center (and Beyond)

Since 2022, the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress has offered awards through the Community Collections Grant (CCG) program to support contemporary cultural documentation projects informed by community-based perspectives. This program is one component in a much larger initiative at the Library that is funded by a multi-year Mellon Foundation grant. As Mellon-funded activity comes to an end, leadership and staff at the American Folklife Center are considering how to sustain such a program into the future. This essay explores impacts of the CCG program for awardees, their communities, and the Center, while imagining what sustaining such a program means in light of the Center's upcoming fiftieth anniversary. Additionally, the essay poses questions about what it means to sustain such a program beyond the federal institutional home in which it originated.

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Public folklore, community, fieldwork, documentation, ethnographic
archives

IN AUGUST 2024, THE FIRST ONLINE COLLECTION from Community Collections Grant (CCG) projects was made publicly available on the Library of Congress (hereafter Library) website. Titled *Warp and Weft of Yap's Outer Islands: Backstrap Weaving in Micronesia*, the collection comprises four dozen photographs and 23 audio interviews, and documents the insights and livelihoods of women who safeguard traditional lavalava cloth weaving on the Ulithi Atoll, Yap State, Micronesia. This collection emerged from a 2022 CCG project co-led by researchers and distinguished weavers Modesta Yangmog and Regina Raigetel of the project's community, and Neil Mellen, Founding Director of the Habel Outer Islands Education Fund. In the announcement

JOHN FENN is the Head of Research and Programs for the American Folklife Center at the
Library of Congress

MICHELLE STEFANO is a Folklife Specialist with the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress

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for the collection launch, Yangmog expressed her gratitude for the “willingness of the interviewees for making this project possible for our young generation. I am happy that people will be able to know more about Ulithian culture” (Groce 2024).

Indeed, *Warp and Weft of Yap’s Outer Islands* is an archival collection and educational resource created by the tradition’s keepers and contextualized by their firsthand perspectives, for audiences far and wide. Preserved for the future in accordance with archival standards, it is equally a collection of rich cultural information created for themselves: for community members of today and tomorrow to actively sustain lavalava cloth weaving and the significance, meanings, and values it reflects. The insights and stories they have chosen to share form part of the public, historical, and cultural record housed at the American Folklife Center (Center) at the Library of Congress. The collection represents a diversity of contemporary community perspectives, in service to source and descendant communities, and present and future publics.

This celebrated milestone encapsulates several interrelated aims that have driven the development and stewardship of the CCG program since its inception in 2020. As outlined below, the program represents a confluence of principles, priorities, and practices in support of community-led cultural documentation and archival preservation. Notions of ethics and equity around access and representation underscore the program—and have long legacies as priorities that have informed the Center’s activity from its establishment in 1976. And as the Center prepares for its fiftieth anniversary, the impacts of the CCG grant program feature in visioning for the future, as it is an initiative that has bolstered community-centered efforts across archival and public programming activities.

Given that the CCG program was initially capped at 3 years by design—and the third cohort of awardees is currently running their projects—the Center is at a crucial



Figure 1. Modesta Yangmog interviewing master lavalava weaver Conchita Leyangrow of Lamotrek Atoll in Talguw on Yap Island, Micronesia, 2023. Photo by Tyra Uwel. Courtesy of Habel Outer Island Education Fund.

moment of reflection and planning. This perspective piece offers the Center an opportunity to reflect on the program's strengths and weaknesses, as well as on the potential modifications and conditions that would be necessary to continue it over the longer term. We start by historicizing the rationale of the program as part of a larger engagement initiative at the Library and in relation to longtime AFC efforts. We then offer details about the program's interrelated aims and the multifaceted support it has enabled the Center to provide to the 29 awardees since 2022. Grounded in examples from awardee projects, we then examine impacts—both beneficial and more challenging—on project communities and at the Center before considering questions and ideas around sustainability for such a program in the future.

In planning discussions at the Center, and in our writing here, we are guided by a twofold question: First, how should we approach sustaining a community-led collecting program modeled on CCG over the years to come? And second, how might this model be applicable elsewhere, at various geographic and financial scales? Ultimately, it is our hope that the insights we share can help contribute to a growth of longer-term, sustainable support for community-led ethnographic research, documentation, and archival activities by institutions, organizations, and programs at regional, state, and/or local levels, for which the CCG program—or aspects of it—may provide a model.

A brief note on the role and history of the Center within the Library is useful here. Established in 1976 by an act of Congress known as the American Folklife Preservation Act (Public Law 94–201), the Center has been a dynamic research and custodial unit within the Library. The Center fulfills its charge to preserve and present folklife through collection stewardship, reference and researcher support, and a range of public programs. In many ways, the CCG program under consideration in this essay intersects with all three of these major areas of the Center's activities. A further note on Center staff and their roles in the broader CCG program as well as this essay: All individuals identified below as staff are employees at the Library at the time of this writing. Each of them, including the authors of this piece, have been centrally involved in the CCG program alongside several others not identified by name. It has been a team effort across the board. Considering the collaborative aspects of the program and the Center's work overall, the pronoun “we” is used in the essay to refer either to the Center as a whole or to the authors. In all cases, context determines the referent.

