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Chicano Studies Research Center to preserve Mexican American religious collections



Pedro Arias/UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

A nun speaks to protesters in front of the California State Building in downtown Los Angeles at an immigration march against the Dixon-Arnett Act, January 22, 1972.

Rebecca Epstein | April 10, 2020

The [UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center](#) is launching a three-year project that will reflect the role of faith, spirituality and religion in Mexican American culture.

Supported by a \$349,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the project team will draw from multiple collections that help tell the story of Mexican American lives from 1940 through the present day.

“Over 90 percent of U.S. Latinos identify with a religion or faith, and yet there is a surprising absence of humanities research related to the role of religion, spirituality, and faith in this community’s history,” says Chon Noriega, director of the Chicano Studies Research Center and project director. “This project provides a unique opportunity for UCLA to play a leadership role in bringing attention to the role of religion in existing archival resources that can then inform social histories, educational practices, and public programming related to the Mexican American population as a constituent element of U.S. social history.”

This project draws attentions to three types of collections:

- faith-based organizations that serve individuals, families, community-based groups and communities
- religious and spiritual leaders working outside their formal positions in a church or religion, often as founders of service-based institutions in underserved communities
- individuals whose lives give insight into the role of religious belief in day-to-day life and civic engagement in Latino communities

The CSRC will process recently acquired collections, reprocess legacy collections and digitally preserve materials consisting of nearly 250 linear feet of documents, 125 audio recordings, and more than 14,000 photographs and slides.

The collections give insights into multiple churches and faith-based organizations including Church of the Epiphany, Homeboy Industries, Católicos for La Raza as well as key religious figures such as Father Gregory Boyle, Father Richard Estrada, Sister Karen Bocalero, and individuals whose daily and professional lives reflect faith-based values such as Mexican American civil rights activist Lupe Anguiano and award-winning broadcaster and newspaper columnist Joe Ortiz.

The collections also include the records of everyday people, like Josefa L. Serna. She arrived in Los Angeles in 1922, accompanied by her mother and two siblings. She married another immigrant, raised six children, and later worked in a women's clothing store in East Los Angeles. She became an American citizen in 1961. The Serna Papers represent a rare and invaluable resource in that the collection documents five generations of an identifiable working-class Mexican American family in Los Angeles over the course of nearly a century.

This is an extremely valuable project for future scholarship, said Charlene Villaseñor Black, professor of art history and Chicana and Chicano studies in the UCLA College.

"Faith-based organizations and community groups have played a key role in the social lives and civic engagement of the Mexican-descent population since the colonial period of the U.S.," she said.

CSRC project team members hope the collections will serve as the basis for dissertations, scholarly books, undergraduate and graduate research projects, teaching assignments that provide hands-on experience with archival research, and as loans for museum and library exhibitions.

Xaviera Flores, co-director of the project and CSRC librarian and archivist, said the funding will have a real impact on the community and on developing a community-focused archival practice.

"The really exciting aspect of this NEH grant is that it will allow us to deepen our community engagement through the project, developing new best practices in this area, while also training the next generation of archivists," Flores said.

In addition to making these materials publically accessible, this grant will allow the CSRC to hire, train and mentor students interested in learning archival work. Flores started her career as a project archivist on a similar type of grant.

"I am overjoyed to be able to provide someone now with that same opportunity through this NEH grant and give back to the community," she said.

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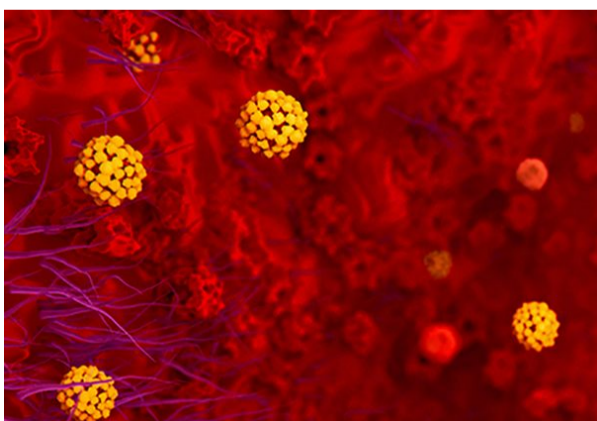
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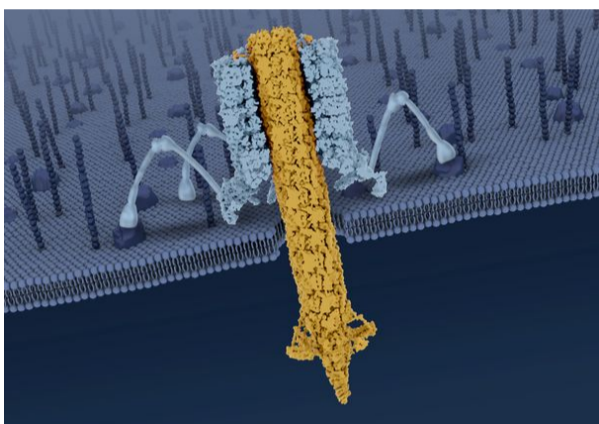
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