Effective Exhibit Strategies to Represent Contemporary Cultures

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A Project

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Abstract

Museums, as high profile institutions, are vehicles for change. They are distinctly situated to exhibit important subject matter to an extensive audience. With cross-cultural misunderstanding constantly reemerging, museum exhibits offer a platform to create clearer understandings between cultural groups. The research question I examine is: What strategies are museums using to design and implement exhibits on contemporary cultures? While examining self-identified communities representation strategies central concerns of the study are the objects and the narratives used in the exhibit, how they are displayed, and how they utilize the physical and theoretical space of the museum. As museums and native groups recognize the benefits of collaboration, the two groups can become more conscious of various means of representation, collection care, power dynamics and a multitude of other concerns surrounding their partnerships. This study focuses on exhibits specifically in cultural museums, community centers and native museums, with five California exhibits to exemplify my findings.

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Introduction

Museums are vehicles for change, institutions uniquely culturally situated to exhibit important subject matter to a large audience. With cross-cultural misunderstanding constantly reemerging, museum exhibits offer a platform to create better understandings between cultural groups. Many exhibits on contemporary cultures are grounded largely in post-colonial theory, focusing specifically on community empowerment, designed to create awareness about social issues and question past models of exhibits making. This study looks at self-identified communities' representation strategies.

Central concerns of exhibit design, particularly working with and about groups that exist today are interpretive strategies which can be broken down into these subcategories: the narratives used, the actors (museum officials, exhibit creators, and source communities), the theoretical space of the museum and the larger social and political contexts. In this study, I discuss how cultural institutions develop exhibits on contemporary cultures, which seek to incorporate communities into the development process. My project examines three case studies in California to exemplify my research findings. To further focus, I will discuss how cultural museums develop exhibits on contemporary cultures and social issues, which ultimately work towards a goal of political and cultural reform, social change and consciousness-raising.

The idea of the museum as an objective, authoritative institution where people are enlightened and made "better" was and still is a dominant trend when the word "museum" is conceptualized, but slowly the idea is rethought and reconsidered. More and more museums understand the value of community input in exhibitions either through informants, collaboration or community driven displays, which employ objects

or ideas solicited from the community. Working with the people whose culture is exhibited adds legitimacy to the message and the exhibit's contents. Community or "native control" gives community curators a chance to present their own message in a public format (Duitz, 1992).

This project presents an overview of the history of museums as cultural institutions, discussing their colonial roots, as well as the Modernist museum movement. It briefly explains the theory and practice of New Museology and its impact on native museums, community centers and cultural museums. This study also touches on the importance of the visitor experience as well as the need for pluralistic and multivocal exhibits. Interwoven are five case studies in three Californian cultural museums or community centers: *BrainInjury Photovoice* and *Valley of the World* at the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California, *Question Bridge: Black Males* at the Oakland Museum of California, in Oakland, California, and finally *California Indians: Making a Difference* and *Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* at the California Museum in Sacramento, California.

Problem Statement & Significance

In my preliminary review of literature I found little discussion on effective strategies for designing and implementing socially conscious exhibits on contemporary cultures. Most publications are either interpretive planning manuals which do not address contemporary culture specifically, or are articles that address the development of historical exhibits.

Interpretive planning manuals are incredibly helpful, especially if the aim of an exhibit is to engage the visitor and make the experience relate to their life. The Museums Galleries Scotland's *Planning for Effective Museum Interpretation- How to write an interpretative strategy* (Museums Galleries Scotland, 2010), explains step by step how to design an effective interpretive plan, but does not address specific exhibit themes, such as the time period. The manual aims to be a general reference guide. *Planning for Effective Museum Interpretation- How to write an interpretative strategy* (Museums Galleries Scotland, 2010), seeks to help guide the exhibit developer in very generic terms, asking the user to consider what, why, when, where and how questions when creating interpretive material.

