Fudeko Project: A Japanese American Digital Journaling Program

Introduction: The University of Connecticut's Greenhouse Studios and Asian and Asian American Studies Institute seek $150,000 for a 24-month IMLS National Leadership Planning Grant to build an open-source prototype for a weekly email- and letter-based journaling program for survivors of Japanese American World War II incarceration. In keeping with NLG Goal 2, this project will strengthen community engagement and wellbeing by developing participants' comfort with storytelling. Additionally, it will create a replicable model for accessible community storytelling and a prototype that will exponentially increase institutional capacity of libraries, museums, and archives to record these narratives.

Project Justification: Despite the rapidly increasing rates of tech adoption among Asian American seniors, technology is an underexplored avenue for building elder social support. It holds great potential for Japanese Americans because of their dispersal across the country after the war. Their social isolation, in tandem with a lack of access to culturally-sensitive care and intergenerational trauma, is all the more concerning because Asian American seniors are less likely to seek out mental healthcare. In contrast, social support has been shown to reduce early mortality among Japanese American seniors. A descendant and scholar of the incarceration, Dr. Hana Maruyama (PI) has worked extensively with Japanese American seniors both as a researcher and as a public historian. Her conversations with former incarcerees, including her grandmother, suggest that many are interested in recording their stories but experience high levels of difficulty with it.

Our program helps participants build digital social networks and develops their comfort with storytelling and technology. Participants choose from three prompts a week, or create their own. Prompts are ranked by difficulty to build participants' comfort with storytelling and positive associations with writing. We minimize barriers to entry by relying on familiar tools (email and the postal services) and fitting easily into pre-existing routines, making it accessible to individuals with mobility problems or other disabilities. The mail-in option ensures that the program is accessible to those without email, and allows us to accommodate varying levels of internet access. We emphasize participants' control over their stories: they choose a prompt or to skip that week according to their headspace. They also own the copyright to their stories and have the opportunity to reflect on what parts (if any) to release to the public.

Our project advisors bring expertise in Japanese American intergenerational trauma and oral history, as well as mental health considerations for digital journaling programs. Dr. Lisa Nakamura is a clinical psychologist who researched the role of Japanese American community events in intergenerational healing. Barbara Takei has extensive experience conducting oral histories with Japanese Americans. Dr. Sarah Willen brings her experience as PI with the Pandemic Journaling Project to help us understand the mental health issues that might arise in digital journaling programs under stressful conditions. Dr. Fiona Vernal offers expertise in oral history with Black and Caribbean communities and will help us think through how to make the prototype replicable so that it can meet other communities' needs. All four have reviewed our process and correspondence materials to ensure we are proactively anticipating potential challenges. They have also offered guidance on integrating psychological best practices around mental health into the program, such as framing prompts to assist participants in incorporating the incarceration into their life story, adding social dimensions including a pen pal program to strengthen participants' networks broadly, and facilitating the sharing of storytellers' works-in-progress with loved ones.

Our community partners will help us address the wide geographic scale of the diaspora, offering expertise on communities in under-represented regions like Alaska, Arizona, and the Midwest, in addition to the major population hubs on the West Coast: the Japanese American Museum of Oregon, the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center, Densho, the Japanese American National Museum, and the Chicago Japanese American Historical Society. Additionally, the Japanese Canadian Arts and Activism Project will help us bring out transnational connections with the internment of Japanese Canadians. We will bring these stakeholders to UConn for a planning meeting to brainstorm how the plugin and program can serve their communities' needs (2.2). We intend to apply for funding for community partners to host events for storytellers to write together, workshop writing, and share it with the public.

The project staff is in the process of launching an initial cohort and intends to launch new cohorts quarterly. Our staff, Brooke Foti Gemmell and Thomas Lee, Greenhouse Studios design strategists will create the prototype and design assets. We will measure project effectiveness using several metrics: quarterly surveys; drop-off rates; response lengths; qualitative analysis of participants' responses. By the grant start-date, we will have accumulated nearly a year's data on the methodology, recruitment strategies, and workflow.

