

Intellectual Agenda

As early as 1908, the city of Merced, California adopted “Gateway to Yosemite” as its tourism slogan, at a time when a trip from the coast to the Sierra Nevada took days instead of hours. The phrase is still prominent on official signage around town. Dusty neon signs announce once-quaint mid-century motor inns named for Yosemite as well, even though demand from tourists stopping off on their way to the park is long gone. When UC Merced opened in 2005, a similar naming strategy was adopted for its institutional spaces, reminding us of iconic Yosemite locations as we visit the Half Dome dormitory or Wawona conference room. To walk around Merced—whether the downtown or the university campus—is to be constantly reminded that you are (or should be) on your way to somewhere else. Rather than a place to pass through and forget, this project re-imagines Merced through intergenerational stories and memories. Gateway to Merced will bring together the university, local government, community organizations, and participants from all sectors of the local community to transform our public and institutional spaces into an authentic and multiple reflection of Merced’s rich cultural life.

This project aims to create not a focal point for expression, but a gateway to participation for the community. The emphasis here is on processes of community engagement over product, using new media to facilitate multiple narratives or paths and open-ended experiences. Gateway to Merced seeks to create an open monument to evolving history in-the-making. New media approaches (e.g. podcasting, blogging, vlogging) connect artistic interpretation with ethnographic and oral history materials—alongside approaches to integration of relational art and creative community engagement practices with ethnographic and oral history methodologies.

In California, the wealthiest state of the nation, money and capital flows with great velocity to and from Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. Yet despite these flows, Merced is an eddy of extreme poverty. Despite being a world center of entertainment and the arts, California’s Central Valley has historically had little access to that world. In 2017, the median household income in Merced was significantly lower than the California national averages, unemployment rate was much higher than the national average, and only 13.3% of the residents had achieved a college degree. Moreover, more than 25% of our population lives in poverty. Like many of the residents of the City of Merced, a significant majority of the students of UC Merced come distinctly underprivileged backgrounds: 73% of the 2018 entering class are first generation college student and 64% are Pell Grant eligible.

Part of the significance of this project is to renew community-engagement around humanities initiatives and also provide access to digital media facilities to enrich ongoing projects. Meaningful engagement between university and local high school students will enable local youth to envision a future that includes higher education and future successes. The Gateway to Merced project is especially important to this region because we have a relatively low number of non-profit cultural organizations. By empowering socially engaged youth in Merced, we aim to

showcase diversity of humanistic practice and combat the class-based biases of arts and humanities programming. Finally, the City of Merced contains an extraordinarily diverse population, with residents who are of Mexican, Native American, Hmong, Japanese, Punjabi (Indian), Portuguese, and Italian descent. Through the collection of the diverse histories of the communities in Merced, in the communities' own terms, we will create lasting networks between these communities and the University community. Not only will these networks provide economic opportunities for area youth, they will generate the power of self-representation and transformative thinking (Longo, 2012; Goodwin, 2018).

Partnership Statement

The Merced the Multicultural Arts Center (MAC) supports the arts in the city of Merced, most notably space for art programming including a gallery, black box theater, dance classrooms. The MAC regularly holds community-facing events in conjunction with the UC Merced Department of Global Arts, Media, and Writing Studies, including sponsorship of numerous gallery exhibits, weekly Music Memory Hour focus groups, free public performances through Arts UC Merced Presents, and the Global Arts Lecture Series and Faculty Recital. A common theme from community conversations is how a commitment to higher education risks a brain-drain of talented youth, which relates to systemic underachievement factors and perpetuates local inequities; the needed counterbalance is re-committing and supporting youth in community opportunities, particularly focused on problem-solving and social transformations (Watson, 2018). One of the promises of locating a University of California campus in Merced was the opportunities that the campus might present through community engagement, which was recently formalized (2015) in our campus' Carnegie Foundation distinction for community engagement. This proposed collaboration with community partners provides an opportunity to bridge the University and the diverse communities in Merced, as it engages Merced's youth population to help develop the historical memory of the city. Notably, the MAC is in the heart of downtown and short walking distance from all youth organizations and centers; it is an open and accessible space to multiple constituencies.

Stronger connections between the broader community and the university serve our continued efforts to recruit talented and diverse students, faculty, and staff, particularly those with strong ties to Merced and the San Joaquin Valley. Place-making projects support socio-identitarian processes that help denizens, particularly at-risk urban youth, to see themselves as belonging to the city and the university community, even as they learn the value of community-engaged research. This project will provide a basis to apply for extramural funding from the NEA, NEH, and the Kresge Foundation.

This project is designed to strengthen ties between the university and the ethnic and geographic communities of Merced. In particular, this focus on development of a community-engagement media hub contributes to the cultural and economic revitalization of the city and provides an

inclusive, hands-on artistic experience. The project will be a catalyst for broad participation in artistic work to improve the livability of our economically-challenged locale by making visible and audible the stories of its diverse and growing populations in the common public spaces of Merced. Finally, providing high school and university students with enrichment opportunities will enable youth to generate a broader sense of Merced's history from the perspective of its many distinct communities, as well as facilitating student interactions with the community and the university.

