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Social Practice Artists in the Archive: Collaborative Strategies for Documentation

Abstract

Over a seven month period in 2015, My Baryo My Borough, a community-based arts and oral history project, partnered with Queens Memory, the Queens Library's local history project, to collaboratively document the Filipino and Filipino-American communities in Queens, NY. My Baryo, My Borough and Queens Memory worked with the Filipino-American community to collect oral history recordings and digitize photographs from the local Filipino-American experience. Central to our success was a shared understanding that our partnership was building mutual legitimacy and trust, creating local capacity and shared ownership, and centering leadership for the project within the Filipino-American community in Queens. More broadly, the partnership illuminated the role that the arts can play in documenting communities that are traditionally underrepresented in the archive.

Biographies

Maggie Schreiner is a Project Archivist at New York University. Maggie was previously the Queens Memory Outreach Coordinator at Queens Library, where she facilitated mobile digitization, and developed partnerships with local community organizations. She holds an MA in Archives and Public History from New York University.

Claro de los Reyes is a social practice theatre artist, actor, and educator who generates community-centered work engaging with social justice. Claro founded the My Baryo, My Borough project, a community-centered oral history project about the NYC Filipino American community. He's a graduate of Fordham Theatre program and holds an MA in Applied Theatre from CUNY SPS.

Keywords

Filipino-Americans, Social Practice Arts, Community Archives, Oral History, Post-Custodial, Public Libraries

Introduction

Over a seven month period in 2015, My Baryo My Borough, a community-based arts and oral history project, partnered with Queens Memory, the Queens Library's local history project, to collaboratively document the Filipino and Filipino-American communities in Queens, NY. My Baryo, My Borough and Queens Memory worked with the Filipino-American community to collect sixteen oral history recordings and digitize over one hundred and fifty photographs from the local Filipino-American experience. The oral histories and photographs have become part of the permanent collection of Queens Memory, housed at the Archives of Queens Library.

Social practice artist and educator Claro de los Reyes launched the My Baryo, My Borough project in mid-2015. The project was commissioned by the Laundromat Project's Create Change Program, and was driven by the question: what role does art and creativity play in a community-centered oral history project? Integral to the My Baryo, My Borough model was three months of free arts-based community programming done in partnership with local artists and organizations. This series of programs was intentionally diverse in nature and ranged from intergenerational story circles, creative writing, family picnics, graphic storytelling, and traditional weaving. These programs not only offered inclusive creative programming that catered to the local Filipino-American community, but were also used to recruit a team of participants who were trained to conduct oral history interviews. The 2015 iteration of the project culminated in a multidisciplinary art exhibition and performance that featured the stories shared by the oral history subjects.

Queens Memory is an outreach-based oral history and community archive project run jointly by Queens Library and Queens College. In addition to recording oral histories with local residents, the Queens Memory project hosts public events at branch libraries throughout the borough, where community members can have their family photographs, documents and memorabilia digitized and added to the Library's digital archives. Queens Memory staff and volunteers work with donors to collect metadata about each item, including names, dates, locations and additional contextualizing information. The Queens Memory model is post-custodial, meaning that contributors retain their original documents, and only the digital surrogates become part of the collections of the Archives at Queens Library. Materials are made accessible through the project's website queensmemory.org, and are also ingested into the Digital Public Library of America, giving additional visibility and contextualizing these records on a national scale. Queens Memory received a grant from the Knight Foundation, which funded Maggie Schreiner to serve as the Queens Memory Outreach Coordinator during the timeframe of this partnership.