Background and Rationale

Late in December 2020, the Librarian of Congress, Dr. Carla Hayden, accepted a \$15 million grant from the Mellon Foundation on behalf of the Library to fund the *Of the People: Widening the Path* initiative. This initiative sought to create “new opportunities for more Americans to engage with the Library of Congress and to add their perspectives to the Library's collections, allowing the national library to share a more inclusive American story” (Library of Congress 2022). The American Folklife Center's Community Collections Grant program has been one of the core programmatic arms within the larger initiative. Since this was a pilot program, the Center intentionally allocated 3 years of project awards, with the goal of funding up to 10 projects per year. Beyond funding, the Center also built in technical and logistical

support for project teams by drawing on staff skill sets—including guidance on field-work practices, preparation of digital collection items for archiving, and navigating federal reporting for grants. It is important to note that we developed this program as a grant for cultural documentation projects accessible to first-time applicants and communities who often did not see themselves as eligible for such funding. The initial term of the 4-year grant from the Mellon Foundation has been extended by 2 years, and all grant-funded activity at the Library under the *Of the People* banner will end in December 2026.

In designing the CCG program, we leaned into a core *ethos* of *self-representation* as a through line in the creation of ethnographic archival collections and the field-work from which such collections derive. While the Center's holdings document a diversity of cultural communities and practices, from across the United States and beyond, many of our collections were created by folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and anthropologists, among others, from *outside* of the communities documented. With the CCG program, we wanted to foreground community perspectives by supporting fieldwork guided by communities and their understandings of the practices, traditions, and expressions they embody and wish to document. It was with this *ethos* in mind that we set out to develop a call for proposals (or "Notice of Funding Opportunity"), soliciting contemporary cultural documentation projects for funding consideration.

While the CCG program itself is new, the model put into place is founded on long-standing priorities and practices at the Center. Since its earliest days, with the "field survey" cultural documentation projects that it led from 1977 through the 1990s in urban, suburban, and rural regions across the country, the ethical prioritization of community involvement and consultation has been vital to the development of the Center's collections and has been driven by a heightened sense of responsibility in ensuring more equitable inclusion of diverse community perspectives in the archival collections and programming. In undertaking the field surveys, fieldworkers made sure to build relationships with community leaders, culture keepers, and artists from the start, collaborating on project design and planning, and learning from them their agendas and needs for shaping project aims and implementation.

Moreover, reflexive attention to ethical stewardship of cultural materials in the archives has informed other projects over the years, from our work on the Federal Cylinder Project (1977–1987) and the launch of the digital Omaha Indian Music collection in the early 2000s, through to the multi-year collaborative curation project with Passamaquoddy Tribal Officers and elders that resulted in the Ancestral Voices online presentation (Gray 1996; Library of Congress 2018). To the greatest extent possible, the Center's librarians, archivists, folklorists, and ethnomusicologists strive to ensure that the documentation held in our archives exists within an environment marked also by ethical stewardship and cultural sensitivity to access and inclusion.

Furthermore, advancing the Center's collaborative approaches to documentation and preservation well into the twenty-first century, and institutionalizing on a routine basis its community-centered *ethos*, is the Archie Green Fellowship program, which supports projects that document—and shine needed light on—people's occupational folklife throughout the United States, encouraging proposals anchored in close relationships between applicants and project communities since 2010. For over

a decade, staff have assisted Fellows with their fieldwork, creation of metadata, and preparation of their documentation to become AFC collections, made also available on the Library website. In fact, the Archie Green Fellowship program has served in large part as a template for the CCG program, not only in terms of its community-led rationale, but also logistically, in terms of structuring awardee-staff collaborative processes, as well as internal coordination and archival workflows. Recognizing that the CCG program has valence as both a new initiative and one that draws strongly on antecedents throughout the Center's nearly 50-year history, we have approached this piece as a chance to reflect on its outcomes and potential sustainability. In the following sections, we offer perspectives on the program's values, in terms of its achieved aims as well as impacts, before discussing what its sustainability looks like at the national level and possibly beyond the federal domain. Launching and stewarding the program has entailed a series of heavy lifts for staff in the Center and across the Library, but the value has been high and should be considered in multiple ways.

