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The social museum in the Caribbean : grassroots heritage initiatives and community engagement

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Summary in English

The Social Museum in the Caribbean as a Mosaic

In the opening chapter of this dissertation, the research project is framed; the outer edges of the mosaic are determined. In that introduction, a brief history of museums in the Caribbean is outlined and previous museological research in the Caribbean is reviewed, noting the niches into which this research project could expand and add new insights. A foundational understanding of museums within the region and their colonial histories is provided by the seminal work of Alissandra Cummins (1992; 1994; 1998; 2004; 2012; 2013) and expanded by the research of other museologists working in and on the Caribbean (*e.g.* Farmer 2013; Maréchal 1998; Modest 2012). The focal point of the dissertation is placed on the topic of community engagement in museums as a way to investigate the roles museums are taking on in contemporary society. In the absence of previous region-wide studies into community engagement, Caribbean museums provide a unique opportunity for novel research. The premise of studying community engagement in Caribbean museums is promising, particularly due to the fact that the region is characterized by such a diversity of communities. The chapter ends by presenting the research questions underpinning the dissertation and provides an outline of the dissertation as a whole.

The second chapter develops the theoretical frameworks which are at the core of the research project; the style of the mosaic is selected and the underlying image is sketched. Theoretically, the dissertation is positioned firmly within a contemporary continuation of the New Museology, which focuses strongly on the societal roles of museums. Thus, museological research and practices within the framework of the New Museology are critically considered in the form of a discussion of the works of some of the relevant authors in the field. Definitions of ‘community’ and ‘community engagement’ (*e.g.* Crooke 2008; Crooke 2011a; Watson 2007) are dissected, with attention to both the possibility of inclusion and the risk of exclusion. The variety of participatory practices which museums may adopt in their desire to engage with communities are exemplified through the work of Nina Simon (2010; 2016). Following on from these practices, the impact or outcomes of community engagement processes need critical evaluation and consideration, taking inspiration from studies conducted primarily in Europe and North America (*e.g.* Fouseki 2010; Fouseki & Smith 2013; Fuller 1992; Lagerkvist 2006; Onciul 2013; Ronan 2014; Smith 2015). The discussion is expanded into new territories by considering museums in other geographical regions of the world (*e.g.* Kreps 2011b; Varutti 2013) and by shifting the discussion beyond major established

institutions towards so-called 'micromuseums' (Candlin 2016). The necessity to include grassroots museums in the scope of this research is underpinned by a critical consideration of the definition of the term 'museum' and the development of a broad working definition to be of relevance in the Caribbean.

Building on this theoretical framework, the third chapter discloses the methodology of the research, the selection of tools needed to make the mosaic. Essentially, the research undertaken in the course of this project can be divided into two parts: a macro level regional museum survey of participatory practices and localized, micro level case studies of community engagement processes. For the regional museum survey, fieldwork was conducted in 25 different islands/countries, resulting in visits to 195 museums. This fieldwork relied primarily on museological techniques for museum visitation and documentation, as well as anthropological methods for engaging with community members and museum staff. In the course of this fieldwork, data was collected in the form of photographs, maps, flyers, catalogues, informal interviews, and extensive field notes. A Caribbean Museums Database was designed specifically for this data, which is made available online, and categories were developed for 'museum types,' 'museum ownership,' and 'participatory practices.' Afterwards, this data was visualized and analyzed through a computer science collaboration, allowing for the creation of maps, figures, matrices, and charts. For the localized case studies, fieldwork was conducted over a longer period of time focusing on two places: the *Kalinago Barana Autê* in Dominica and the *Bengal to Barbados* exhibition project at the *Barbados Museum & Historical Society* in Barbados. This case study fieldwork also relied on a combination of museological techniques and anthropological methods, with more emphasis placed on the latter through the use of participant observation, surveys, and interviews. In the course of these two case studies, data was collected in the form of paper-based surveys (150 and 51 respectively), interviews, lectures, literature, and field notes. The survey data was coded, visualized into charts, and analyzed in combination with the other contextual data.

