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## Exploring Family Stories Through Clay: A Community Project Inspired by Helen Cordero's Storytellers

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**Exploring Family Stories Through Clay:  
A Community Project Inspired by Helen Cordero's Storytellers**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Specialization: Art Therapy

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### **Abstract**

This community art project presents the development and implementation of a clay workshop designed to engage families in intergenerational storytelling and joint creation of storyteller sculptures, inspired by the storyteller figurines created by Pueblo potter Helen Cordero. The paper presents research regarding the positive impact of intergenerational storytelling on family members' mental health, well-being, self-esteem, and identity formation. Additionally, there is a review of research that points to the transformative qualities of clay, which can enhance people's overall well-being, their sense of presence, wonder, and joy, and their ability to self-reflect. Since this project was inspired by the artwork of a native potter, it is guided by articles that suggest an ethical approach inspired by indigenous methodology, and includes the practice the author developed to approach the research and the workshop design with cultural humility. This project is grounded in a narrative therapeutic approach which views people as constructing their realities and making meaning through narratives. Participants' engagement in this workshop seemed to indicate a yearning for opportunities to connect and share stories, and highlighted the potential of using clay in art therapy practice. Future research could further explore the utilization of clay art therapy in enhancing intergenerational connections, as well as conducting similar workshops with populations from varied backgrounds.

*Keywords:* clay, art therapy, intergenerational narratives, storytelling

*Author Identity Statement:* This author has been a potter for over twenty years, has lived on several continents, and immigrated to the United States in 2016.

## Introduction

Cochiti Pueblo potter Helen Cordero created clay storyteller figurines inspired by memories of her grandfather telling stories to the children gathered around him. Helen's granddaughter, Elizabeth Suina, described the act of transmitting stories depicted by her grandmother's figurines: "not only is the story being told from visions, but the children are also envisioning that same story in their minds" (Kamins, 2018, 3:16). A growing body of research points to the benefits of the process that Helen's granddaughter described, indicating that there is an association between children's emotional well-being and their knowledge of their family history and intergenerational narratives (Elias & Brown, 2022; Salmon & Reese, 2016).

I grew up in Israel, thousands of miles away from where Helen Cordero lived and worked. I was introduced to her work when I moved to Hong Kong and joined Artminor, a small ceramics studio dedicated to bringing the arts to people of all abilities. Reggae Siu, the founder of the studio, was a passionate believer in the transformative power of clay. He turned the small cramped studio into a space where exploration, creativity, and people's different abilities had no limits. When Reggae introduced me to books and photos of Helen's work, we marveled at how the two of us, each coming from a different culture and part of the world, felt a connection to an artist from a culture foreign to us both. Her work and the theme of passing on traditions between generations resonated with us and with each of our cultural identities, and we dreamed of bringing people together, inspired by Helen's storytellers, to use clay to explore their own stories.

Twenty years have elapsed since my time in Hong Kong, and in those years, I have witnessed the transformative and therapeutic power of clay in my work with people of all ages, on several continents. My capstone thesis is an opportunity to fulfil the dream Reggae and I shared twenty years ago. It is an opportunity to revisit the idea of bringing people together to create and share stories, inspired by Helen's work.

In this capstone thesis, I designed and implemented a workshop for parents (or grandparents) and children which invited them to explore the stories, memories, and values that

are transmitted in their own families. Taking inspiration from Helen Cordero's work, this workshop invited each family to create a clay storyteller figurine together, reflecting their own family stories. In conversation and through art making, the workshop addressed questions about memory and family history, identity and belonging, and how values, ideas, stories, memories, and dreams are passed between generations.

In an effort to understand the role such a workshop can play, I reviewed literature that explores the impact of intergenerational narratives on mental health, wellbeing, and identity development. I looked at the role that art can play in the process of transmitting stories, and reviewed literature regarding the therapeutic benefits of clay and the use of clay in art therapy. Since this work draws inspiration from an artist from an indigenous culture which is not my own, I reviewed literature that presents an ethical approach inspired by indigenous methodology, and developed a practice to guide me in approaching my research and workshop with cultural humility.

Transmitting family traditions and values is both a verbal and a non-verbal experience. It is my hope that this clay workshop served to enhance relationships between generations and enhance participants' sense of belonging and connection. Additionally, I hope that this work can contribute in highlighting the many possibilities and potential in using clay in art therapy practice.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Impact of Intergenerational Narratives on Mental Health and Wellbeing**

A fellow clinician's observation that children who knew about their family history were the most likely to succeed in overcoming psychological and educational challenges inspired Duke, Lazarus, and Fivush (2008) to examine this notion. To assess their fellow clinician's observations, they developed a questionnaire of family knowledge which they administered to students at a large high school in Atlanta. Naming this questionnaire the Do You Know (DYK) scale, the researchers administered this scale to 40 adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14. Participants and their parents were then administered several self-report measures to assess

family functioning and children's well-being, among them measures of children's self-esteem and anxiety. Their results indicated that there was a correlation between knowledge children had of their family histories and their emotional well-being: "the more children said they know about their family histories, the lower their anxiety, the higher their self-esteem, the more internally controlled they were, the better their family functioning, the fewer their behavioral problems, and the more cohesive their families" (p. 270). Reflecting upon these results, Duke et al. (2008) pointed out that knowledge of family history is indicative of certain processes and forms of communication within families, and may include components such as family cohesiveness, rituals, and families' intergenerational communication.

