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

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What I find is that you can do almost anything
or go almost anywhere,
if you're not in a hurry.

Paul Theroux
The Happy Isles of Oceania

*To all the scientists in my family
For paving the way*

Introduction

We get so involved in giving voices to people of the past, that we often forget what the people of the present are saying.

Carmen A. Laguer Díaz (2013: 565)

Museums carry an old reputation of being temples of knowledge, storehouses of history. They were commonly known as institutions that are great at caring for the past and delivering educational monologues. For roughly the past half century, museums have worked diligently to reinvent themselves as institutions in the service of the present and its societies. The museum of today aims to collect history *and* contemporary, engage in dialogue rather than monologue, and encourage debate and interactive learning. Contemporary museums wish to embed themselves as dynamic actors within their present-day communities. They do so by placing communities at the heart of their missions and the core of their institutions. In the context of this world and this time, the epitome of the museum is the *social* museum.

This social museum has become the ideal or idealized image of the museum around the world. Yet, its presence is perhaps most suitable and most important in the Caribbean region, an area characterized by widespread cultural, linguistic, ethnic, political, and religious diversity. Defining the Caribbean is difficult, as many parameters can be selected as the basis for a definition. Geologically, it can be characterized as the Caribbean plate or geographically as those islands and countries which are washed by the Caribbean Sea. For this research, based on shared political and cultural ties, a broader definition of the Caribbean was relevant which stretches to include the Bahamas and Turks & Caicos Islands in the Lucayan Archipelago, as well as Belize in Central America, and Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana in South America.

It is this broad, diverse, yet linked Caribbean which is the setting of this research. “Culturally diverse, the region shares a common pre- and post-colonization history, though nuanced by the peculiar local histories and geographies of the individual countries” (Cummins *et al.* 2013: 7). The individual islands and countries in the Caribbean, as well as their societies, both share commonalities and have their own particularities. While such a diversity might seem challenging to museums wishing to be strong societal actors, in fact it encourages and allows for profoundly social museums to exist in a diversity of types and models which mirror the variety of the communities they are

centered around. In the context of the Caribbean, the social museum is a widespread phenomenon and a strong societal actor.

In this fragmented, extended archipelago of the Caribbean, museums are tasked not only to engage with a diversity of communities, but also with finding ways to reconcile conflicted pasts and complex presents. St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott, in his Nobel Lecture, warned fellow Antillean writers not to “make too much of that long groan which underlines the past” (Walcott 1992). Instead, he suggested to weave together layers of both past and present, while ensuring that neither overwhelms the other. His metaphor for how historians, writers, and artists can achieve this, echoes with relevance for museums:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars.
Derek Walcott (1992)

It is precisely here where the social museum in the Caribbean situates itself. Museums throughout the region have, are, and will rely on grassroots heritage initiatives and community engagement to write their own reconciliations of past and present. This dissertation aims to explore both *what* museums are doing in this regard – their participatory practices – and *how* they are choosing to work – their community engagement processes.

Couched in the theoretical discourse of the New Museology, this dissertation asks how Caribbean museums are realigning their societal role in relation to contemporary Caribbean communities. The answer is approached from a macro and a micro level, presenting both a broad view of the mosaic of Caribbean museums and offering depth to this image.

The macro level assesses the participatory practices employed by Caribbean museums and is the result of visits to 195 museums throughout the region. This fieldwork consisted primarily of museum visits and discussions with staff, requiring the development of a unique mixed methodology which combines museological and anthropological techniques. By approaching the museum visit as an event, the museums could be studied more holistically and experientially, although there are some limitations due to the temporality of the data. The collected data was visualized through a computer science collaboration, supporting the analysis of different variables. This macro level research resulted in a broad understanding of Caribbean museums and their participatory practices.