Project Work Plan:

The staff will disseminate an initial report with project advisors who will make recommendations for altering and/or developing the project methodology and workflow. In October 2024, the project team will compile an initial design document that incorporates these recommendations. Over the next year, the design and development team at Greenhouse Studios will create an initial version of the prototype in consultation with the community team and the advisory council.

The community-engagement team will launch cohorts quarterly, and may increase to monthly launches depending on demand and capacity. Maruyama will craft an outreach and recruitment strategy drawing on her communications, web, and social media experience at and relationships from the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center and the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. Publicity efforts will be geared at Japanese American community publications, as well as community-based non-profit, public history, and camp newsletters. Social media will target the descendants of incarcerees who might assist loved ones with participation. We will host introductory sessions at Japanese American pilgrimages, nursing homes, and senior centers and will build word-of-mouth by creating opportunities for current and former participants to share their work at events hosted by community partners and online webinars that can be repackaged into web and social media content. Should interest exceed capacity, we will put potential participants on a waitlist for future cohorts organized first-come, first-served.

From October-December 2025, the design team will run tests to ensure the prototype works and begin training the community-engagement team on how to use it. In January, the community-engagement team will begin integrating the program content into the prototype. They will also begin uploading past cohorts' narratives into the prototype. In March 2025, we will launch the prototype.

Project Results: The IMLS National Leadership grant will allow us to create a new digital archive of personal narratives, design and test a new model for community-based narrative data-collection, and design an open-source prototype that can streamline future work and facilitate similar projects. Participants will sign a non-exclusive, world-wide, perpetual license granting the Fudeko project the ability to use and maintain their contribution and will be able to release parts or all of their narrative for public/educational access to these interviews on a Creative Commons license. Co-PI Director Tom Scheinfeldt and Greenhouse Studios Senior Strategist will manage the project data in accordance with all federal data management requirements. At closeout, all project data, where contributor permissions and copyright allow, will be transferred from its active Omeka workspace to Densho, which is partnering with us as the collection's long-term repository. Their Internet Archive partnership offers an established, sustainable platform for preservation.

The prototype will streamline our workflow and exponentially increase our capacity: scheduling out prompts and responsively selecting them for users; automatically launching new cohorts; and aggregating participants' answers on a sharable page (with metadata) so that participants can quickly see the impact of their work. In turn, it will allow us to design follow-up programs for specific camps (the events, programs, people, and spaces unique to them) or sub-groups (LGBTQ incarcerees, women, or mixed-race incarcerees, etc.); other spin-off programs might specifically target Japanese Peruvians and Panamanians deported to the U.S. who were ineligible for reparations; Japanese Americans outside of the exclusion zone; the experiences of Japanese diasporas across the Americas and Australia.

For librarians, archivists, and other collecting professionals, our plugin will be built in Omeka, providing a familiar standards-based management environment that can be easily integrated into preexisting digital collections and workflows. The Omeka Classic content management system and its LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP) architecture will gather, upload, store, and serve these responses, along with item- and collection-level metadata generated by contributors and project staff, via the World Wide Web. On the front-end, the use of email/the postal system will make our methodology and prototype easy to use and widely adaptable, particularly for lower-income communities with less reliable internet access. As one of the founders of Omeka and a veteran of several large online collecting efforts, Co-PI Scheinfeldt will lead the project's technology development. Custom themes and plugins for the Omeka Classic platform will be written in PHP, HTML, and CSS and will be released back to the Omeka community via an AGPL open-source license. We will announce the availability of these tools through Greenhouse Studios social media channels (Instagram, Twitter, Mastodon, etc.); public channels such as the DH Slack community, H-Net listservs; code4lib, and the DH+Lib community; and possible conference presentations, for instance at National Council for Public History, the Oral History Association, and the Digital Library Federation Forum.

Budget Summary: We request $149,981 over 2 years with no cost sharing: 1) Salaries and Wages: $44,148; 2) Fringe Benefits: $6,247; 3) Travel: $26720; 4) Supplies/Materials/Equipment: $8,000 (mailings for 20-25 participants, individual books for each participant, computer/web programs); 6) Student Support: N/A; 7) Other costs: $19,500 (honoraria for advisors and partner organization staff); 8) Indirect Costs: $45,366. Cost share is not applicable.