

A Virtual Reality Cultural Center For An Unrecognized Indian Tribe

Introduction

University of California, Riverside (UCR) Library, in partnership with the Memory and Resistance Laboratory housed in the UCR Department of Media and Cultural Studies, requests \$149,904 from IMLS for a 2-year National Leadership Planning Grant to prototype a virtual reality (VR) cultural center for the [Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation \(OCEN\)](#), a federally unrecognized Indian tribe in California. We will integrate UCR Library's 3D/VR and digitization capabilities with our faculty's unique strengths in empowering social justice through media and creativity, as well as our close relations with the tribe. Through close consultation with tribal members, this project will produce a preliminary design of the virtual cultural center, a catalog of artifacts to be digitized, and a VR prototype curating selected virtual models to be further refined for full implementation.

Project Justification

OCEN is one of the many unrecognized Indian tribes in the US. Not recognized by either the federal or state government, these tribes have been deprived of the two elements that are foundational for their future: a tribal income and a land base to facilitate community building. They face tremendous challenges to function as a tribe, to make claims, to have resources, and to set the stage to heal from the centuries of harm their community has endured. With 600 enrolled members, OCEN's homelands encompass greater Monterey County, with a prohibitively expensive real estate market. Their situation is not unique in the urgency to protect their ancestors' burial sites and sacred sites from disturbance while struggling to reclaim ancestral remains held by settler institutions and for recognition by the settler state that has sought their disappearance. Unrecognized tribes like OCEN must enact highly creative tactics to protect their cultural heritage. Supported by OCEN's fiercely determined tribal chairwoman, Louise Miranda Ramirez, we propose to build a virtual reality cultural center that acts as both a manifestation for an actual cultural center to be built on 84 acres of land that OCEN is having returned to them, as well as a speculative reclamation of virtual space for actual indigenous futures. The land that OCEN is receiving back is in the shape of a bear. It will be the first homeland the tribe has had for hundreds of years. This project underscores the urgency of land back as the condition for a healing process from 400 years of settler colonialism.

This project grows out of co-PI [Latipa](#)'s deep engagements with the OCEN and other California Indian Nations including a course module "[Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation \(OCEN\) - The Struggle for Recognition](#)" (partially supported by a University of California Office of the President [grant](#)), a feature-length film under production entitled [White Owl Green Star](#), and a 2024 exhibition mounted at the Museum of Art and History in Lancaster, California entitled [This Valley Is Sacred: The Ancestors Are Speaking](#) (co-curator with Dr. Bruce Love). It is also built upon related projects including IMLS funded [3D/VR Strategy](#), [Seeking Immortality](#) (with a key difference in that we are working with an unrecognized tribe lacking financial resources and technology support), and [NEH](#) funded [Kintsugi 3D Builder](#). This project will also leverage existing open source or commercial software and platforms including [Potree open source 3D viewer](#), [Unity](#), [Unreal Engine](#), and [Blender](#). We will utilize UCR Library's deep expertise in 3D/VR including 3D [scanning](#), [modeling](#), [animation](#), and [digital twins](#). We have started drafting a [preliminary design](#) for the cultural center using our existing equipment, including [Artec Leo](#), [Artec Spider](#), and [Oculus Quest II Headset](#).

This project directly addresses NLG program goal 2.2 to *support community collaboration and foster civic discourse*. It will serve as a model for libraries across the country, especially those who have invested in maker spaces and have accumulated 3D/VR expertise, to deeply engage in their local communities in creative ways to foster the social justice causes, particularly for those who have historically been marginalized and deprived of the resources and means to protect their core interest and livelihood.

Project Work Plan

UCR Library will take the overall project management responsibility, led by PI Raymond Uzwyshyn. The project consists of 6 major tasks, listed below.

- Task 1 (Lead: co-PI Latipa, 4 months): Consulting with the tribal leadership and members, brainstorm and formulate a plan for the virtual cultural center.

- Task 2 (Lead: PI Uzwyshyn and co-PI Latipa, 1 month): building a catalog with associated metadata of historic sites and artifacts that will become part of the virtual cultural center.
- Task 3 (Lead: PI Uzwyshyn, 3 months): UCR 3D/VR preliminary work. Test and select technology stack and hardware/software environment, conduct preliminary 3D scans in both indoor and outdoor environments. Outdoor environment should be comparable to that of the identified OCEN sites. Test equipment limits and develop contingency plans.
- Task 4 (Lead: co-PI Latipa, 1 month inclusive of lead time): a week-long field trip to Monterey Bay region to conduct 3D scanning of selected test sites and artifacts. Selected sites must include an Indian Mound, which poses additional challenges in our 3D scanning and modeling capabilities.
- Task 5 (Lead: PI Uzwyshyn, 12 months): lead the UCR Library team, including Innovative Media Librarian Alvaro Alvarez, Maker Services Coordinator Brendon Wheeler, and Digitization Services Specialist Mark Buchholz, and a waged student, build a prototype for the cultural center.
- Task 6 (Lead: PI Uzwyshyn and co-PI Latipa, 3 months): review, feedback, documentation, and dissemination.

Diversity Plan

Our project is an urgent contribution to the conversation regarding California Indian history, land, culture, identity, and futurity. Just as it centers a contemporary tribe's fierce determination to protect their culture and keep it thriving in the 21st century, it simultaneously allows us to reflect upon centuries of violence wrought by Spanish and U.S. colonialism which tried to destroy Esselen relationships, languages, customs, and culture. This project is central to the current conversation concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion because it amplifies OCEN's fight in the present day to reclaim land, culture, and togetherness in the face of the ongoing catastrophes of real estate development across the greater Monterey Bay region. It will address how the legacies of colonialism live on in the realms of law, business, government, and policy, for whom there is little to no recognition of the disturbance of long-resting ancestors and in how museums continue to hold OCEN's ancestors hostage in their collections which are founded in colonial logics of extraction and accumulation.

Project Results

This project leverages leading-edge VR technologies to manifest OCEN's vision in both physical and virtual realms. This prototype serves dual purposes: presenting OCEN's cultural center to stakeholders and creating a dynamic digital virtual archive that addresses the challenges of an overlooked tribe's heritage through 21st-century cultural work, a virtual space, metadata and 3D digitized artifacts to preserve largely forgotten histories and beliefs. The initiative fosters intergenerational knowledge transfer and sharing of knowledge while demonstrating OCEN's vibrancy to federal and state recognition agencies and a wider local and global community. OCEN's VR cultural center will catalyze dialogue with the tribe refining the VR digital archive's architectural design to explore wider needs. This collaboration with UCR library will establish a template for developing further virtual cultural spaces for unrecognized communities and populations. Engagement with shared historical context of common histories addresses challenges that communities face across the nation. Our project will be disseminated through academic papers and exhibitions in California's national art and cultural venues, as well as professional organizations annual meetings ranging from California's Indian Studies and Scholars Association, Society of Media Studies to the Coalition of Networked Information and Computer and Libraries to dialogue about the cultural, historical and socio technological possibilities of the project as a generalizable template for these types of interdisciplinary collaborations usable and an example for other memory institutions and communities.

Budget Summary

Our request to IMLS include the following direct cost breakdowns: \$80,542 salaries and wages, \$14,021 fringe benefits, \$12,000 for a week-long field trip to OCEN to scan artifacts and sites, \$4,000 for two conference travels to disseminate project findings. Out of the total salaries and wages, \$16,789 is allocated to a 25% waged student, which is counted towards student support. We also request \$3,000 over 2 years to consult the tribal members. After applying UCR's federally negotiated indirect cost rate of 32% for community engagement activities, our total IMLS request is \$149,903.