The micro level was designed to add depth by investigating the complexities and the dynamics of community engagement processes. To gain this deeper processual understanding, two case studies were conducted with fieldwork consisting of interviews, participant observation, and community surveys. The *Kalinago Barana Autê* in Dominica showcases an ongoing process of collaboration and negotiation between Dominica's government and the Indigenous Kalinago community. The *Bengal to Barbados* exhibition in Barbados marks the beginning of a complex co-curation project between a national museum (*Barbados Museum & Historical Society*) and the heterogeneous, local

East Indian community. By investigating both practices and processes – the macro and micro levels – the dissertation examines how Caribbean museums are actively considering and reconsidering their societal roles.

Museum History

A history of the ‘museum’ as a concept stretches back to ancient times and its origin cannot be placed in any one part of the globe. Throughout history and all over the world, people have collected items and kept them safe in specific locations, often through the appointment of curators or custodians (Kreps 2011b: 457). As James Clifford noted “accumulating and displaying valuable things is, arguably, a very widespread human activity not limited to any class or cultural group” (Clifford 1997: 217). Within this historical, global phenomenon, the origin of the term ‘museum’ itself is rooted in Europe in the Renaissance (Findlen 1989). It was the next step in the development of a myriad of types of collections which had been known under various names such as library, theater, studio, gallery, *wunderkammer*, or cabinet (e.g. Borromeo [1625] 2010; Felfe 2005; Findlen 1994; Quiccheberg [1565] 2013). Many of these collections were highly private and accessible only to a handful of privileged persons (Findlen 1989). The contents of these collections were incredibly varied, often seamlessly bringing together nature and culture, ordinary and exotic. Gardens, as living collections of flora, easily fit within this concept and the wider quest for scientific knowledge (e.g. Masson 1972; Svensson 2017). The Enlightenment influenced the development of the museum towards encompassing a significantly more public role in the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century. In this era, travelling collections became popular, which showcased natural history, ethnographic models, or anatomical specimens to a broader public for their general education and instruction (Podgorny 2013). The late 19th century and early 20th century also saw the rise of the Great Exhibitions, which were massively popular and attracted audiences from all classes. Many of these exhibitions were meant to collect and showcase resources and valuables from around the world – predominantly from colonies – and also, most problematically, included exhibitions of peoples (Corbey 1993). Although aimed to educate visitors, these exhibitions also functioned like markets in which parts of the world were exploited for their natural and human resources and sale was an underlying goal. The vision for these exhibitions was one of bringing order to a colonial experience which was perceived as chaotic (Corbey 1993: 360). This was also the era which saw the birth of the modern museum institution, as a place for the collection and display of objects to a relatively wide public, aiming to educate and civilize (Bennett 1988; 1995). Within this development, the national perspective was dominant – an imbalance still present in the museological discourse today. Designed as places of order and surveillance, museum visitors were supposed to influence each other to civilized behavior and thus the lower classes could be ‘improved’ (Bennett 1988: 81 & 86). These modern museums were strongly tied to, or rooted in, the Great Exhibitions, often owing (parts of) their collections to these exhibitions, and sometimes even their buildings or *raison d’être*.

It is within this history that we find the origins of the first museums in the Caribbean (Cummins 1992; Cummins 1998; Cummins 2004; Cummins 2013; Modest 2010; Modest 2012). Many of these early museums and collections were founded by

commercial and political leaders, designed for the promotion of local natural resources to new clients and investors. In a sense, collecting practices echoed those of the earliest Caribbean-European encounters, which had resulted in natural resources and people being taken to Europe as proof of the ‘discoveries’ (Modest 2012). In the 19th century Caribbean, natural-history and geology collections were most commonplace, having been amassed through systematic surveys of islands and countries as part of the colonial enterprise. As mentioned, these types of collections were also stimulated through the Great Exhibitions, which inspired the creation of committees and societies in the Caribbean to provide materials for these exhibitions. A height of activities in this regard was related to the Great Exhibition held in Jamaica in 1891. Rising interest in the fields of anthropology and archaeology further stimulated these early Caribbean collections and museums, which by playing into tropes of socio-cultural evolution ‘proved’ why colonizers were entitled to the resources of the colonies. In this interplay between imperial expansionism and scientific exploration, Caribbean museums and collections functioned as mirrors to imperial centers (Cummins 2004: 232).