In Fivush, Bohanek and Zaman's (2010) Family Narratives Project, the researchers and their students studied transmission of family narratives among families with children between the ages of nine and twelve. They collected recordings of family conversations in various settings, such as around the family dinner table, and analyzed the content of the conversations. They noted how often narratives of past family events and stories (which they labeled as intergenerational narratives) occurred, how much time was dedicated to these narratives, who was telling the story, and how it was being told. Fivush et al. (2010) looked at this information in relation to various measures of the children's identity and well-being. These self-report and parent-report measures included assessment of anxiety, depression, aggression and acting out. Their findings suggested that "adolescents who are embedded in a storied family history show higher levels of emotional well-being" (p. 50). Reflecting upon these findings, the researchers pointed out that transmitting family stories provides a framework for identity building, a sense of belonging and continuity, and an understanding of one's self and one's world, in "ways that promote a secure identity" (p. 50).

Salmon and Reese (2016) studied how children benefit from their parents reminiscing and talking about the past. They defined elaborative reminiscing as discussing the past "in a detailed, emotional, and collaborative way" (p. 233). Such reminiscing, they claimed, "has a significant

benefit for children's language and socioemotional skills" (p. 233) and enhances children's ability to narrate and process their own experiences. Salmon and Reese (2016) pointed out that elaborative reminiscing is a tool which is available to all families, regardless of income or language, for promoting children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

The positive impact of sharing stories of the past with children was discussed by Elias and Brown (2022) in their review of research examining the relationship between mental health and intergenerational memory. These researchers pointed to a growing body of research indicating an association between children's mental health and well-being and their knowledge of their family history and intergenerational narratives. While they noted that this body of knowledge is still emerging, Elias and Brown (2022) suggested that the findings are promising, and can lead to implications for interventions bringing family stories into clinical practice. In light of the research linking the sharing of intergenerational family stories with emotional well-being, and following Elias and Brown's (2022) suggestion, it is my hope that the community workshop I developed in this thesis can provide a space for bringing family stories into art therapy practice.

According to Neukrug and Hays (2023), narrative therapy is based on the idea that people construct their realities and make meaning through narratives. These authors posit that narrative therapists believe that "our stories define who we are" (p. 314). I have approached my project from this lens, with a goal of creating a space for families to engage in meaning making and identity building through co-construction of family narratives.

### **Helen Cordero's Storytellers**

Cochiti Pueblo Potter Helen Cordero's storyteller figurines give form and an artistic expression to the act of transmitting stories between generations. Helen created her first storyteller figurine in 1964, thinking of her grandfather, Santiago Quintana, who she described as a gifted storyteller, surrounded by children listening to his tales (Babcock, G. Monthan & D. Monthan, 1997). The people of Cochiti Pueblo are a native community located near the foot of

the LaBadaja Hill in New Mexico. Babcock, G. Monthan and D. Monthan described the Cochiti people's long history of pottery making, which began 2,500 years ago when ceramic technology was introduced to the area. These researchers claimed that the pottery of Cochiti Pueblo is best known today for the storyteller figurines created by Helen Cordero in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After creating the figurine of her grandfather, Helen went on to create additional storyteller figurines, and nearly overnight her work received great recognition, won awards and prizes, and became a world-famous collector's item. Helen's children, grandchildren and several relatives began making storytellers as well (Babcock, G. Monthan & D. Monthan, 1997). The figurines all have a central large storyteller figure surrounded by children (and sometimes even animals) all gathering around to hear their stories. Helen's granddaughter Elizabeth Suina reflected on the common features shared by the storyteller figurines: "The eyes of the figurine are closed, because he's envisioning the story as he's telling it. His mouth is open because he is narrating the story" (Kamins, 2018, 4:30).

Speaking of her grandmother's storyteller figurines, Suina explained that each figure has a story to tell. She described her grandmother's dedication to family and culture and to keeping her family traditions alive. Suina related to the tradition of transmitting stories between generations and to the character traits this can elicit: "We don't write down our stories, they are told, you know, by word of mouth, and you know, we teach verbally, and you have to be a good listener if you're gonna learn" (Kamins, 2018, 3:32).

### **Utilizing Art to Explore Family History and Stories**

Cleaning out an old guardhouse in preparation for its renovation as an art studio, Klorer (2014) discovered that the space, which lay deserted for over 50 years, held old documents and letters which shed light on the history of her Missouri neighborhood. In response to finding a document from 1947 which described housing policies that were clearly racist, Klorer created art as a way to face her neighborhood's past, along with additional art pieces reflecting upon her



personal family history. In the arts-based research project that followed, she held community workshops in her neighborhood inviting participants to explore history and family stories through art. Participants were invited to bring documents and artifacts, instructed in methods of collage and layering, and given a small box to contain a collage of their story.

Klorer (2014) highlighted the power of art to add deeper layers to the conversation, and pointed to the power of the process of creating as a way of telling one's story. She also related to the value of creating an artifact: a physical symbol which can hold and symbolize these stories. In my process of designing a community project that would focus on transmitting stories between generations utilizing art, Klorer's work informed my workshop design.

Rubesin's (2016) work with refugees utilized art and storytelling to share refugees' stories with the community. According to Rubesin, the refugee experience often involves pre-migration and migration trauma, and once refugees arrive at host countries, they are faced with many additional stressors such as culture shock, language barriers, food and healthcare insecurity, and housing and employment instability. Additionally, refugees can face anti-immigrant attitudes and discrimination in their host countries. Rubesin gave her home state of North Carolina as an example of a state that has passed anti-immigrant legislation, as state leaders made statements explicitly saying that newcomers are not wanted in their towns and cities.