Context

The My Baryo, My Borough project was born out of an urgent need to document the largely overlooked history of Filipinos and Filipino-Americans in New York City. Despite being the fourth largest Asian American population in New York City (Salvo, 2014), there are very few archival materials exploring the histories and experiences of Filipino-Americans in the city. This stands in contrast to the vibrant array of projects documenting Filipino and Filipino-American communities on the West coast of the United States, including the Manilatown Archival Project in San Francisco (Wong, Ikeda, Cachola, Ibanez, 2014), the Filipino American Library in Los Angeles (Wong et al., 2014), and the National Pinoy Archives in Seattle (Filipino American National Historical Society, 2016), the Welga! Filipino American Labor Archives at the University of California Davis (UC Davis, n.d.) and UCLA's Archiving Filipino American Music in Los Angeles (Ruskin, 2006). My Baryo, My Borough contributes a unique East coast, New York City focus, while also bringing an arts-based collection strategy to the table.

My Baryo, My Borough responds not only to the lack of primary source documentation of the Filipino-American experience, but also to the continued underrepresentation of Asian Americans in mainstream understandings of American identity. Michele Caswell (2014) describes this cultural invisibility as “symbolic annihilation,” a concept borrowed from 1970s feminist media scholars that describes “what happens to members of marginalized groups when they are absent, grossly underrepresented, maligned, or trivialized by mainstream television programming, news outlets, and magazine coverage” (p. 27). Community archive projects, Caswell (2014) argues, provide a platform for previously marginalized voices, and serve as “an alternative venue for communities to make collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them and to control the means through which stories about their past are constructed” (p. 31-32).

Similarly, Queens Memory was created to document the history of the borough of Queens, and to empower all residents to document their lives and experiences. Queens is the most ethnically diverse county in the United States, with a population that is over 70% people of color, and 47.5% foreign born (Queens Library, 2015). Representative archival documentation of Queens necessitates collecting from communities that are traditionally underrepresented in the archive. The outreach-based, post-custodial model employed by Queens Memory is specifically designed to build trust with local communities, to model respectful custodial and description practices, and to demonstrate the Library's interest in the histories of everyday Queens residents. As Terry Cook (2009) notes, as archivists “we are literally creating archives. We are deciding what is remembered and what is forgotten, who in society is visible and who remains invisible, who has a voice and who does not” (p. 169). Queens Memory attempts to do this work in a way that is as

democratic and inclusive as possible.

Partnership

Queens Memory partnered with My Baryo, My Borough to provide technical training, event space in public libraries, marketing materials, digitization equipment and staffing, and long-term stewardship of the materials collected through the project. Specifically, this partnership facilitated three community archives events held in two Queens Library branches in neighborhoods with significant Filipino-American populations, Woodside and Forest Hills, and one private event at a family reunion in Belle Rose. The archival material resulting from this partnership includes sixteen oral histories, over one hundred and fifty digitized historic photographs, and ninety born-digital photographs of My Baryo, My Borough events. Jennifer Quiambao, an active My Baryo, My Borough volunteer and a Queens College MLIS student, was trained on Queens Memory description standards, and is responsible for cataloging the oral histories and producing the final finding aid. As a result of this partnership, the Archives at Queens Library now has a significant collection of material documenting the Filipino-American community in Queens, as well as tangible and continuing connections to local Filipino-American communities.

As the collaboration progressed over the course of the autumn, it became clear that the partnership between My Baryo, My Borough and Queens Memory was both very generative and mutually beneficial. Central to our success was a shared understanding that our partnership was building mutual legitimacy and trust, creating local capacity and shared ownership, and centering the leadership for the project within the Filipino-American community in Queens. We approached our work as professionals – as a social practice artist and an archivist – and were flexible when required. More broadly, the partnership illuminated the role that the arts can play in documenting communities that are traditionally underrepresented in the archive.