Community Collections Grant Overview and Aims

From 2022 through 2024, each year, 10 CCG awardees, who were either organizational or individual applicants, have been supported with up to \$50,000 to undertake cultural research and documentation projects within their communities over the course of 12 months. If financial and logistical barriers to facilitating such work are removed, the funds can be used for project team labor; participant honoraria; travel and accommodation; purchasing equipment such as cameras, laptops, and hard drives; or for other costs. At the end of the projects, the documentation is submitted to the Center to become archival collections that are also made available on the Library's website (loc.gov), alongside the *Warp and Weft of Yap's Outer Islands* collection noted earlier. In general, project teams have created born-digital audio, video, and photographic materials, in addition to submitting manuscript materials, including field notes, community ephemera, and interview transcriptions and translations. Importantly, as we emphasize throughout, the program's underlying aim has been to directly support awardees' self-representation in archival collections and the ethnographic processes generating the collections. As such, decisions on what is submitted to the Center's archives, or made accessible online, are made by each project team.

The teams working on the awarded projects represent diverse cultural communities and social groups across a wide range of geographical contexts spanning 10 time zones—from Caribbean and Pacific islands, including Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, Hawai'i, Guam, and Micronesia, to urban, suburban, and rural areas of the South and Midwest, and the East and West Coasts. Just as diverse are the focal points of the projects, which have documented contemporary musical, dance, arts, and food traditions, community celebrations, festivals, and sacred events, as well as shared efforts in safeguarding their living cultural heritages, shedding important light on the economic, sociopolitical, and ecological challenges they face.

For instance, the 2022 CCG project of filmmaker Russell Oliver centers on coffee growing and production traditions in Yauco, Adjuntas, Jayuya, Guayanilla, Lares,

and Maricao, Puerto Rico, which Hurricane Fiona significantly disrupted in the Fall of that year. Through video interviews with longtime coffee farmers and makers, the project brought into focus the devastating effects of the climate crisis on their livelihoods while also exploring the traditional practices and shared experiences around coffee growing. Project team member Remy Rodriguez, of Fincas La Sombra, Guayanilla, explains:

As a coffee farmer in Puerto Rico, climate change is always a big concern. Prolonged droughts, irregular rain patterns, strong winds, and frequent storms or hurricanes are always a threat. Prolonged droughts affect coffee harvests by altering flowering events, mainly extending the season, thus increasing labor requirements and future productions. Storms and hurricanes threaten coffee production every year, mainly the harvest, which coincides with hurricane season. Higher temperatures increase pest and disease populations, which decrease coffee production, yields, as well as coffee quality. All these adverse climate change effects have a major impact on farm profitability. (Stefano and Oliver 2022)

Similar issues are surfaced in scholar and documentarian Tammy Greer's 2022 project, *"And We Are Still Here": Stories of Resilience and Sustainability from Houma Culture Bearers in Louisiana*. In documenting an array of traditions with United Houma Nation artists, such as half-hitch coil palmetto baskets, cypress baskets, four-strand braided palmetto baskets, wood carvings, palmetto huts, clay ovens, wattle and daub huts, and Spanish moss dolls, she notes that "most spoke about the rising bayous and coastal waters, and about more frequent and increasingly devastating hurricanes," as well as "the loss of understanding of our cultural ways, especially among youth" (Shankar and Greer 2022).

Reflecting the twofold aim of supporting documentation and archival preservation, as applicants need not have any training in either, Center staff work with each awardee team over the course of their projects to help them prepare their materials for preservation in the archives and online public presentation. The path to online presentation for awardee collections is lengthy due to multiple factors, not least of which are the time and labor needed for staff to accession and process project collections and ensure public access and meaningful engagement with them online. Yet, as discussed later, one of the most rewarding aspects of the program is the relationships that have been built along the way through ongoing collaboration between community documentarians and Center staff.

During the early phases of CCG projects, staff have convened a series of online group meetings to discuss with awardees their project plans and guide them in thinking about archival preservation and presentation of their efforts. Attending to these long-term ideas early on reflects the idea that the fieldworker is the *first* archivist. Topics of these meetings have included documentation methods and technological considerations, such as preservation standards in relation to different digital file formats; ethical and legal discussions on project participant permissions, collection copyright protections, and public access and use; as well as the creation of descriptive metadata to accompany project materials, especially for enhancing "discoverability" of

collection items by researchers and the public. From a recent interview with members of the CCG staff team, archivist Charlie Hosale, notes:

These discussions help us identify any unique plans—for instance, multiple team members on one grant working concurrently, or a desire to shoot extremely high-definition video—for which we need to account and respond. After teams have had a little time to start their documentation we conduct metadata trainings. These are in-depth, one-on-one conversations with each team about the metadata worksheet they're expected to use as they continue documenting, and eventually submit to us, along with their project materials, at the end. Those are fun conversations! (Stefano et al. 2024)

The group meetings run parallel to individualized work with awardees, as each project has a dedicated staff contact over the duration of their projects to assist with specific needs and concerns. At times, in-person meetings were necessary, with teams traveling to Washington, DC, for work with staff at the Center or staff traveling to project sites—with travel costs in either case being covered by the Library. It is through these group and one-on-one discussions that staff and awardee teams get to know each other, developing the trust that is needed for long-term collaboration and offering staff the chance to learn how to improve the process moving forward.