Rubesin (2016) described an art therapy program in schools and community centers in her small North Carolina city. This program aimed to work with refugees utilizing a strength-based approach, honoring their stories and connecting them to community members. Rubesin described an exhibit that highlighted the artwork and the stories of 150 newcomers. Community members were invited to view the exhibit, to speak to the artists, and then to create their own art-based narratives in response. Clinicians who worked on the project processed the experience with the artists, and found that the experience had generated hope, pride and a sense of owning one's story among the newcomers. Responses of community members who attended the art show were assessed using questionnaires. Rubesin noted that responses to the open-ended questions

indicated that community members were deeply moved by the art show, and expressed empathy, appreciation and admiration of the newcomers' courage and resilience. I believe that this project highlights the power of using art and stories to foster connection and empathy, and as a tool for social change. As Rubesin concluded, "sharing art-based narratives, we are reminded that we are all unapologetically human" (p. 170).

### **The Therapeutic Benefits of Clay**

Helen Cordero's storyteller figurines, which inspired my community project, are made of clay, and in that sense, it seemed fitting to choose clay as the material I'd be utilizing for my project. However, beyond that obvious connection, using clay for this project has additional benefits which can significantly enhance participants' experience. A variety of studies using different methodologies and looking at diverse populations all point to the advantages of using clay to enhance people's overall well-being, their sense of presence, their sense of wonder and joy, and their ability to self-reflect (Grenimann Bauch & Bat Or, 2021; Jang & Choi, 2012; Kimport & Robbins, 2012; Nan, 2021; Nan & Ho, 2017; Nan, Huang & Kang, 2023; Sholt & Gavron, 2006).

Sholt and Gavron (2006) concluded their literature review on the topic of clay work in art therapy by highlighting that the "fundamental features of clay-work contribute to a significant exploration of self" (p. 71). Among the themes they found in the literature, the authors emphasized that clay can enable both verbal and non-verbal forms of expression, and enables clients' ability to transform themselves and their lives.

A study by Kimport and Robbins (2012) examined the impact of clay on people's moods. In their study, participants ( $N = 102$ ) were randomly assigned to one of four groups following an experience which induced a negative mood state. Two of the groups were given a ball of clay, with one group being instructed to interact freely with the clay and the other group being instructed to create a small pinch pot. The other two groups were given a soft stress ball, with one group being instructed to play freely with the ball and the other group being instructed to toss the

ball back and forth. All four groups were given five minutes for their interaction with the clay or the stress ball. Mood assessments were administered to participants before and after this intervention. Results of this research were that "participants in the clay conditions experienced more than 50% greater mood improvement than individuals exposed to the stress balls" (p. 77). This work pointed to the idea that clay in and of itself can reduce a negative mood. However, this study did not examine the efficacy of an intervention designed and led specifically by an art therapist and the role this could play in going beyond the impact of the material alone. Additionally, it would be interesting to see if art interventions utilizing materials other than clay impacted mood improvement. Such studies could help shed light on whether it was the act of creating something in and of itself that impacted mood improvement, or whether it was a specific material.

Jang and Choi's (2012) research sheds light on the impact of an art therapy intervention utilizing clay. Their study examined whether a clay art therapy program would improve the ego-resilience of teens from low socioeconomic backgrounds. They defined ego resilience as the ability to "effectively cope with their stress and inner anxieties" (p. 245). The researchers created an experiment group and a control group of teens in an educational welfare program in Korea ( $N=16$ ). The groups participated in 18 weekly 80-minute sessions. Ego-resilience of participants was measured using a self-report ego-resilience scale, which was administered before the first session, at the last session, and a month after the last session. The experiment group's sessions were carefully planned as "pottery work-centered group art therapy" (p. 249) focusing on using clay for exploration and self-expression in individual and in group projects, and included displaying their work to the group and exchanging feedback. The control group participated in a group therapy program. The researchers did not give details regarding the content or type of therapy program the control group received, information which could have given additional insight to the study. Results of the study indicated an increase in ego resilience among adolescents who participated in the pottery art therapy group which the researchers found to be

statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Jang and Choi claimed that participation in the weekly sessions had a positive impact in participants' emotional regulation. They suggested that utilizing clay in a therapeutic environment gave participants the ability to experience a sense of control by shaping the clay, and that witnessing the transformation of the material from a ball of clay to a completed project provided participants with a sense of achievement, pride and optimism. Additionally, they observed that the clay art therapy group improved personal interactions among group members. Future studies looking at the impact of clay on ego-resilience could expand upon this relatively small sample size.

Evidence of the transformative qualities of clay can be seen in studies by Nan and Ho (2017) and Nan, Huang, and Kang (2023). In their quantitative studies on the impact of Clay Art Therapy (CAT) on individuals experiencing anxiety and depression, these researchers found that CAT improved participants' daily functioning, emotional regulation, and overall well-being. While the study by Nan and Ho (2017) measured participants' depression and well-being using a variety of self-report assessments, Nan, Huang and Kang measured hair cortisol levels of participants as a physical marker indicating stress responses in addition to using self-report tools. They found that participants in the CAT group reported a significant improvement in their emotional regulation and impulse control, as well as a sense of joy and success. Participants in the CAT group also exhibited an acute elevation of Hair Cortisol Concentration which can be seen as a predictor of positive treatment response and an indicator of lower levels of stress and depressive symptoms. However, they found that there was an insignificant difference between the CAT group and the control group in hair cortisol concentration. They attributed this to the small sample in the study, and various technical challenges (such as use of hair dyes) getting in the way of accurate measurement of hair cortisol. Nevertheless, the concept of introducing the measurement of physiological markers of stress can be expanded upon in future studies.