At this same time, there were political leaders who advocated the social improvement of Caribbean populations through educational reform (Cummins 2004: 229). One of these was Lt. Col. Reid who created legislation for the foundation of public libraries with museum displays throughout parts of the British West Indies, beginning in Bermuda in 1839 (Cummins 1992: 34). Reid envisioned that these museums, which would contain collections of natural history and art, would benefit the Caribbean public at large. In practice, the opportunities of the newly emancipated majority populations were limited in terms of time to spend on ‘leisure’ activities. Even more so, Alissandra Cummins has critically pointed out that “it was the inaccessibility of the European concept of ‘museum’ to the African cultural sensibility which proved to be the greatest barrier of all” (Cummins 1992: 34). The absence of West Africans from the histories told through these early museums reinforced this estrangement (Cummins 2013: 32).

Some of these early Caribbean museums can still be found in the region today and were included in this study. The *St. Vincent Botanic Gardens: Curator’s House* was opened in 1891, although the gardens themselves had already been founded in 1765. *Musée L’Herminier*, whose building still exists although it is now no longer a museum, was opened in 1872, while the *Natural History Museum of Jamaica* and the *Institute of Jamaica* can trace their beginnings to 1879. *Musée Schoelcher* opened its doors in 1887 (see figure 1), and the *National Museum & Art Gallery of Trinidad & Tobago* – then called the *Royal Victoria Institute* – was founded in 1892. Many of these early Caribbean museums were focused heavily on all aspects of natural history, some of which complemented these with art collections. Ultimately, this specific historical development of Caribbean museums supported a legacy of the Caribbean as being predominantly a natural rather than a cultural region. Wayne Modest has argued that this notion has influenced how the image of the Caribbean region was invented and has continued to impact perceptions of the Caribbean and its people as not being ‘cultural enough’ (Modest 2012).

Following independence, Caribbean museums were left with the colonial legacies of their collections. These collections had been dominated by natural history, and to a lesser extent art and archaeology. The latter had been created as ‘salvage



Figure 1: Musée Schoelcher, Guadeloupe, was opened to the public in 1887.

anthropology’ – collecting and cataloguing the cultures of rapidly ‘disappearing’ peoples – effectively limiting them to collections of Amerindian archaeology.

While black Africans were of some anthropological interest, blacks from the Caribbean and the United States did not fit into either of the salvageable categories of a dying race or having a culture that was disappearing due to European contact. New World blacks, it was thought, were already tainted by European contact and its civilizing forces and therefore seen to lack practices worthy of cultural significance – and related objects – worthy of anthropological interest.

Wayne Modest (2012: 92)

The narrow scope of Caribbean museums, the emphasis on nature over culture, and the lack of virtually any collections relating to the majority populations of the region, became increasingly problematic when “existing museums in the region were co-opted by post-colonial governments to become agents of identity creation” (Farmer 2013: 172). Governmental museums in these newly independent Caribbean states sought to develop new collections and include African histories and heritages into their narratives, evolving into post-colonial institutions and supporting new national identities. An example of this is the creation of museums in restored plantation houses, which thematically discuss histories of slavery, resistance, emancipation, and independence. Moreover, this period also encouraged the development of grassroots heritage initiatives, as “long experience with disinheritance and marginalization amongst ordinary people strengthened communal or personal approaches to history-making” (Cummins 2004: 238). As part of this shift, ephemeral museums took on a unique role of focusing on the present. It is within this history that we find today’s social museums in the Caribbean: new or old institutions which are working through community engagement practices and processes to place themselves firmly within their contemporary Caribbean communities.

