

Introduction—Cultural Frameworks for Transformative Documenting and Learning

by Naomi Sturm-Wijesinghe and Mauricio Bayona, Guest Editors, on behalf of Los Herederos

We write this introduction with deep gratitude for the opportunity to serve as Guest Editors of the 2025 issue of the *Journal of Folklore and Education*, “Cultural Frameworks for Transformative Documenting and Learning.” As co-directors of Los Herederos, an immigrant-founded, Queens-based nonprofit dedicated to inheriting culture in the digital age, we are honored to bring our perspective to a conversation that has long shaped our work: how transmedia storytelling, ethnographic documentation, and community collaboration can become frameworks for transformative learning.

This year’s thematic focus—“to amplify and demonstrate the power and the promise of multimodal storytelling to educate”—is not only timely but also deeply aligned with our mission. We appreciate JFE’s and Local Learning’s recognition that “learning” can happen everywhere; from the classroom to community centers, on street corners, across family tables, in radio studios, and through digital networks. Learning happens when young people see their parents’ stories reflected in archives, when immigrant individuals hear their languages broadcast back to them in public media, and when artists recognize their practice as part of a larger cultural inheritance. To us, multimodal storytelling is not simply about media innovation; it is a pedagogical strategy for cultural continuity, equity, and empowerment.

In the spirit of this issue, we offer the following pre-recorded conversation live from our Community Space in Jackson Heights, Queens.



[Listen Now](#)

Los Herederos recently opened our first brick and mortar space in the 74th Street - Roosevelt Ave - Jackson Heights subway station as part of an MTA sponsored program to rehabilitate abandoned retail units. The space, which greatly enhances our capacity to serve our local communities at a time when access to space in our neighborhoods is threatened by wide scale gentrification, includes community gallery, performance venue, and radio station. Its role as the borough’s major transportation hub with proximity to LaGuardia Airport, offers a chance to include commuters in our programming and to curate content that celebrates the singular yet multifaceted ethos of what it means to be from/make Queens home.

Why This Issue Matters to Us

This issue gives us the chance to step back and articulate practices that often live in motion. Much of our work at Los Herederos is responsive—designing programs that meet community needs as they arise; training neighbors to document stories traditions or supporting educators in integrating cultural frameworks into their teaching. We are often “in the doing” rather than in the writing. To contribute to this journal is to create space for reflection, a way of putting down on paper the lessons that emerge from the lived complexities of cultural documentation.

Education, in our practice, is baked into every aspect of what we do. When we teach community members to conduct oral histories, we are not only gathering narratives but also training a generation of ethnographers who see value in their own stories. When we run our community radio station, we are not only broadcasting programs but also cultivating an intergenerational curriculum of listening, dialogue, and voice. When we bring transmedia documentation into classrooms, we are not only supplementing the curriculum but also challenging students to see cultural identity as dynamic and multifaceted.

By contributing to this issue, we join others in affirming that ethnography is not limited to text-based outputs. The authors’ emphasis on podcasts, poetry, comics, and videos that follow mirrors our own practice, where recipe books, neighborhood sound archives, and radio programs are treated as legitimate scholarly and educational texts. These multimodal forms contest reductive understandings of culture and encourage nuanced explorations of identity. They demonstrate that the products of ethnographic research and documentation can live both in the academy and in daily life, serving as resources for classrooms and communities alike.



About Los Herederos

Los Herederos was founded in 2015 by a cohort of Queens-based artists, documentarians, and folklorists. We describe ourselves as a grassroots, media-folk arts organization dedicated to inheriting culture in the digital age. The name Los Herederos—“The Inheritors”—captures both our responsibility to carry forward cultural traditions in a multilingual milieu and our commitment to building transmedia infrastructure with our communities, thereby naming our stake in their cultural futures. Our creative strategy is both observant of our surroundings and reflective of our own experiences as life-long New Yorkers and immigrant artists.

Our projects operate at the intersection of public folklore, socially engaged art, and cultural sustainability. We document folk practices not only for preservation but also for activation, ensuring that archives are accessible, multilingual, and participatory. We view culture not as static artifacts but as a resource for building thriving, equitable communities.

As a largely immigrant founded and led organization, we see culture and identity as crucial dimensions of public health. Communities flourish when they know where they come from, and when they have tools to narrate that story themselves. In a rapidly changing city like New York, threatened by displacement and cultural erasure, we use documentation as a strategy for survival and belonging.