Another key component of the program is the opportunity for awardees to apply for an additional \$10,000 of funds to facilitate a public program toward the end of the documentation period.¹ Although optional, the majority of project teams have chosen to apply for support to create the time and space for sharing project outcomes within source communities. Over the years, project teams organized events that have included celebratory showcases of particular traditions, such as dance; community workshops, particularly for youth; discussion panels; and exhibitions of photographic materials from their projects. As video is commonly used for documentation, events have also included screenings of edited films, both rough and final cut, weaving participant interviews into broader narratives about their communities and cultural activities. At the time of this writing, the 2024 CCG awardee team based at Florida International University, whose project documents the longtime Goombay Festival of Little Bahamas and Coconut Grove, Miami, is drawing on the funding to build a much-needed online archive that brings together materials from the project and other local sources as a “one-stop” community history and cultural heritage resource.

In recent years, the Center has also supported awardee presentations at scholarly and professional conferences. In 2023, seven representatives from the 2022 and 2023 cohorts presented their projects at the annual meetings of the American Folklore Society and Louisiana Folklore Society. For the 2024 conference of the Society of American Archivists, staff organized the session “*Of the People*: Contemporary Digital Collecting with the American Folklife Center’s Community Collections Grants,” in which 2023 awardees Tameshia Rudd-Ridge and Jourdan Brunson shared their Dallas-based project *If Tenth Street Could Talk*, a collaboration between their organization, kinkofa, and Remembering Black Dallas, and the Tenth Street Residential Association. Rooted in archival research, community mapping, and interviews with community



Figure 2. Junkanoo performers make their way down Grand Avenue during the annual Goombay Festival in Coconut Grove, Miami, 2023. Photo courtesy of Aarti Mehta-Kroll.

elders, the project documents the cultural history—and current preservation activities of residents and activists—of the city’s Tenth Street Historic Freedman’s Town District, a highly significant yet continually overlooked African American neighborhood founded in the late 1880s as a Freedom Colony. During their presentation, they provided in-depth insights into their research and documentation methods and how the project is laying a needed foundation for meeting their larger, next-step plans.²

Furthermore, at the time of writing, Center staff are planning—in collaboration with project teams—a dynamic series of in-person and online public programs across 2025 to celebrate the work done by all CCG awardees. Anchored by two symposia in the Spring and Fall, other programs include concerts, performances, and film screenings for teams to share their projects—and the community traditions and perspectives they represent—with wider audiences at the Library. In addition, a series of *Folklife Today* podcast episodes and blog posts will spotlight awardee efforts as further opportunities to contextualize the audiovisual materials they created, for audiences far and wide.

On a rolling basis since July 2022, awardees have participated in publicizing their projects through the Library’s *Of the People* blog, which has more than 56,000 subscribers. Over 2 years, CCG awardees have been interviewed by Center staff—or have written pieces of their own—for the blog, offering descriptions of their community’s living heritage and featuring project photographs and excerpts from participant

interviews in discussions on the importance of their efforts.³ In a recent *Of the People* interview, Alex Lumelsky, who leads the 2024 project *Chaldeans: Portrait of an Evolving Community*, ends with the following note on the impacts of the grant:

Chaldeans are relatively small in number, but they are a distinct group of Christians who come from northern Iraq, with roots that date back to ancient Mesopotamia. Although Chaldean customs and traditions are quite different from those of Iraq's Arab majority, because both groups originate from Iraq, Chaldean culture is often overlooked and misunderstood.

Michigan is home to the largest concentration of Chaldeans in the United States and the community has had an outsized impact on the region. With the inclusion of this collection in the American Folklife Center, Chaldean culture will be documented, preserved, and shared with the public. The Chaldean American story is among many great immigrant stories and deserves to be understood and preserved. This collection will enable it to have its own place in history. (Nicholas and Lumelsky 2024)

In fulfilling *Of the People* goals, the CCG program has successfully created new opportunities for communities and groups to add their stories, experiences, and perspectives to the national collection stewarded at the Library—ensuring that a more diverse, inclusive, and thus representative “American story” is reflected, shared, and made accessible for all. As explored in the next section, positive outcomes of the program are many, benefitting the project teams and the Center in different—and overlapping—ways. And it is in exploring various facets of impact that we can move toward building a sustainable program as part of core Center activity for the coming decades.