The fourth chapter presents the results of the regional museum survey, particularly the participatory practices employed by these museums; the tiles are placed into the mosaic and the image is filled out. Twelve participatory practices are identified which are organized into three groups: those which lie at the heart of the organization of the museum (*e.g.* if the museum is an ecomuseum or has community staffing), those which are involved in exhibition making (*e.g.* exhibiting donated objects or contemporary artwork), and finally the participation which occurs during museum visitation (such as activities and events). Each of these practices is described or defined, coupled with ample examples from museums visited throughout the region. The chapter showcases how participatory practices are present at (nearly) every museum, but also that they are adopted and adapted in a wide diversity of ways.

The fifth chapter focuses on the case study conducted in the Kalinago Territory, Dominica, at the *Kalinago Barana Autê* (KBA); details are added to the mosaic. The chapter begins by placing the museum in its historical and cultural context, sketching the history of the Kalinago community and the process of the creation of the museum. This information provides the frame to explore the ongoing community engagement process of the development and running of the museum, based on the perceptions of the Kalinago community. The KBA was a community initiative, but was developed and

funded by the government of Dominica. It is currently still owned by the government, but is managed and operated by the community. The Kalinago community is generally positive about the intrinsic value of the KBA, using it frequently for recreation and social gatherings, and note the importance of the museum for outside visitors. The community is more divided when it comes to the instrumental value of the museum, being positive about its educational and cultural value, but conflicted over its financial impact and its role as a source of employment. Part of this contention may be due to the status of the community engagement process currently – namely, that the museum is not (yet) owned by the Kalinago. A lack of transparency may also be part of the problem, as many community members who do not directly benefit from employment or income do not necessarily consider other (intrinsic or instrumental) values for themselves and others. Certainly, there is potential for the museum and its community engagement process to be further improved. However, the frequent use of the site along with the generally positive evaluation by the community show that it has already been a valuable community engagement project.

In a similar vein, the sixth chapter is concerned with the case study conducted at the *Barbados Museum & Historical Society* (BMHS), Barbados, about the *Bengal to Barbados* exhibition. The chapter begins by exploring the history of the East Indian community in Barbados and its five strands of migration in order to understand the complex composition of the community today. Contextually, the history of the BMHS is also included, as well as a discussion of the museum's current direction and aims. Within this setting, the first stages of the co-curation project are explored as they are perceived by both members of the East Indian community and the museum staff. BMHS staff is largely positive about the exhibition concept and rates the exhibition as highly important, particularly for educational reasons for Barbadian society. The East Indian community is considerably more divided, with some rating the exhibition as highly important and others as largely unimportant. Differences can be seen along gender and generational lines, as well as between the two main pillars of the community: Gujarati-Muslims and Sindhi-Hindus. Mindful of these issues, efforts were made early on to improve the representativity of those involved in the exhibition project and to create more awareness of the exhibition within the East Indian community. Coupled with negotiation, transparency of the aims and outcomes of the project was needed and significantly more time was invested in order to understand the participants involved, build mutual trust, and develop a working balance of power.

The seventh chapter presents a discussion of the research as a whole, developing a number of interpretations by combining the macro level and micro level results together; patterns are identified in the completed mosaic. Although community engagement practices and processes – and particularly research into their impact – can still be expanded and improved, Caribbean museums have certainly been working to alter their role in contemporary society. The strong presence of grassroots museums alongside governmental museums ensures that a wide range of communities can be targeted, that museums can respond dynamically and flexibly in different ways, and that they can take on present-day as well as future mandates. By adopting diverse participatory practices, Caribbean museums can be both widely representative and engage with communities in unique ways, depending also on the museum's type and the linguistic area it is located in. By working through community engagement processes, Caribbean

museums have connected directly to more members of their communities, anchoring themselves more squarely and subjectively into society.

Finally, in the eighth chapter, the image of the social museum in the Caribbean is revealed: not as a single, quintessential museum but rather as a complex and dynamic mosaic. The Caribbean museum landscape, consisting of a wide range of museum types which are able to take on a multitude of societal roles, can reach out to different levels of society and diverse audiences. It actively reflects the diversity of contemporary Caribbean society and is characterized in particular by grassroots initiatives. By recognizing the museum as a phenomenon that can take on many different shapes and sizes, its value for a myriad of communities becomes apparent.