Grenimann Bauch and Bat Or's (2021) qualitative study highlights the impact of working with clay as well. Their study focused on the use of a clay sculpture activity with fathers of

toddlers as a tool to enhance and observe parental mentalization; the ability of a parent to understand their child's and their own behavior. Greniman Bauch and Bat Or found that the process of sculpting with clay encouraged a sense of wonder and enhanced the fathers' process of self-reflection.

Kin-Man Nan (2021) reflected on using clay in his art therapy practice. He presented several case studies of clients' process with clay, and related lessons from his years of practice. Nan noted that "the sensory nature and plastic texture of clay helps create positive psychophysiological effects, such as raising body awareness, creating a mindful state for the artist, and enhancing positive affective experience" (p. 56). He described the experience of working with clay as sensory-rich and immersive, a process he saw as enhancing mindfulness, connecting participants with the present moment, and providing a "sense of tranquility and serenity" (p. 61). Additionally, Nan pointed to the discovery process of creating and re-creating with clay as symbolic of the ability to make changes in one's life.

## **Methods**

### **Workshop Design and Preparation: Ethical Considerations**

I entered this work with the question of finding an ethical way to approach my subject: How can I draw inspiration from an artist from an indigenous tradition which is not my own? In what ways can I ensure that I am approaching this work with cultural humility? How can I design a workshop which shares information about Helen Cordero in a way that is respectful and honors her, her heritage, and her work?

In order to engage in an ethical and respectful practice in her own research, Napoli (2019b) developed a series of ongoing self-reflexive questions which guided her work. Her opening question "Have I shown respect in all choices and actions?" (p. 82) sets the tone for the questions that follow. Following Napoli's example, I developed several self-reflexive questions to guide and ground me in my project.

***How can I gather information about Helen Cordero in a way that honors her?***

***What is my responsibility when I introduce Helen Cordero's work to others?***

Napoli (2019a) pointed to the need for a critical examination of the sources on indigenous knowledge. She asserted that it is crucial to examine who poses themselves as an expert on native peoples. Historically, both researchers and therapists have written about native cultures, speaking in their name and often profiting from presenting themselves as experts on these cultures. According to Napoli (2019b), indigenous methodology involves the reparative steps of recognizing and critically deconstructing such representations of native communities, and highlighting the importance of centering the indigenous person themselves as the primary expert on their own world view.

In my research about Helen Cordero, I strove to use a critical lens in reviewing literature, and considered who is writing about indigenous people and artists, their relations to the community, and their positionality. As Napoli (2019a) pointed out, many of the scholarly articles I encountered assumed a position of authority describing native peoples and art, and either eliminated or disregarded their voices. Therefore, my process of finding materials about Helen Cordero and deciding what I would present in my workshop included making decisions about which materials NOT to include. Additionally, I tried to center my work on finding primary sources in order to honor and hear Cordero's voice and story in her own words. I was unable to locate any recordings of Cordero herself, but was able to find footage of her granddaughter speaking about her and her work. I chose to use photos of Cordero and of her storyteller figurines and the words of her granddaughter as the sources for my workshop.

***How can I maintain cultural humility when I engage with Helen Cordero's work?***

***How can I engage in a respectful dialogue with her and her work?***

Napoli stated that "it is imperative that non-Native art therapists not take from American Indian Peoples' stories, worldviews, or collective knowledge. We can, however, collectively engage in a respectful, reciprocal and honest dialogue" (Napoli, 2019a, p. 180).

In order to engage in such a dialogue, I followed Napoli's (2019b) suggestion: "I propose, as an ethical practice, to remain committed to one's personal identity formation work first and foremost-to fully know and honor the full extent of one's own story" (p. 82). As part of my pre-workshop process, I spent time on an arts-based exploration of my positionality, my story, and my own identity formation.

The piece I created (see Figure 1) took an element from my own culture: the Passover Seder plate. Passover, the holiday which marks the exodus from Egypt, my ancestor's escape from slavery to freedom, is marked every year by a big meal called the Passover Seder, in which foods symbolizing various aspects of the story are eaten. The Passover Seder includes songs, discussion, and reading the *Haggadah* (which literally means 'the telling' in Hebrew), a text recounting the story of escape from slavery to freedom. For the week-long duration of the Passover holiday, Jews replace wheat products with *matzah*, a flat bread, as a reminder of our ancestors' hurry to escape slavery leaving no time for their bread to rise. Since childhood, Passover has been my favorite holiday. I find that the entire holiday is focused on intentional embodied storytelling, keeping up a story that has been told and re-told for thousands of years. While it is essentially the same story and same text, the story evolves and is elaborated over the years. In my own family, it has evolved to include stories of my father's activism as a freedom rider in the civil rights movement, freedom songs from around the world, and raising awareness of slavery and human trafficking in the world today.

The traditional Seder Plate has six sections, each containing one of the symbolic foods. In my artistic response, I created a large platter which holds small bowls of various sizes. Each small bowl is inscribed with a word in Hebrew, connecting me to the language which is a key part of my identity. The words represent ideas and values that come from stories that were shared in my family, and which I hope to pass on to my children. Creating this piece and spending time reflecting on the process of creating it helped me articulate some of the questions I am curious

about exploring in my thesis and beyond: How do we filter the past through our present? How do our stories shape who we are and how we interact and respond to the world around us?