Previous Research

Community engagement (see *Community Engagement*, page 39), as both a theory and a practice, has been researched extensively within museology. Authors such as Elizabeth Crooke (2007; 2008; 2011a; 2015), Viv Golding & Wayne Modest (2013), Ivan Karp and colleagues (1992), and Sheila Watson (2007), have been instrumental in reflecting on the relevance of community and community engagement for museums. Community engagement has been particularly studied in terms of Indigenous or source communities (Clavir 2002; Cooper & Sandoval 2006; Fuller 1992; Peers & Brown 2003b). Many critical evaluations of community engagement have focused on the benefits and impacts of specific projects, exhibitions, or museums (Fouseki 2010; Fouseki & Smith 2013; Lagerkvist 2006; Perkin 2010; Ronan 2014; Smith 2015). In addition, Nina Simon’s (2010) practical publication of her personal experiences with numerous community engagement practices has been hugely influential in guiding museums who wish to develop similar projects. Ultimately, whether theoretical, practical, or critical evaluations, museums in Europe and North America have been overly represented in the museological literature related to community engagement.

Nonetheless, community museums, networks of community museums, and regional museological cooperation have also received significant attention in Central- and South America (*e.g.* Barnes 2008; Burón Díaz 2012; De Carli 2004; Françaço & van Broekhoven 2017; Zea de Uribe 1982).

Within the Caribbean, a number of museum surveys have explored the existence of museums in the region and have presented suggestions for future developments or improvements. These surveys which took a regional perspective were often restricted to a single linguistic area, *e.g.* only the English-speaking Caribbean. The focus for most of these surveys has been on assessing the needs of these museums in order to strategically support their 'development.' 1933 saw the surveying of museums in the British West Indies (Bather & Sheppard 1934), followed by a survey through the Caribbean Conservation Association (Lemieux & Schultz 1973), reports and workshops by CARICOM (Caribbean Community Secretariat 1979; Singleton 1978), an assessment by the Island Resources Foundation (Towle & Tyson 1979), a report for UNESCO (Solomon 1979), and another for the Organisation of the American States (Rivera & Soto Soria 1982). Curator Frances Kay Brinkley published a concise review of museums in the Eastern Caribbean in *Museum's* edition dedicated to Latin America and the Caribbean (Brinkley 1982). UNESCO also undertook extensive surveys of Caribbean museums (Whiting 1983) and Caribbean monuments and sites (Delatour 1984). Many of these reports stressed the problems encountered by Caribbean museums, a lack of funding or of trained staff, and in general highlighted neglect and deficiencies. The aim of these surveys was to make concrete suggestions or recommendations: *e.g.* the development of a 'mobile museum' in the region, the creation of a travelling conservation laboratory, the foundation of a museums studies program or training, and the establishment of a regional museums association (Cummins 2017; Whiting 1983: 13-16). In 1987, all these recommendations came together in the foundation of the Museums Association of the Caribbean (MAC). Over the years, MAC has provided a number of resources about Caribbean museums which take a very broad view of the region. Its directories of Caribbean museums (separated into the four linguistic areas) were updated several times, most recently and extensively in 2011 (Museums Association of the Caribbean 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2011d). These contain 1107 museums,¹ although the information per museum is very basic (its name, address, and contact information). MAC also contacted these museums with a questionnaire for a more detailed survey, which received 110 responses (Sands of Time Consultancy 2011).

Besides these regional surveys, scholarly research into Caribbean museums has been published as well. The work of Alissandra Cummins (1992; 1994; 1998; 2004; 2012; 2013) has been seminal in this regard, focusing on the history of Caribbean museums, predominantly in the English-speaking Caribbean, and their role in the development of identity and meaning-making. The book *Plantation to Nation* (Cummins *et al.* 2013) deserves particular recognition as the first to focus on the growth of Caribbean museums and museology, regardless of nation or language. Several of its articles are referenced throughout this dissertation, particularly in the theoretical chapter. The book

1 The Spanish-speaking museums form the majority of this number (832), including all Central American countries from Mexico to Panama, as well as Colombia and Venezuela.

also included several studies of individual museums. Similar studies have been published independently (e.g. Collomb & Renard 1982; Inniss 2012; Lee 2015; Ramtahal 2013), as well as articles which have focused on museums in a specific country or island (e.g. Callender 2015; Gillette 2000). Regional scholarly literature has focused on diversity (Brookes 2008), or provided more generalized overviews (Maréchal 1998). Without disregarding the importance of the studies, reports, articles, and books referenced above, there has not been any previous research specifically into community engagement from a Caribbean regional perspective. As far as it has been possible to uncover, this work is the first in that regard.