Articles focused on source communities and collaboration draw heavily on the cultural context of exhibits and the museums, but do not generally address design explicitly. Amy de la Haye (1996), for example, uses the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibit on subculture clothing as her point of departure (1996, pgs. 143-151). In order to display *authentic* clothing and cultural styles from a variety of locales and time periods, the exhibit designers drew on crowd-sourcing: collecting items from people who experienced the culture and were, in some cases, still a part of it. One pitfall of crowd sourced exhibits, de la Haye concedes, are some articles of clothing were hard to get a hold of, which created the risk of having a "biased" exhibit, representing only a small portion of the culture. De la Haye's article does address strategies and problems with crowd sourcing objects for display and representation of subjects, but the focus of the exhibit is on clothing styles through history, rather than contemporary cultures alone.

The diversity of literature written from the perspective of both indigenous and non-native exhibit developers is minimal. As Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown (2003) write in the Introduction to *Museums and Source Communities*, "the still emerging nature of work between museums and source communities means that much is yet unpublished, and other material [has] been produced either for in-house use by individual museums or are only known **[**to**]** a particular nation" (2003, p.11). Furthermore, Elizabeth Scott and Edward M. Luby explain in *Maintaining Relationships with Native Communities: The Role of Museum Management and Governance*, not all museums have policy in place to properly engage with source communities, "The main challenges include an absence of policy on issues of critical concern to Native communities, a lack of procedures in many museums for formalizing staff knowledge about relationships when staff leave their positions, and organizational structures that do not live up to their full potential" (2007, pgs.265-285). Developing stronger relationships between source communities and museums is an evolving process, but in recent years important steps have been made to improve collaboration and incorporate the "voice" of the groups represented.

Conceptual Framework

Exhibits on contemporary cultures that are grounded largely in post-colonial theory and focused on community empowerment are designed to create awareness in visitors about social issues and question past models of exhibit practice. My conceptual framework centers on the representation strategies self-identified community groups use to create displays on contemporary cultures. Central concerns of exhibit design, particularly working with and about groups that exist today are representation strategies

(Simpson, 1996) which can be broken down into these subcategories: the object and the concept, (de la Haye, 1996; Baxandall, 1990), the actors (museum officials and source communities), the theoretical space of the museum (Bolton, 2003) the larger social and political contexts (Bennett, 2006).

A cultural museum should be an institution that is willing to explore, interpret and exhibit contemporary social issues. Constructing and designing exhibits on contemporary cultures brings up many issues of representation, for instance, *who* is speaking *for* a culture (Peers & Brown, 2003). The voice of the native population within the exhibit adds authenticity, which is lost if the leading voice is solely that of the museum. Even if the foremost *voice* in the exhibit is that of a native person, are all *voices* incorporated?

Considering the aim of the exhibit is an especially important concern when thinking about exhibits on contemporary cultures. Collection care, representation choices, group politics, the cultural landscape of the museum, and outside interests, such as tourism and funding all influence the effectiveness of the institution's message. Cultural museums, particularly in our post-modern environment are not devoid of the influence from external forces. Any museum or cultural center that displays objects or conveys meaning makes choices about representation and has a responsibility to do it *accurately* (Rosoff, 1998).

In recent years, museums are seeking out source community advisors and collaborators to aid in their development of exhibits (Nightingale & Swallow, 2003). As museums and native groups recognize the benefits of collaboration, the two groups are becoming more conscious of various means of representation, collection care, power dynamics and a multitude of other concerns surrounding their partnerships. Museums are

seeking to move away from the label of *colonial institutions* and are embracing source communities as valuable partners in exhibit design and implementation. From the perspective of the source communities, museums are becoming popular spaces for self-identified groups to represent themselves and share their own cultures' histories (Bolton, 2003).

As more native groups begin to develop and create museums and cultural centers, the ideological perspective of "western" display strategies is re-examined and re-conceptualized (Bolton, 2007). Native groups are adapting the concept of the museum, an institution with a long history of colonial practices, to their own needs (Flynn & Hull-Walski, 2001). The tension between sustaining tourism and funding and the desire to stay authentic to the local community's histories and their present needs, creates tension between many museums and their communities. The requirement to sustain and fund the institution leads many groups to perform perceived notions of what "culture" should look like (Foana'ota, 2007). Some cultural knowledge must be protected and is not meant for public consumption. Museums must decide which information they can make public for display and community outreach/inreach programming, and what information should not be exhibited, (Stanley, 2007) and to be taught solely to the younger members (Fienup-Riordan, Peers & Brown, 2003).