### Figure 1

*Arts Based Reflection: Seder Plate*



### Workshop Setting and Participants

This community engagement project took place in a synagogue in a small town on the East Coast of the United States. Participants were families with children who are members of the synagogue community. I approached this particular community since I knew their rabbi, who had participated in a program I taught overseas over a decade ago. After meeting the rabbi to describe the program, we decided to send out an invitation to families with children between the ages of eight to thirteen. We decided to limit the group to between 20 to 25 participants. This number would allow us to include several families in the group while maintaining an intimate atmosphere and space for conversation amongst the participants. Registration for the workshop was on a 'first come, first served' basis. The program was planned as a 3-hour workshop to be held in the activity room of the synagogue on a weekend afternoon. Seven families participated in the



workshop. There were eleven adults and twelve children, with a total of 23 participants. The rabbi of the community participated as an observer and engaged informally in the discussions.

I chose this community both as an insider and as an outsider. As an insider, my life has been immersed in Jewish culture, traditions, and history. In this process of engaging with Helen Cordero's work, I wanted my starting point to be coming into the dialogue from my own positionality and cultural heritage. The population participating in the workshop was in various stages of preparing for a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony, a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony typically performed when a child is 13 years old, marking the transition from childhood to full participation in the community. Religious ceremonies involve reading from the *Torah*, the holy scriptures, and often include physically passing the Torah between the generations in the child's family, symbolically representing the passing down of the tradition between generations. My intention was to explore the potential of the clay storyteller workshop in generating meaningful exploration, conversation and connection amongst families.

I am an outsider to this community in the sense that I am not a member of their synagogue and did not previously know any of the participants. Additionally, as an Israeli who has only lived in the United States for a few years, my experience (and its impact on my own identity) has been different than that of the American Jewish community. Among the differences that have been most significant in my own experience is that I grew up as part of a majority (Israel is the only country in the world where Jews are the majority), whereas American Jews have grown up as a minority. It is my hope that this insider-outsider position can serve as an asset in my work.

### **Invitation and Pre-Workshop Request**

A week before the date of the workshop, I sent an email to the families that had signed up requesting that they come to the workshop with something that has been passed down to their families for a 'show and tell' activity. This could be a physical object, a photo, or a story. The purpose of this step was to get families thinking and talking about the stories that are important to

them in the days leading up to the workshop. My hope was that this preparation would plant the seeds for the topics we would be exploring.

### **Set-up**

I arrived early to set up the space for the group. On one side of the room, I set up a circle of chairs for the opening part of the workshop. Next to the circle, I placed a whiteboard. On the other side of the room, I set up several small tables and chairs for the clay work. I also set up a long table as what I like to call a "buffet": a spread of all the materials and tools. I left one section of the long table open to be used as a space for demonstrating clay sculpting techniques. An additional table was set up with some snacks, hot water, coffee, tea, and hot chocolate mix.

### **Materials**

Materials for the workshop included a collection of photos and images which I shared with the group as part of my presentation. These images included a photo of a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, a map showing the location of Helen Cordero's Pueblo, a photo of Helen and of her grandfather, and several photos of Helen's clay storyteller figurines. I had initially thought of showing these images as part of a slide show, but decided to print them out on 12"x18" paper which I attached to thick cardboard. Having hard copies of the images enabled me to keep them out on display throughout the session, allowing participants to take their time looking at each image, as opposed to giving only a few seconds for each image on a slide show.

The clay I used for the project was Laguna WC602 stoneware, which has a smooth texture and fires to a light brown color. Clay materials included clay, a wire cutting tool to cut off chunks of clay, plywood work platforms, sculpting tools, garlic presses, rolling pins, pieces of fabric, old newspapers, various stamps and textures that could be used to make marks on the clay, needle tools for cutting the clay, paintbrushes and clay slip (watered down clay), and several underglaze colors. I have access to a kiln which I planned to use to fire participants' work.

## Group Session Procedure

The below figure lists the steps that made up the workshop. Following this list is a detailed description of each step.

### Figure 2

#### *Workshop steps*

Sequence	Description
1.	Opening: 'Show and Tell' activity, introducing the theme of intergenerational storytelling, establishing a connection to participants' cultural heritage, and learning about Helen Cordero's storytellers.
2.	'Tea Time': structured time that included snacks and guided questions to help families begin to brainstorm and plan their storyteller sculptures.
3.	Instruction in basic clay sculpting skills and process.
4.	Creating sculptures in family groups.
5.	Question cards guiding family reflection upon traditions, values and stories that are important to them.
6.	Sharing sculptures with the group and closing reflection.

#### **Opening: Show and Tell**

I began the workshop by inviting the participants to join me and sit in a circle. The community rabbi welcomed them and introduced me to the group. I introduced myself by sharing my own 'show and tell' which was a picture of my grandfather. I told the group that my grandfather grew up in Vienna and escaped as a teenager in 1938 right after the Nazi invasion into Austria. Growing up, my siblings and I loved hearing stories of his very mischievous antics when he was a child in Vienna. One of our favorites was how he used to lean out of his second-floor apartment building and pick cherries directly from a tree that reached his window. He would then chew the cherries and spit the pits out the window onto the heads of people walking down the street, giggle when they jumped with surprise, and then crouch down and hide, until my great grandmother caught him. I then invited the participants to share their 'show and tell' items and

stories with the group, and as each family shared their story, I encouraged the other group members to ask questions and respond to the family that was sharing.