Methodologies That Drive Our Work

Transmedia Storytelling

Transmedia storytelling—telling a story across multiple platforms and formats, each contributing unique but connected perspectives—is at the heart of our practice. We see transmedia not as a trend but as a necessity. Our communities are not monolithic, nor are the ways they consume and share stories. Working across technological and cultural media, is a key way we reach and stay accountable to the diverse needs of our communities, aid in the transmission of cultural traditions, and build bridges via place-based folklife.

For example, our *Inheritors* series profiles folk and traditional artists through a combination of short films, audio interviews, and digital photos, and multilingual written text. Each platform serves a different audience and the sum is greater than the parts—together, they create a multilayered portrait of culture that can be entered from multiple points.

This approach aligns with this issue’s call to “engage culturally responsive pedagogy and diverse texts.” When a student reads a comic about migration, listens to a podcast about neighborhood rituals, and then encounters an archival photograph from the same community, they are learning not only about cultural practices but also about the multiplicity of ways culture can be known and represented.

Interdisciplinary Ethnography

We embrace an expansive view of ethnography. For us, fieldwork is not limited to the notebook or camera but includes cookbooks, albums, murals, and public art. These creative outputs are not supplementary—they are central. They honor the principle that knowledge is not only textual but embodied, oral, sonic, and visual.

Our pedagogical approach involves demystifying ethnography for community participants. Rather than positioning ourselves as extractive researchers, we emphasize collaboration, training, and co-creation. When we help a local youth group record their elders’ recipes and stories we are not just archiving data, we are building an intergenerational bridge that strengthens cultural identity and fosters pride.

We know that examining community narratives prompts students and audiences to explore identity in nuanced ways. By validating diverse forms of ethnographic “texts,” we show that learning can emerge from the kitchen table as much as from the classroom.

Activating Archives

At Los Herederos, we think of archives not as static repositories but as living, breathing cultural infrastructures. Our community archiving initiatives are key to the cultural sustainability of our neighborhoods and for leveling the playing field with respect to what art forms get documented and fomented over time.

Our work with Jackson Heights’ Diversity Plaza exemplifies this. Over multiple years, supported by the Library of Congress, we documented the Plaza’s foodways, ritual practices, folk arts, and small businesses. This was not only preservation; it was an act of resistance against cultural erasure in a neighborhood facing gentrification. For local South Asian and Latinx communities, the documentation serves as cultural continuity. For educators, it becomes a teaching tool about urban

space, migration, and resilience. For policymakers, it highlights the importance of community spaces as repositories of knowledge.

The thoughtful conversations of this issue's Advisory Committee highlighted that the "products of media production from the past century can also be found in archives around the world" (see 2025 Call for Submissions). Our contribution is to ensure that the archives of the present are inclusive, accessible, and reflective of everyday cultural practices.

Community Radio as Cultural Intimacy

Our community radio station, LH Radio, currently produces over 27 programs in collaboration with local residents, reaching more than 12,000 multilingual listeners. For us, radio is not just entertainment, it is an ethnographic project. It creates cultural intimacy by allowing communities to narrate themselves from the inside out while simultaneously participating in an interwoven geography of cultures in contact.

One of our flagship shows, *Creators*, reimagines oral history as radio storytelling. Artists are invited to reflect on their lives and work while engaging with archival materials. The result is not only a radio program but also a new form of documentation that honors the artist's archive and introduces them to broader audiences.

Radio embodies the principles of multimodal pedagogy. It is immediate, accessible, and participatory. In classrooms, it can be used as a teaching resource; in neighborhoods, it becomes a platform for empowerment; in archives, it creates a record for the future.

Looking Forward

As Guest Editors, our hope for this issue is that it affirms the transformative potential of ethnography and storytelling when practiced in multimodal, interdisciplinary, and community-centered ways. The contributions gathered here demonstrate that education does not only mean the transmission of knowledge but also the co-creation of meaning. They show that documenting culture is not a passive act but a pedagogical one—one that shapes how we understand ourselves, our neighbors, and our shared futures.

For Los Herederos, documentation is inheritance. Storytelling is pedagogy. To inherit culture in the digital age is to honor tradition while embracing innovation, to archive the past while imagining futures, and to make learning a process of shared transformation.

We invite readers to think of ethnography not only as analysis but as practice: a practice of listening, of co-creating, of narrating, and of teaching. We hope that the ideas presented here inspire educators, folklorists, artists, and community leaders to embrace multimodal storytelling as a way to build equity, sustain culture, and foster understanding across differences. This issue is not just about documenting—it is about learning to document, in ways that expand the cultural record and deepen the collective imagination.