Community Collections Grant Impacts

The CCG program has helped democratize the national record by supporting cultural documentation and archival projects in diverse communities spanning the United States and territories—the majority of which have had little to no representation in cultural heritage institutions at any geographic scale, let alone at the national level. Moreover, as echoed by Alex Lumelsky, the program has offered opportunities to not only enhance the record, but to correct it as well. This was certainly a motivation for Ashley Minner Jones, who led the 2024 CCG project *Beyond Baltimore Street: Living Lumbee Legacies*. Through interviews and photographs, the project documents the stories and experiences of elders in Baltimore's longstanding Lumbee community, and is anchored in the following goals:

The Baltimore Lumbee community is not currently well-represented in institutional archives, save a new collection based on our research to-date that we are building right now at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, where I imagine the materials we are producing for this project will also live. I say not “well-represented” because: 1) there is a general dearth of information; and 2) the information that is out there is often incorrect and offensive. I'm thankful for this opportunity to submit materials representing our folks authentically, on our own terms, and in reflection of this contemporary moment. I'm thankful the materials will be forever accessible to

the public. It means a lot to our elders to be recognized by the Library of Congress and it will mean a lot to all of us to have these enduring records of their lives and contributions. (Stefano and Minner Jones 2024)

Indeed, the greatest impacts of the CCG program—for awardees *and* the Center and Library—lie with its support of diverse communities’ leadership of ethnographic documentation and archival preservation processes, where explorations of their contemporary cultural livelihoods and practices are from their perspectives and, as Minner Jones states, on their terms.

With respect to the 2022 project, the *Louisiana Lao New Year Archive*, led by Phanat Xanamane, documenting religious, food, and costume/adornment practices at the heart of the yearly Louisiana Lao New Year Festival in rural Iberia Parish, team member Sami Haggood describes the impetus for applying:

Imagine you’re going about your last day of the year getting ready for New Year’s Eve and all the partying you will do to celebrate the new year. Your outfits are ready, you know exactly which places you’re going to get food from, and you have family and friends over to either make food or bring drinks. Now imagine someone shows up to your house with a film camera and a laptop and tells you: “Hello! We’re representing the Library of Congress and have come here to document your culture’s way of life. It’s because your personal history is in danger. Did you know that? Because it is. And this is our way of rescuing what makes your journey special!” What would you say to that? . . . This hypothetical situation, while a little melodramatic, are the stakes for a small yet notably distinct Laotian population nestled in the heart of America’s Cajun country. But of all the states, *why* Louisiana? And why is this so important? These were some of the questions and concerns that prompted Phanat Xanamane, a 1st-generation member of the Louisiana Lao community and community activist in that area, to apply for the AFC’s Community Collections Grant. (Haggood and Xanamane 2022)



Figure 3. Iron Mackfee Locklear (Lumbee) plays checkers with granddaughter Valerie Fox in his Glen Burnie, Maryland, backyard. Photo by Jill Fannon Prevas, 2024.

Whether referencing the visibility and status of the Library or the ways in which financial support has enabled much-needed cultural documentation, awardees have described positive impacts of the program within their communities at the local level. Several project teams have noted that their projects have helped to strengthen traditions, particularly for younger community members, and in terms of the long-term preservation of—and enhanced access to—the important cultural information their collections hold. Within his community, Xanamane has recognized that the use of the Lao language is diminishing, “which creates a difficult barrier for new generations to understand the traditions of the first.” He continues:

When language breaks down, so too does meaning and the understanding of important religious chanting rituals, music, and general social exchanges and references between people of Lao ethnicities. Our project begins to remedy this disjuncture between generations and repair rifts between traditional and mainstream culture so that younger generations may have a better point of access to understand their own heritage. (Haggood and Xanamane 2022)

Similarly, Tammy Greer identified the value of the project collection for immediate use within the Houma community and for future generations, as well. She stated:

No artist has turned us down for an interview. Our artists seem to consider this an opportunity for our tribal citizens and others to see some of Houma culture. We will give our documentation materials to the Library of Congress and, also, to the artists—and we will make a banner and short video for each artist so that they can use this documentation material as they apply for grants, as well as display and sell their art. We all see that now, because of this documentation, our youth for at least seven generations will have access to our artists/stories, their words, and their art. The artists seem to know that this is part of their legacy and that this is needed. And they have been so generous, so honest, and so vulnerable in their stories. It has really been an honor to do this work with these folks. (Shankar and Greer 2022)

The opportunity to facilitate public programs has also bolstered intergenerational transmission of shared cultural knowledge and experiences among project communities. In February 2023, awardee Karen Abdul-Malik, known also as Queen Nur, organized a culminating celebration for her project *Community on the Line: The Culture of Urban Soul Line Dancing in the Philadelphia, New Jersey and Delaware Tri-State Area*. The event included a panel discussion with longtime dancers, choreographers, and instructors (and project team members); the screening of a 30-minute film based on project footage and interviews; and—unsurprisingly—much line dancing to the tunes of DJs AJ Rivers and Chris Blues. The event brought together young and older members of the regional R&B/Soul Line Dance community, clearly showing that the tradition remains strong.⁴ During the discussion, panelists were asked if the future of line dancing is secure, to which the audience responded positively and enthusiastically, thanks in large part to younger dancers who are joining in, keeping it alive, and choreographing to more contemporary hip-hop music (Stefano and Abdul-Malik 2023). Nonetheless, one of Queen’s main objectives is that the project

should provide inspiration, and a model, for other R&B/Soul line dancing communities around the nation to document their stories, too, for which she often promotes the Center as a helpful, first-step resource.⁵