The purpose of this introduction was to serve as an ice-breaker and to have participants introduce themselves. While they belong to the same synagogue, the community is large, and not all the families knew each other. The intention of this particular introductory activity was to have participants represent themselves in the context of the stories that they carry and to actively engage participants in the role of storytellers transmitting their family stories.

### **Connection to Participants' Cultural Heritage**

To introduce the topic of transmitting cultural traditions, I showed the participants a photo of a Bar-Mitzvah ceremony. In the photo, a child is surrounded by their parents and grandparents who are handing them a Torah. I asked the participants to describe what they saw and what it symbolized. Next, I asked participants if they could think of additional traditions and practices that are part of transmitting stories and ideas within their cultural heritage, and wrote their answers down on the whiteboard. The purpose of using the whiteboard was to enhance the brainstorming process by allowing participants to see the list they were creating together.

### **Introducing Helen Cordero's Storytellers**

I introduced Helen Cordero to the group by showing them the map of New Mexico marking the location of Cochiti Pueblo. I explained that we were going to metaphorically travel to meet someone from a different culture, who celebrated her own cultural heritage of transmitting stories and traditions by creating art about it. I showed the group the photo of Helen and her grandfather, and told them about the first clay figurine that Helen created, depicting her grandfather telling stories to children and grandchildren surrounding him. I explained that Helen went on to create many more storyteller figurines, and inspired her relatives and other Cochiti artists to create storytellers as well. By creating her figurines out of clay, she was also carrying on a tradition of pottery making that was transmitted between generations of the Cochiti Pueblo. As they looked at the images of Helen's figurines, I asked participants what they noticed. I facilitated

the conversation to help participants reflect upon what they saw and what feelings and images Helen's figurines brought up for them. I pointed out that the figurines all had their eyes closed, and their mouths open, and asked what they thought that reflected.

### **Tea Time: Families Begin to Brainstorm About Their Storyteller Sculpture**

I explained to participants that each family was going to be creating their own storyteller sculpture, based on their own family histories, and that our first step would be to think about what we would like to express in our sculpture. I handed each family a card with some guiding questions, and explained that over the next 15 minutes, they were invited to take snacks and hot drinks from our food table, and sit with their families for a 15-minute 'tea time' to discuss the questions on the cards.

### **Figure 3**

*Cards with questions for families to discuss over 'tea time'*

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The questions that appeared on the cards given to families

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- Who is your storyteller?
  - Is your storyteller a particular person or a composite of different people or experiences?
  - What is your storyteller saying?
  - Who is listening?
  - What do they hear?
- 

### **Instruction in Basic Clay Sculpting Skills and Process**

Following their family 'tea time' conversations, I invited the participants to come over to bring their chairs close to the table with the art supplies. I began by asking participants what they knew about the process of working with clay and firing, and explained that I would be taking their creations to dry gradually in my studio. Once the sculptures were dry, I would fire them in my kiln, and then bring them back to the synagogue so that each family could pick up their sculpture and take it home. Since this process takes time, I set the date for pickup to be three weeks from the date of the workshop. Next, I introduced the various materials on the table, and demonstrated clay sculpture techniques. This included how to create a hollow form for the large

storyteller figure by attaching two pinch pots to create a ball stuffed with newspaper to help hold its shape. I demonstrated the technique of slipping and scoring as a way to attach clay pieces to each other, and demonstrated the use of some of the tools such as the garlic press which could be used to create hair. I showed an example of the color the clay would have after firing, and explained how to use the underglaze colors to add touches of color to their sculptures. Finally, I pointed out that clay is a very forgiving material that they can change and experiment with, and invited them to have fun exploring the materials and tools.

### **Creating in Family Groups**

I invited families to sit at the small tables, and to approach the materials table freely to gather any materials and tools they wanted. I defined the time frame for this part of the workshop as an hour, with the option of adding an additional 15-20 minutes if needed. I remained by the materials table at first, assisting participants with gathering tools and materials, and then circled between the tables, answering questions and assisting with the materials. I gave a few time reminders as we neared the hour mark, and observing that families were still immersed in their work, extended the time for an additional 20 minutes. Once again, I gave timing reminders for the ending of this part of the workshop.

### **Question Cards**

After completing their sculptures, participants filled out a card with three different categories of things they hope to transmit to their own children or grandchildren. I asked parents and children to each do this separately. I explained to the children that to answer these questions, they could imagine themselves in the future as parents and grandparents themselves, thinking of the stories they would be telling their own children. Once the cards were completed, I invited children and parents to reveal their cards to each other. The goal of this intervention was to encourage participants to identify the values, stories, and traditions that are important to them and to help children and parents visualize themselves as part of a wider chain that links past and future, thus encouraging a sense of identity and belonging.

## Figure 4

*Card participants filled out*

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The questions on the cards participants were invited to fill out

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- A value I hope to transmit to my children/grandchildren
  - A tradition (something you do) that I hope to transmit to my children/grandchildren
  - A story I hope to transmit to my children/grandchildren
- 

## Exhibit and Closing Reflection

After participants cleaned off their tables by returning all their tools and materials to the containers on the supply table, we set up an informal exhibit. I wrote the questions which the families had addressed in their tea-time planning discussion (see Figure 3) on the whiteboard to help guide them in presenting their storyteller to the group. Each family introduced their storyteller and shared details about the identity of the figures they had sculpted, the stories or memories that their storyteller was conveying, and their process of creating. After all the families had presented their storytellers, I invited each participant to share a few words or a sentence about what they were taking away from our afternoon together. I reminded the group of the date their sculptures would be ready and assured them that they would be carefully handled and cared for throughout the firing process.

