South El Monte Arts Posse: Collaborative Curriculum Building

Pictured above are SEMAP co-director Romeo Guzman, and teachers from five participating schools in El Monte and South El Monte.

Background

Since 2013, I have been working as a writer and collaborator with the South El Monte Arts Posse, (SEMAP) which is an arts collective co-founded and co-directed by Romeo Guzman (Columbia alumnus) and Carribean Fragoza. SEMAP can be described as “a collective of artists, writers, urban planners, educators, scholars, farmers, ecologists, swap meet
vendors, and youth dedicated to engaging with the South El Monte and El Monte community through the arts by rethinking our use of space and transforming how we inhabit it.” (https://semartsposse.wordpress.com/about/).

Unlike most arts organizations, SEMAP does not house its operations and projects in a building. This is an integral part of its community-building process as it ensures that all its projects are site-specific works of public art & engagement. So for example, when SEMAP exhibits in gallery spaces, it makes sure to translate the public and often process-based nature of the projects for gallery audiences, often integrating interactive and participatory elements. The specific SEMAP project I have been participating in over the course of AY2015-16 (described below), is representative of this collaborative, community-oriented ethic of engagement.

2015-16 Project: “Collaborative Curriculum Building”

In the summer of 2015, SEMAP began initiating plans to run a series of curriculum planning workshops in El Monte (EM) and South El Monte (SEM) that would connect a few of its historians/authors with local teachers in EM and SEM, for the purposes of building up teacher resources on local histories of the area. After spending significant time planning, coordinating, and liaising with various schools and interested parties over the course of the Fall, in March 2016, aided by the support of a History in Action Project Award, I, along with my Columbia colleague Andre Deckrow, visited El Monte. In all, we worked with about fifteen social studies teachers from all five high schools in the El Monte Union High School District. In the week we spent in El Monte and South El Monte, we had three main objectives:

1) To work closely with the teachers (ninth to twelfth grade) on designing local history curricula based on pre-existing research on El Monte and South El Monte done for SEMAP by myself and Andre.
2) To become better acquainted with the local institutions and resources that might assist in the work of developing local histories/curriculum.
3) To initiate steps for a follow-up curriculum planning event next year.
Our main curriculum planning day was hosted by Mountain View High School. Here, we spent time devising curricula around two major themes. The first theme, lead by my colleague Andre Deckrow, reflected the research he has done (and published) for SEMAP on Japanese American internment. Andre’s article on this topic can be accessed here: https://www.kcet.org/departures-columns/a-community-erased-japanese-americans-in-el-monte-and-the-san-gabriel-valley. I lead the curriculum planning on the second theme, which was based on research I have previously done (and published) for SEMAP on the history of Spanish missions and the local indigenous communities in EM and SEM, and specifically, the history of a rebellion against the Spanish lead in 1785, by Tongva medicine woman, Toypurina. The article I wrote on this topic can be accessed here: https://www.kcet.org/departures-columns/toypurina-a-legend-etched-in-the-landscape-of-los-angeles

At Mountain View, I lead the curriculum planning on this topic by giving a short lecture (pictured left) on “Teaching Local Indigenous History in El Monte and South El Monte”. I used the lecture to address both the pre and post contact history of indigenous groups local to the area. The aim of the lecture was to provide the teachers with enough content knowledge and resources for further information, that would enable them to introduce some aspect of local indigenous history into their pre-set curriculum. As the teachers explained to us, there is very little flexibility and room within their curriculum to branch into the local indigenous histories of the area, in spite of their desire to do so, and interest on the part of their students. We therefore focused a significant portion of the curriculum planning and brainstorming session (pictured right) that followed the lecture, on devising ways in which the content from the lecture might be folded into existing topics.
The teachers came away with a number of ideas that they intend to implement next year, including the integration of indigenous history content into their current teaching about missions, local geography (place names, etc), and even the possibility of introducing field trips to local sites of significance for current and past indigenous groups.

Our aim in collaborating with the teachers on this local history curriculum building project, was to help them find ways that they could use their teaching to connect the currently abstract and marginalized experiences Japanese and indigenous peoples from the area, to the very communities where their students are currently living. In this respect, our Curriculum Building Project is in keeping with SEMAP’s main goal of fostering local community ownership over its narratives and histories. SEMAP sees an important part of its purpose as being to shift the relationship between the SEM/EM residents and the physical spaces they inhabit. In past projects they have approached this through the use of art and community narratives to foster agency, ownership, and grassroots democracy. Through these various projects, the Collective has tried to create a sense of ownership of community not based on proprietorship over buildings or land, but based on residents’ connection to place through knowledge, and personal and communal narratives. It’s most recent effort to build on this mission has been to approach community building at the level of schools, education, and local history. Hence the “Collaborative Curriculum Building” project was conceived as a new way of extending the work it has been doing all along.

Outside of the classroom, we also spent time during our trip getting acquainted with local resources and other institutions that may offer partnership in the future. This included taking a tour of the local area. We also made preliminary plans for holding another similar event in the future with this same group of teachers, and other colleagues that they may be able to recruit.