For some awardees, projects represent the beginning stages of prolonged efforts, expanding the scope and depth of their work toward larger-scale goals on the horizon. Tameshia Rudd-Ridge and Jourdan Brunson of the *If Tenth Street Could Talk* project summarize their next steps:

Kinkofa, Remembering Black Dallas, the Tenth Street Residential Association, descendants, and community advocates have joined forces to preserve the living memories of the community and to correct the historical record regarding Tenth Street's origin story. The research and fieldwork supported by the Community Collections Grant signifies a milestone in sharing the story of Tenth Street with a wider audience. The next step is to develop a traveling exhibition with the long-term aspiration of establishing permanent monuments and a cultural center in the community. In fostering a deeper appreciation of Tenth Street's rich history and contributions, our ultimate aim is to inspire and educate current and future generations on the enduring legacy of Freedom Colonies. (Stefano et al. 2023)

Before turning to the program's impacts within the Center, it is worth noting that the documentation that teams have generated is also serving as an advantageous resource and as cultural products for them to continue using, in addition to its use in applying for additional grants. Importantly, the materials they create during their projects are theirs to use, and a number of teams will be producing longer films and seeking out public screening opportunities, as touched on earlier.⁶ For example, musician and documentarian Boots Lupenui has produced the film *Unearthing the Lost Songs of Kohala*, based on his 2022 project exploring unrecorded "heirloom songs" of elders in the Kohala region of the northwest peninsula of the island of Hawai'i. About the project he notes: "We are trying to preserve these heirloom songs, these snapshots of our history, culture and way of life before the last remaining memories of them disappear forever" (Shankar and Lupenui 2022). To date, the film has been screened at cultural organizations in Hawai'i, and he will share it with the wider public during the 2025 CCG events at the Library. Such impact is about enabling platforms and opportunities to share cultural traditions with a range of audiences, while also building a base for further work with—and through—those cultural practices.

Impacts at the Center

As outlined above, the CCG program built on efforts by the Center to expand the diversity of community voices and viewpoints represented in the Center's archives and its array of public programs. Additionally, the CCG program prioritizes supporting community and individual self-representation in documentation and preservation processes, foregrounding their perspectives on how their cultural materials are to be accessed and used. An assessment of impact internally at the Center begins with an acknowledgment that the CCG program intersects and extends an *ethos* supporting ethical access and representation of diverse cultural traditions.

A notable impact of the program stems directly from its support of project team *control* over significant aspects of their grant projects—from research and documentation phases through preservation and public engagement processes, including the support for facilitating their own community events. Internally, this facet of impact has entailed staff commitment to developing rapport with awardees and their team members in one-on-one and group settings from the start and for the long term. At the core of these processes, and in putting ethics and equity into action, is the collaborative work between staff and teams on the creation of their metadata for every record—each audio interview, festival video, portrait photograph, and/or field note—they made. Beginning with early group meetings, when the metadata worksheet tool is first introduced, staff and teams meet on an individual basis over the course of the year to work together on it, reviewing progress and answering questions. On the importance of this process, Charlie Hosale explains:

The metadata workflow is designed to be collaborative and community led, reflecting the overarching *ethos* of the CCG program. We want teams to use their vernacular and not get bogged down or overwhelmed by controlled vocabulary, and we've designed a workflow that realizes these goals. Documentary work extends past creating recordings. It encompasses the description of those recordings, too. Establishing that shared understanding with CCG teams ensures that they create documentation that will carry meaning into the future, enriching public and researcher engagement with these important, primary-source materials. Of course, there has to be compromise, because Library systems are not designed to easily support every possible arrangement and description. So, we all work together to find the right solutions and realize CCG goals. (Stefano et al. 2024)

While time-consuming for both awardees and staff, this process ensures that each project team has agency in describing their project materials in their words, as they know best the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *why* of the collections they create. Archivist Sabine Lipten, who works with teams on the processing of their collection materials, discusses the significance of team-led metadata: “Traditionally in the archive, metadata is created by the archivist and not by the donor or subject of the collection. This has and can lead to issues of ‘archival gaps’ and under/misrepresentation of communities present in a repository” (Stefano et al. 2024).

In respecting community expertise and avoiding misrepresentation, the information awardees provide is used for framing each of their collection items on their respective Library web pages (and in the archives). This approach “allows for more accurate cultural description as well as community voices to really shine through and start to fill the archival gaps in AFC/Library collections,” Lipten adds (Stefano et al. 2024).

Supporting the CCG program has drawn on the dedication of considerable Library staff resources. On the back end, the program entails a range of administrative work in communication with other Library offices, as well as the larger *Of the People* team. From facilitating the yearly application process, aligning fiscal resources with grant cycles, and guiding awardees in fulfilling grant requirements, through coordinating Library promotion—for instance, CCG press releases, announcements, and blog posts—and internal reporting on its progress, there is no sidestepping the fact that the program has substantially impacted our workloads.