## Results

### Record Taking and Arts-Based Processing

Immediately following the workshop, I carefully packed up the sculptures and transferred them to my studio. With the experience of the workshop still fresh in my mind, I spent time journaling. My writing included details of what occurred, impressions of participants' responses, and words, stories, and phrases that had stayed with me. Due to the process of drying and firing ceramics, I was able to spend time in my studio observing and reflecting on each of the sculptures created in the workshop. I intentionally engaged in my writing and reflection process as I sat surrounded by the storyteller sculptures.

I had initially imagined that I would create my own storyteller sculpture as my arts-based processing, but as I sat surrounded by the participants' sculptures and all the stories and memories that they held, I felt a sense of awe and wanted to create art that reflected that experience of holding all these stories and memories. I was aware of the trust that the participants put in me as the caretaker of their creations, taking their storytellers through the process of drying and firing. I felt a great responsibility and gratitude for my role in caring for these precious storytellers and the memories, stories, and meanings that they held. My response art was a reflection of these feelings: I created a large bowl to represent the experience of holding the participants' storytellers and stories. On the exterior part of the bowl, I used various methods of engraving, painting, and embedding words and images that represented stories and ideas that participants shared during the workshop.

### **Figure 5**

*Arts-Based Processing: Bowl Expressing my Experience of Holding Participants' Storytellers*



### **Observations of Participants' Experiences**

All the families came prepared with an artifact for the 'show and tell' activity. As each family presented, I noticed that they co-constructed their story, with parents and children telling the story of their item together, and both parents and children answering questions that came up from the group. The items that the families brought and shared stories about were a baby shoe, a



hand-written recipe card, a prayer shawl, a clarinet, a photo of a grandparent, a children's book and a *menorah*, a candle holder for the holiday of *Hannukah*. Following each family's presentation, the members of the group spontaneously responded by asking questions and sharing what the participants' stories and items brought up for them. After the first family spoke about the item they brought, a baby shoe, group members asked if they felt comfortable passing the item around, which the family agreed to. Following this first case, each family that presented passed their items around the circle for group members to hold and closely observe. I noticed that they had added a sensory element which seemed symbolic – as they were physically holding each other's stories and memories.

Participants responded with enthusiasm to Helen Cordero's figurines. A few of the children asked if they could see Helen's figurines in person, and when I suggested that I could send them the link to the PBS documentary that features Helen's work through an interview with her granddaughter, participants all said that they would like that. I kept the enlarged images of Helen's work displayed in the room, and participants walked up to the images and viewed them throughout the session.

During the time families worked on their sculptures, there seemed to be a buzz of activity in the room: participants seemed fully absorbed in their clay work, walking back and forth to the supply table to take materials as needed, showing each other different ideas and working collaboratively. Laughter and conversation filled the room. Families negotiated different roles in the joint artwork, such as deciding who would create which character, and collaborating on decisions such as the sculpture's pose and features and where to place the smaller figures. I noticed a sense of experimentation and inventiveness and exclamations of enthusiasm and encouragement such as "Look at this!" or "Wow! How did you make that?" and "That looks amazing!"

The initial time frame for this part of the session was defined as an hour, with a check-in to see if more time was needed. I gave several timing reminders throughout the work. Participants

described being in a state of flow; they expressed being so absorbed in the activity, that they had lost a sense of time, and expressed being shocked that an hour had passed. I extended the activity for an additional twenty minutes, once again giving timing updates as we neared the conclusion of this segment.

When parents and children filled out the cards asking what traditions, values, and stories they hoped to transmit to their own children and grandchildren, I had asked them to fill out the cards separately, and only then to reveal their responses to each other. In this exercise, the children were asked to imagine themselves as future parents. As I circled between the tables absorbing elements of the family conversations, I noticed that revealing their responses led to continued conversations. In most families, the parents and children had both similarities and differences in their responses. As a parent myself, I noticed that I was particularly interested in the children's ideas and in the parents' responses to their children's ideas. Among the themes that came up in the cards families filled out were traditions of family vacations and gatherings, celebrations of certain holidays, traditions surrounding birthdays, and cooking certain dishes. Among the values that children and families listed were social justice, standing up for what's right, honesty, keeping family together, kindness, and being interested in the world.

As each family described their sculpture during the shared exhibit time, I noticed that all the sculptures depicted a specific person in their family. These included grandparents, a great grandparent, and an uncle. Memories and stories were attached to a specific older relative, and participants wove descriptions of this individual's personality and their relationships with them into their stories. Two of the families created a storyteller depicting a grandparent who had recently passed away. In both cases, the children spoke about their connection to the grandparents and talked about their significance in their lives and their love for them. Similarly to the 'show and tell' activity, the storytelling that families engaged in as they presented their sculptures was co-constructed with children and parents narrating the story of their sculpture together.

Looking at the sculptures themselves, and hearing the participants describe them, I observed there was a lot of personalization of the sculptures. For example, one family sculpted their grandfather sitting in a wheelchair, while others added elements such as glasses, hats, scarves and shawls, a book, a newspaper, and a musical instrument. One sculpture included the storyteller sitting on a sculpted wooden log. Participants' narratives highlighted that these physical attributes and accessories were meaningful to them as reminders and representations of the individuals they were depicting. When it came to the small figures gathered to hear the storyteller, participants all described a significance of the number of figures they created, such as the number of grandchildren in the family. Here, too, certain visible elements were added to specify particular individuals, such as relative size compared to the other figures, or a certain hairstyle, and even a sports team jersey on one of the child figures. Several of the sculptures included pets (two dogs and one cat) among the smaller figures surrounding the storyteller.