Building Legitimacy and Trust

The legacy of distrust between minority communities and traditional memory institutions has been widely noted (Flinn, 2007; Caswell, 2014a). Our partnership positioned My Baryo, My Borough as a liaison between Queens Memory and the Filipino-American community. Through months of free community-based arts programming, Claro de los Reyes built relationships with individuals and families, ultimately developing a network of people who were interested and engaged in the

My Baryo, My Borough project. This cultivated trust was extended to Queens Memory, allowing the Library to responsibly collect and serve as the long-term custodian for the oral histories and digitized family photographs generated during our partnership. For My Baryo, My Borough, a new project, partnering with a large and established institution such as Queens Library provided additional legitimacy, as well as situating the project within a larger context. The partnership allowed for the active and ongoing involvement of the Filipino-American community in documenting and making accessible their history on their own terms (Stevens, Flinn, & Shepherd, 2010) and demonstrated that documenting Filipino-American history in Queens was not just a Filipino project, but a Queens project.

Creating Local Capacity and Shared Ownership

Creating structures for skills building and continued engagement of the Filipino-American community was a key goal for both project partners. Enthusiastic participants from the public arts series were trained as interviewers for the oral history component of the project. All sixteen oral history interviews were conducted by pairs of interviewers, in order to develop the interview skills of community members. At digitization events, information about neighborhood history and personal digital archiving were shared through interactive activities and brochures. And as previously discussed, My Baryo, My Borough volunteer Jennifer Quiambao was trained on Queens Memory description and access standards. A culminating event shared oral histories and images, as well as a theater performance that wove together the stories collected over the course of the project. All of these techniques were intended to create a sense of shared ownership in the process and of the products. Additionally, these strategies developed the capacities of local community members and facilitated continued engagement in local community history and archival activities. This final aspect was important to our specific context as two project coordinators funded through short-term grants (from the Laundromat Project and the Knight Foundation). This allowed us to envision and build for sustainability that would last beyond the duration of our grant cycles.

Centering Leadership in Underrepresented Communities

Finally, this partnership allowed Queens Memory to collect materials from a community that had been previously underrepresented in the archive, while centering leadership for the project within the community itself. My Baryo, My Borough built relationships with potential interview subjects, conducted the oral history interviews, and encouraged community members to contribute photographs at digitization events. Decisions about event locations, times, and specific activities

were all made in close collaboration with My Baryo, My Borough coordinator Claro de los Reyes and participants. Donors were actively engaged in the process of collecting metadata about oral history interviews and photographs, and the final catalog description was created by a My Baryo, My Borough volunteer. These methods situate the resulting records in an intellectual and cultural context of community knowledge (Caswell, 2014). Ultimately, by centering the decision-making power for the project with My Baryo, My Borough, the resulting archive of Filipino-American experience in Queens has become a place “where collective memories are created, collective histories restored, and collective identities represented.” (Wong et al., 2014, p. 112).

Conclusion

There have been a variety of archives that have explicitly opened their doors to artists to make use and reuse of existing archival materials, including the Portland Archives and Records Center (Carbone, 2015), the New York Public Library (NYPL Labs, 2016) and, very recently, the South Asian American Digital Archive (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2016). The My Baryo, My Borough model brought arts into the beginning of the records creation cycle, as a method of gaining trust and building community. The use of public arts programs facilitated the creation of a rich archive documenting the Filipino-American experience in Queens. Participants were engaged and invested in the project, and as a result shared personal, meaningful, and sometimes difficult histories. The collaborative, arts-based process that inaugurated the project allowed for a documentation and description practice that involved and valued the contributions of community members. This in turn allowed community members to value the archive (Caswell, 2014a).

This case study has attempted to demonstrate possible techniques, successes, and considerations of an arts-based, post-custodial, and collaborative documentation strategy. In a short video, My Baryo, My Borough and Queens Memory volunteer Jennifer Quiambao reflected that being part of the project helped her “to see how archives live on, and how you relate it to a community that is actually alive, and how... you relate the past to the present” (Laundromat Project, 2015). Strategies to document and engage underrepresented communities necessitate developing community partnerships and outreach as a core of the archival profession (Flinn, 2007). For My Baryo, My Borough and Queens Memory, a successful partnership included cultivating mutual legitimacy and trust, building skills, and centering the leadership for the project within the Filipino-American community.

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