At the time of writing, the final cohort of awardees are more than halfway through the documentation phase of their projects, with fieldwork focused on an array of community practices in New York City, Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Miami, through to Michigan, Louisiana, New Mexico, California, and Washington State. The Center's staff continue to serve as liaisons with each of the 2024 teams, helping with general project questions and meeting about their metadata and other issues. In recent months, staff assisted with interim grant reports and applications for the optional public program funding. And at present, staff are planning group discussions that will prepare teams for the submission of their project documentation and final reports.

Working with project teams continues long after their project materials are accessioned by the Center. And, in all cases, work with the teams has continued past the original 12-month performance period detailed in the grant agreements, in order to get to the point of accessioning the materials. Many teams have formally requested no-cost extensions with justifications ranging from the impacts of natural disasters to the scheduling of public programs and to the need for more time to finish aspects of cultural documentation. All told, the requests awardees made for extensions to grant projects demonstrated to Center staff that one impact of community-centered work is the need to be flexible with timelines when it comes to managing accessioning and processing workflows. As mentioned throughout this essay, the Center sees the CCG program as an opportunity to build relationships with communities. Doing so has revealed that internal workflows may be at odds with external community timelines, and that working to find a resonant solution for all parties is impactful in many directions.

Considering some of the challenging internal impacts, sustaining a CCG-like program beyond Mellon Foundation support is an emergent priority for the Center as we look to our next 50 years. Both leadership and staff are currently exploring how the program can be modified and sustainably integrated into the Center's infrastructure, capacity, and core activity. To support these aims, conversations with staff and awardees alike on the program's strengths and weaknesses are ongoing. Additionally, we have recently invited all awardees to participate in a voluntary survey exploring their experiences with all aspects of this grant program. While we have drawn on applicant and awardee feedback from the start of the program to continuously enhance it, we launched the survey to offer opportunities for global feedback from which we can learn how we might refine a future iteration of the program.

A CCG Program for the Future

At the Center, discussions about sustaining a modified version of the CCG program interleave with planning for the commemoration of our fiftieth anniversary in 2026. In reflecting on the Center's history, and in building on its long-standing prioritization of community-centered efforts, we are looking across the next several decades to articulate core activities that include a redesigned CCG program that can be responsive to and reflective of contemporary cultures, issues, and events. Indeed, its *ethos* of community-led collecting connects to a number of growing movements in the archive and cultural heritage fields as well as broader technological advancements

that inform our thinking. First is the significant rise of self-documentation enabled by ubiquitous technology and decreased barriers to access and skills development. People engaged in a range of efforts—from social justice movements to the transmission of traditional knowledge and culture—can produce rich documentation in various formats without much technical or financial overhead. Second, an interrelated shift toward born-digital documentation in the cultural sphere has led to thoughtful discussions about post-custodial stewardship and the need for central institutional repositories. In particular, digital content can be safely maintained and accessed via multiple sites, including online platforms, which calls into question the longtime idea that a single repository is the only preservation option.

Third, the ongoing articulation of principles and protocols undergirding “slow archiving” (Christen and Anderson 2019), as revisited later, adumbrate a wide range of critical perspectives on data sovereignty, agency in archival representation, and the very colonizing principles that have underpinned ethnographic collecting and preservation for so long. In-depth discussion of any of these movements and concepts lies well beyond the scope of this essay, though it is sufficient to note that they are informing—and will continue to inform—the redesign of the CCG program as a cornerstone of the Center’s activity over the longer term. Driving these plans is also the philosophy underlying the Mellon Foundation’s Public Knowledge program—the specific program supporting the *Of the People* initiative. As stated on its website, the program seeks to “increase equitable access to deep knowledge that helps to build an informed, heterogeneous, and civically engaged society” by cultivating “networks and maintainable infrastructure, expand digital inclusion, and ensure that more authentic, reflective, and nuanced stories are revealed, preserved, and told” (Mellon Foundation 2024). In fact, these are principles that have guided staff in all steps of stewarding (and improving) the program since 2022, and they strongly align with not only the Library’s strategic priorities of recent years, but the Center’s longtime mission to enhance representation and inclusion in its archives and programming. Nevertheless, the values promoted through the Public Knowledge program can serve as a guideline that will likely inform our planning at the Center.

In terms of improving the program’s sustainability over the longer term, key considerations emerging from our internal reflections concern the challenges discussed earlier, which stem in large part from its current scale. Here, the issue of capacity is stressed: that is, staff bandwidth; the substantial administrative overhead it requires; and budgetary feasibility. As outlined, underlying questions regarding Center management and staff workloads relate to the multiyear engagement with project teams, and the archival ingest, processing, and preparation for online access to their collections. Moreover, budget concerns pertain primarily to securing sources of funding that can also be sustained. To address these issues and increase the program’s viability, it is clear that the Center will need to address scale with respect to the number of projects supported per grant period.