The closing conversation included brief responses from participants to the question of what they were taking away from the workshop. Participants expressed positive feelings and a sense of joy and enthusiasm, stating that they had had fun and found the workshop engaging and meaningful. Participants expressed an eagerness to have more opportunities like this. Several of the families reported that they could not wait to get their sculptures back from the firing, and that they had already discussed where they would place the sculptures in their home.

### **Discussion**

I designed the clay storyteller workshop following my dream of bringing families together, inspired by Helen Cordero's storytellers, to use clay to explore their own stories. My intention was to explore the potential of this workshop in generating meaningful exploration, conversation and connection amongst families.

Throughout the workshop, I noticed that when prompted to share family stories and artifacts, and to share the story of their sculptures, children and parents engaged in co-construction of their narratives, with all family members contributing to weaving the story

together. Fivush, Bohanek and Zaman (2011) suggested that the co-construction and co-narration of intergenerational family stories enhances the internalization of these narratives, as children make these stories their own. This process, they claimed, enhances children's emotional wellbeing and regulation, offers them a channel for creating meaning, and a lens through which to view their own experiences. It is my hope that the storytelling and sharing prompts throughout the workshop, along with the literal co-construction of a clay sculpture provided an opportunity for families to engage in the process of internalizing and deriving meaning from their stories. I am curious to further explore the relationship between the co-construction of a tangible object, such as a sculpture, and the co-construction of stories and memories, which are non-tangible.

During the 'show and tell' activity that opened the workshop, participants shared items that had been passed down in their families. Participants listened to each other intently and asked questions about the stories shared, which I had anticipated and encouraged. What surprised me was the initiative that came from the group to pass around the items between the group members. The participants took noticeable care in handling each other's items, first by asking permission to pass the items around, and then as observed by their physical gestures of holding something very precious. The community art project described by Rubesin (2016) used immigrants' and refugees' art pieces and the stories that accompanied them to invite connection with community members. Responses from the artists indicated that they felt valued and seen, and responses from community members reflected feelings of empathy, appreciation, and a sense of shared humanity. My workshop participants' act of passing around each other's items can be seen as tapping into the type of connection Rubesin described; I believe that the participants were expressing a desire to connect with each other's stories. They recognized the ability of a physical symbol to hold meaning, and their desire to hold each other's artifacts can be seen as symbolic of holding and honoring each family's story.

As participants in the workshop worked with the clay, the mood in the room was noticeably upbeat. There was a buzz of activity, laughter and expressions of excitement and

enthusiasm. Feedback from participants as we concluded the workshop also indicated that they had found the hands-on clay work to be fun and energizing. My own observations of families working on their sculptures were of collaborative work, cooperation and communication around creating together. These observations go hand in hand with Kimport and Robbins' (2012) and Nan's (2021) claims that working with clay promotes positive affect, and with Jang and Choi's (2012) observation that clay work can benefit interpersonal relationships. This workshop aimed to utilize these benefits of clay work in the process of intergenerational storytelling.

In her discussion of indigenous methodology, Napoli (2019b) referred to her understanding of her ancestors' stories as her own. The power of identifying with ancestors as a way of internalizing and making a story your own came up in my workshop as participants all created sculptures depicting specific people in their families. Their memories and stories were associated with a particular older relative, and their stories were intertwined with descriptions of these relatives' personalities. On a personal note, I see this with stories that I regularly share with my children about my beloved late father. They are intertwined with anecdotes about his personality, and although my youngest was born after my father passed away, I can see him incorporating the stories of the grandfather he never met into his own story and identity. The power of stories of one's ancestors and how they can impact identity formation is a subject I hope to explore further.

Klorer (2014) related to the value of participants creating an artifact which can serve as a physical symbol of their stories. My workshop aimed at a joint creation of an artifact as a symbol of participants' stories and as part of an experience of sharing and transmitting these stories. In the concluding moments at the end of the workshop, participants expressed excitement at the notion of getting their sculptures back from the firing, and even discussed where they planned to place the sculptures. Relating to the fact that she did not know what participants in her project would do with the story boxes they created, Klorer pointed out that "we may never know the entire impact of this kind of project" (p.153). I can relate to having to sit with the lack of

information about the project's impact. Where will my workshop participants keep their storyteller sculptures? Will they share their art and their stories with others? Will they become cherished keepsakes for their families? Will their experiences in the workshop inform how they engage with storytelling amongst their families? These questions which remain unanswered are a reminder of the power of creating something, letting it out into the world, and being able to let go and, as expressed by Klorer, "trust in the power of art and story" (p.153).

### **Limitations and Considerations for Further Study**

Due to scheduling and timing issues, the easiest way to return the sculptures to participants was for me to drop them off at the synagogue on the promised date, and for participants to drop by the synagogue office at their convenience and pick them up. Had it not been for the limitation of timing, I would have explored the possibility of designing a follow up meeting for group members to meet again, see all the completed pieces, and engage in further reflection.

In the process of engaging with Helen Cordero's work, I wanted my starting point to be coming into the dialogue from my own positionality and cultural heritage, and so I ran the workshop within the Jewish community. In the future, I hope to seek out opportunities for bringing this workshop to people of additional backgrounds and cultures. I hope that bringing this content to people from a wide variety of backgrounds can serve as a way to celebrate and honor participants' unique worlds as well as their shared humanity.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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