A deeper level of knowing: University folklorists tackle global issues

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Maribel Alvarez, associate dean for community engagement for the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences and University folklorist, knows that many people associate folklore with "the light stuff of fun and fantasy."

"But in fact," Alvarez says, "folklore is often the harbinger of cultural change; folklorists and cultural reporters can track shifts in beliefs and habits with great efficiency."

She says this can be the case especially when addressing global issues like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alvarez, who also holds the Jim Griffith Chair in Public Folklore at the University’s Southwest Center and is an associate research professor in the School of Anthropology, describes folklore as a discipline that digs deep down into the forms of individual or group behavior patterns - like beliefs, legends and rituals - by which we make sense of things on a daily basis.

Science and folklore can be important partners when it comes to telling the story of an issue like climate change, she says. Alvarez detailed the relationship in an essay she co-authored with Gary Nabhan, research social scientist at the Southwest Center.

"We discovered that many of the first people to notice significant changes in patterns of pollination, the temperature in bodies of water or the variation of patterns of wildflowers in certain zones affected by drought were actually 'the folk' who lived, walked and knew these places intimately," Alvarez says. "It's not just the kind of knowing that comes from studying books, but the knowledge that grows with you and is passed by oral tradition and observation."

Alvarez is editor of BorderLore, a monthly online journal published by the Southwest Folklife Alliance. To take the conversation about climate change to the next level, she has launched ClimateLore, a planned yearlong series of stories focusing on the impacts of climate on cultural traditions, language and work. Kimi Eisele, managing editor and information specialist coordinator in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, will oversee the effort.

"Climate change can feel like this giant, impossible-to-solve problem. But if we narrow in and start talking to people on individual levels, we see that there are resilience practices that are already in place and have been for a long time," Eisele said. "I think it brings an individual, personal focus to something that can feel large, distant and abstract."
An example, she says, is how members of the Hopi Tribe bases planting, harvesting and seed saving on long-observed seasonal cycles. Another example is the use of an environmentally friendly resource like adobe as a building material.

Eisele says she will write some stories herself and commission others from people with stories to tell, including indigenous writers talking about their communities and experiences. The stories will cover topics including effects on local foods, impacts on practices like winemaking and basket weaving, and the language of climate change. She says ClimateLore will be funded in part by Arizona Humanities [7].

Alvarez and Eisele had hoped to begin publishing the ClimateLore stories in the spring, but plans changed as coverage shifted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Like climate change, COVID-19 presents us with a human paradox: How do we adapt, how do we deal with human actions that, on one hand, feel like 'just the way we do things,' and on the other hand threaten our health and survival," Alvarez said. "Both situations compel us towards fear and anxiety on one end and towards solidarity and compassion on the other."

The first ClimateLore piece is expected this summer. Eisele is asking anyone with story ideas to send them her way [8].

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