Relatedly, another consideration concerning scale draws on the slow archiving movement alluded to earlier. In brief, the movement calls for slower, more mindful archival practice, especially in terms of countering centuries-old colonial mind-sets of collecting everything—often with great urgency and without consideration of

those whose cultures are being recorded (and/or extracted). Slow archiving thereby underscores the centrality of community-centric involvement and perspectives in archives and archival processes on the whole (Christen and Anderson 2019). In this light, community perspectives and values may attend to the *what* and *how* of archival collections development, but also the timelines and pacing of the creation of such collections and their access. Over the course of the CCG program, staff were regularly reminded that project teams face their own sets of challenges and experience a range of time pressures that impact their work. As such, it appears that institutional timelines (and expectations) may be in tension with community timelines (and availability). Time allocated for a project is necessarily a component of scale and sustainability, and the emphasis on collaborative navigation at the heart of slow archiving resonates with our own experience as the institutional partner in CCG projects.

Although such modifications may seem obvious, in terms of their demonstrated need, underlying logic, and likely advantages, here we draw attention to considering their potential as ingredients for developing similar programs elsewhere, ideally adaptable to a range of institutional and organizational contexts and at varying geographic scales. Allocation of sufficient time will enable project teams to more readily meet their documentation and preservation goals, as determined by them when proposing, beginning, and undertaking their projects. Crucially, additional time provides needed flexibility for adjusting project plans, as well as an important buffer for possible—and often inevitable—unforeseen events while documentation activities are underway, which can include the learning of new information and exciting leads to follow. Extended time will likely foster greater access to resultant collections, as the most time-consuming activities for CCG awardees have been metadata generation and the creation of interview logs, transcriptions, and translations. Furthermore, just as significant is the time and support necessary for awardees to organize, to whatever extent possible, convenings of the project community, and others, for sharing the outcomes and products of their efforts.

Of course, aside from the funding and supportive infrastructure provided through *Of the People*, the Center enjoys a number of built-in benefits: The Library is its home, and the Library is home to one of the oldest and largest ethnographic archives in the world, with three dozen expert staff stewarding its growth and continued accessibility. Nonetheless, where similar efforts have yet to take root, and for where there may be support, aspects of the CCG program can be adoptable. For instance, it may be more practical for a potential program to partner with archival repositories at regional, state, and/or local levels for the preservation of resultant community documentation.

Conclusion

In announcing the Library's *Of the People* initiative, Dr. Carla Hayden, Librarian of Congress, stated: "By inviting communities of color and other underrepresented groups to partner on a wider, more inclusive path for connection to the Library of Congress, we invest in an enduring legacy of the multifaceted American story that truly is 'Of the People'" (Library of Congress 2021). Through the CCG program, staff at the Center have supported Hayden's vision for a "wider, more inclusive path for

connection to the Library of Congress” by actively working with teams on documentation projects anchored in community perspectives (Library of Congress 2021). As noted above, this program was designed to advance self-representation in the archival collections, but was also intended to build relationships that invite diverse communities to be part of the Library. The multiyear initiative has been full of challenges and opportunities for the Center and the community awardees alike.

Throughout the preceding pages, we have presented examples, questions, and issues that underscore the value of the CCG program and the desire to keep it going, albeit in a modified manner. But it is probably the words of one awardee that best sum up the perspective here. In discussing the work that he and his collaborators at Urban Artistry did through their 2022 CCG project on house music dance culture across the United States, artist, folklorist, and cultural advocate Junious Brickhouse notes that “if we do not take care to support communities to document their own cultures, then the products of our culture may take precedence over the processes by which we sustain them” (Stefano and Brickhouse 2022). His observation, whether taken as a warning or a charter, provides ample guidance on the need to center community in cultural research and documentation, lest their tradition and practices be overrun by a centralized urge to document and describe.

Notes

1. The application consists of a short proposal and budget document to ensure appropriate and feasible use of funds, despite the fact that awardees are just about guaranteed to receive the funding.
2. Center staff members Charlie Hosale and Michelle Stefano co-organized the virtual session for the Society of American Archivists conference, August 17, 2024.
3. With the permission of awardees, their *Of the People* blog posts have been drawn on (and cited) throughout this article.
4. Michelle Stefano was fortunate to attend (and enjoy) the *Community on the Line* event on February 25, 2023, in Hi-Nella, New Jersey.
5. For instance, Michelle Stefano was invited by Queen Nur to present on the Center and CCG program at the nation’s top line dancing community event, the UC (Union Crew) Stars Awards, in downtown Baltimore, January 2023.
6. In general, CCG project leaders, oftentimes the original grant applicant, retain the intellectual property rights to the collections they and their teams have created. In turn, rights holders give the Center and Library permission to steward and make collections available to researchers and the public, including online.

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