Research Questions and Objectives

This research into Caribbean museums is set within the larger transdisciplinary ERC-Synergy project *NEXUS1492: New World Encounters in a Globalising World*, which investigates the impacts of colonial encounters in the Caribbean. The primary two objectives of NEXUS1492 are: (1) to provide a new perspective on the first encounters between the New World and Old World by focusing on the histories and legacies of the Indigenous Caribbean, and (2) to raise awareness of Caribbean histories and legacies, striving for practical outcomes in future heritage management efforts with implications for local communities, island nations, the pan-Caribbean region, and globally. Within this larger project, the research presented in this PhD dissertation relates to both of these objectives by means of its focus on the topic of Caribbean museums and community engagement. It relates to the first objective of NEXUS1492 by placing the development of Caribbean museums within a wider historical and colonial framework and by analyzing them through the legacy of natural and cultural collecting which started off during these first encounters. It resonates even more strongly with the second NEXUS1492 objective by focusing on the contemporary role of Caribbean museums and how this influences diverse communities. As part of such a large, transdisciplinary research project, collaboration was possible with colleagues from the fields of anthropology, archaeology, computer sciences, education, genetics, geochemistry, heritage studies, network sciences, and physical geography. These collaborations not only helped to advance the questions and methodologies of this study, but also provided opportunities to conduct fieldwork together and enabled the development of joint research projects to support this research or improve its outreach. In addition, the possibility to receive feedback on all stages of the development of this research from such a wide array of specializations was very valuable.

Primarily, this dissertation seeks to answer the question:

How are Caribbean museums realigning their societal role in relation to contemporary Caribbean communities?

It focuses on answering this main question by hypothetically identifying community engagement as the primary approach through which Caribbean museums might achieve such societal repositioning. Following on this hypothesis, it is possible to identify four sub questions. By finding the answers to each of these, the ultimate aim is to identify solutions to the main question as well. The sub questions are:

1. Theoretically, what are participatory practices and what are the intended outcomes of community engagement processes for communities and individuals?
2. What are the characteristics of contemporary Caribbean museums and how are they adopting and adapting participatory practices?
3. How are community engagement processes, including their value and outcomes, perceived by Caribbean communities?
4. How do community engagement practices and processes affect the role of Caribbean museums in relation to Caribbean society?

The research as a whole is placed within the theoretical discourse of the New Museology and is influenced by post-colonial theories and the current discourse on heritage. This theoretical foundation directs the research towards community engagement as the primary focus, which is encapsulated in the first sub question. The main research approach is designed to take place on a macro and a micro level, where the former is well-suited to investigate participatory practices on a regional scale and the latter is appropriate for a deeper understanding of community engagement processes. Thus, the second sub question corresponds to the macro level and is to be answered through a regional survey of Caribbean museums and their participatory practices. The micro level relates to the third sub question, whose focus on the processes and perceptions calls for a case study approach. The case studies revolve around on-going or newly beginning community engagement processes and the perceptions of the participants are the core subject matter. The case studies in Dominica and Barbados were selected in part due to the hypothetically complex dynamics of engagement between minority communities and local government(al institutions). Finally, the macro and micro levels are analyzed together in a detailed discussion. There, in a series of answers and observations, interpretations can be made about how community engagement practices and processes actually affect the role of Caribbean museums.