Outreach Strategies

In the long-term and as a result of this initiative, alliances formed through this partnership will give UC Merced faculty and students a sustained presence in the downtown area, providing the local community with continued and growing options for arts participation by Mercedians of all ages and backgrounds. As such, this project builds from ongoing fieldwork with community partners. The outreach strategy expands existing collaborations with the participants listed below and their (under)graduate student advisees. In addition, the relationships forged with the We 'Ced student journalism project, the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI), and the Merced Senior Community Center will be central to broader outreach strategies, even as new bridges are built with Hmong, Punjabi, Filipino, Mexican, and Central American community heritage centers in Merced.

Timeline

Phase 1: Fieldwork and Community-Engaged Media Laboratory Planning (7/1/2019 – 8/15/2019)

- GSRs begin networking with community centers, collaborate with UROC undergraduate interns collecting oral histories, provide expertise in majority language areas
- Community-engaged media hub proposal is drafted and reviewed
- Media hub equipment purchasing begins

Phase 2: Implementation of Community-Engaged Media Laboratory (8/15/2019 – 6/30/2020)

- Complete equipment purchasing
- Develop best practices document for media collection and ethnographic representation
- Ongoing collaboration with Merced youth groups on related youth mentorship guidelines

Project Objectives and Assessment

- Expand language range for oral history project to include Spanish, Hmong, Punjabi, and Portuguese (majority language profiles in Merced County)¹;
- Continue to document and propose a media laboratory space for community-engaged media projects;

¹ See 2018 Census data on Merced County language profiles under Diversity tab at <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/merced-county-ca/>

- Develop and implement media laboratory in MAC at project completion;
- Archive projects for long-term access with the Library and other digital repositories.

In order to assess the overall impact of the grant, we will track the successes of the high school and university students who participate in the project, where they land over a 5-10 year period, and how many return to the Merced area. We will also measure the size of the oral history archive that is generated through our efforts and the number of projects that utilize this archive and are supported by our efforts. In addition to the individual projects that emerge from our collaboration, we will be creating a publicly accessible digital archive hosted by UC Merced Library in which oral histories will be store and made accessible to the public. Artistic collaborations will be made available to the general public through a large scale exhibit at the Multicultural Arts Center, the UC Merced Art Gallery, and through a digital archive via the our campus' Center for Humanities.

Participants

Jayson Beaster-Jones is an Associate Professor of Music and Chair of the Department of Global Arts, Media, and Writing Studies. In addition to two monographs on music industries in India, he regularly publishes in scholarly journals in ethnomusicology and anthropology. Since August 2018, he has been running weekly Music Memory Hours at the Multicultural Arts Center with the Merced Senior Community Center. These memory hours are in collaboration with Petr Janata (Psychology, UC Davis) as a way of investigating the relationships of music, memory, and cognition. He is the faculty mentor for a number of humanities students in the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Center at UC Merced (funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation) who will be contributing to the ongoing "Gateway to Merced" project.

David Torres-Rouff is an Associate Professor of History and Chair of the Department of History and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies at UC Merced. He is the author of *Before L.A.: Race, Space, and Municipal Power in Los Angeles*. Since 2016, he has been working on "Merced's Lost Chinatown," a multidisciplinary effort to re-people Merced's nineteenth century Chinese community and reconstruct its spaces, which were bulldozed in the 1950s to build Highway 99. The project aims to generate scholarship and public humanities results. It is grounded in robust partnerships within the community including the Merced County Courthouse Museum. The project has also been a successful platform for training several advanced undergraduate students in archival research and spatial analysis in conjunction with the Andrew Mellon Foundation-funded Undergraduate Research Outreach Center-Humanities (UROC-H).

Patricia Vergara is an Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology in the Global Arts Studies Program at UC Merced. Her research centers upon Mexican musical styles in Columbia and the relationships between trauma, violence, and memory. In addition to being an active performer, she is the Director of Arts UC Merced Presents and is responsible for introducing a number of

significant artists to the Merced area. Vergara will assist with collecting oral histories from musicians in the Merced County area and documenting the soundscapes of the city.

Anne Zanzucchi is an Associate Teaching Professor in Writing Studies as part of the GAMWS department. She has published several articles and book chapters on multimedia theory and practice for teaching and learning. Her teaching and recent conference presentations focus on public literacy and community-engaged writing initiatives, with an emphasis on science communication. Currently, she advises graduate student fieldwork in the Youth Leadership Institute and We 'Ced youth organizations.

With a multimodal focus, this collaboratively led initiative feature academic and professional backgrounds in the textual, visual and aural elements of media initiatives. The unified objectives are to plan space arrangements and initiate the groundwork for related educational and communications-focused projects, with a sample project and overall guidelines for continued and future work in these spaces.

Works Cited

Goodman, Steven. 2018. *It's Not About Grit: Trauma, Inequity, and the Power of Transformative Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Longo, Nicholas V. 2012. *Why Community Matters: Connecting Education with Civic Life*. New York: SUNY Press.

Watson, Vajra. (2018) *Transformative Schooling: Towards Racial Equity in Education*. New York, NY: Routledge.