Outline

To conclude this first, introductory chapter, an outline is presented of the remainder of the dissertation in order to guide the reader. This outline sketches the contents of each chapter and indicates where the reader may find the answers to the separate sub questions.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical frameworks which lie at the basis of this research project, and roughly aims to answer the first sub question. Couched in the New Museology, the chapter discusses this theory in detail, as well as the development of two related theories: post-colonial theories and the current heritage discourse. It delves into the history of the term ‘museum,’ identifies a suitable working definition for this research project, and explores a number of museum models. Specific focus is also placed on the definitions of ‘community’ and ‘community engagement’ and on the meaning and relevance of these terms in the Caribbean in general and for this research project in particular. The theoretical framework is essential for understanding the methodology developed for this dissertation research.

Chapter 3 follows by describing the methodology of the research as a whole. It begins by considering the research approach and its design into a macro and a micro level. A detailed description of the regional museum survey of 195 museums is provided.

This section discusses the selection of islands and countries, and the museums visited within them. It describes the fieldwork methodology, as well as the computer science collaboration which resulted in the creation of various data visualizations placed throughout this dissertation. Similarly, for the micro level research, that is the two case studies, the selection criteria are discussed along with the fieldwork methodology. The section details how data was collected and what kind of data was collected during the fieldwork sessions. In closing, the chapter reflects on the research ethos, considering the role of the researcher in the field, the presence of possible biases, and notes the code of ethics employed. The chapter thus describes where, how, and what kind of data was collected in the course of this research.

Chapter 4 presents the main findings of the regional museum survey, or the macro level approach, with examples of participatory practices from Caribbean museums. The chapter is structured by participatory practice: each practice is first categorized and followed by multiple practical examples. This extensive collection of Caribbean participatory practices aims to answer the second sub question and provide a broad regional perspective. It is of notable relevance to museum professionals wishing to adopt or adapt participatory practices. In addition, a reading of this chapter benefits from consulting the online accessible Caribbean Museums Database which contains detailed entries of all 195 museums.

Chapters 5 & 6 present the findings of the two case studies, or the micro level approach, by detailing the processes surrounding two community engagement projects which were ongoing at the time of this research. Chapter 5 focuses on the *Kalinago Barana Autê* in Dominica, a museum envisioned and managed by the Indigenous Kalinago community but constructed and owned by Dominica's government. This long-term collaboration process allows for a closer look at how the Kalinago community perceives the value and outcomes of the museum, particularly in light of its ownership model. Chapter 6 concerns the *Bengal to Barbados* exhibition project in Barbados, a co-curation project between the local East Indian community and the *Barbados Museum & Historical Society*. The very beginning of this collaboration provides insight into the development of the exhibition and the process of finding shared goals, especially in the context of a heterogeneous community. Both case studies highlight specific answers to the third sub question. While the cases are particular, they reveal some of the complexities which any community engagement process in the world could encounter.

Chapter 7 is the stage of an extensive discussion of the research as a whole and combines both macro and micro level perspectives. It develops a broad yet detailed image of the community engagement practices and processes in Caribbean museums. It is structured around a series of nine insights, each of which is discussed in detail. The chapter contains interpretations, statements, results, and discussion points, all of which tie back to the final sub question as well as the main research question. It considers the societal role of Caribbean museums by exploring differences such as the museum's location, its type of content, or its ownership. It furthermore discusses community engagement processes in terms of challenges or conditions for success. The chapter sketches a wide diversity of ways in which Caribbean museums, often complementarily to each other, are realigning their societal roles and engaging with contemporary Caribbean communities.

In closing, Chapter 8 provides a short conclusion of the complete dissertation, revealing the image of the social museum in the Caribbean. It ends by indicating a number of possibilities for further research.

As a final note to the reader, while most figures can be found in line with the text within the relevant chapters, the full page visualizations produced in the course of this research are placed as a series immediately before Chapter 7. This facilitates returning to them while reading the discussion. The full image credits for all figures can be found in the list of figures. The appendix contains an index of the names of all museums researched as part of the regional museum survey. It also includes the questionnaires and their collated responses conducted in the course of the two case studies.