This research project will explore issues surrounding the sometimes fraught and often rewarding collaboration between exhibit developers (both native and nonnative) and the groups they represent. The theoretical and practical considerations an exhibit designer must consider fall into two categories: the controlled factors, which are the objects, photographs, artifacts, narratives, interviews, label text, and the physical space of

the exhibit and the uncontrolled factors, which are the social and political contexts, the work culture, the environment of the museum as well as, society at large. Central themes of the literature review will include: theoretical and cultural perspectives, objects/material culture, representation, and museum authority, perspective, and agendas in order to explore the question: What strategies are museums using to design and implement exhibits on contemporary cultures?

In order to explore this subject deeper, I will examine these sub-questions:

1. What is the role of source communities in the exhibit development process?
2. How does the culture of the institution and the culture of the source community influence the collaborative process?
3. What are effective strategies for constructing socially conscious exhibits, intended to create public awareness?

Research Methodology

For this research project, I used a qualitative methodology to explain my findings. The purpose of this study is to examine effective practices in cultural museums, which create exhibits on contemporary cultures. I view myself as a relativist; there are no universals; all cultures, including the cultures of museums, must be understood in their individual contexts. I take a constructivist and interpretivist method to my research. The constructivist approach has allowed me to explore the cultural and social contexts of the museums' respective exhibits, while the interpretivist approach enables me to employ qualitative data research methods such as participant observation (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

There are no "right" ways of creating an exhibit on contemporary cultures, therefore I examine multiple and varying perspectives from the field in order to understand the practice. This methodological paradigm influences my research design because all museums must be understood as stemming and existing in unique socio-historical settings. With a strong anthropological background and focus on feminism and social justice, I have a bias towards marginalized and oppressed groups being able to *represent* themselves. It's important to acknowledge, as an art administrator, what biases and points of view are inherent in the museum, as an institution with a long and detailed history.

Limitations: This research project is limited to examining non-indigenous and indigenous exhibits representing contemporary cultures. The research has been conducted in a limited time frame, from January 2012-June 2012 and involves both "western" and "non-western" practices of exhibiting, not geographically "western", but ideologically.

Delimitations: Geographically, this project centers on exhibit development in the United States and draw on practices globally, but does not compare the two practices extensively. The case studies I use to exemplify my findings were all conducted in Northern California.

The research project focuses solely on museums, who construct exhibits on contemporary cultures. The following definitions will help define the scope of the research:

Self-identified Cultural Groups/Contemporary Cultures: Groups in existence today that identify as a whole, with a cohesive and common history and sometimes are created through a shared experience. Generally geographically or spatially constructed, with

common social and political philosophies.

Cultural Museums: An institution, which focuses on representing peoples locally, regionally, nationally or from around the world, with an emphasis on collecting, preservation, exhibiting, interpreting and education.

Cultural Centers/Native Museums: Organizationally run; focus is on collecting artifacts from their own culture and creating exhibits, which represent themselves.

Community Centers: An institution or organization where people from a local community can meet for educational or recreational purposes.

Design Strategies: techniques, best practices and tools to create exhibits.

In order to answer this research question, I identify present exhibitions in cultural museums on contemporary cultures, inform data with observation, as well as identify paradigms and patterns in exhibit development in order to compare and critique best practices. The qualitative data oriented research, is based heavily in social constructivism (the world is constructed by social interaction and interpretation, informed by one's cultural background), subjectivism (personal experiences is the basis for factual knowledge) and is informed by emancipatory research (the intentional goal of creating social change). A postmodern worldview accepts chaos, complexity, the unknown, incompleteness, diversity, plurality, fragmentation and multiple realities. This is represented by concepts such as: relativism, that believes truth, morals and culture can only be understood in relation to their own socio-historic context. (O'Leary, 2010).

The Colonial History of the Museum

As institutions, museums have justified their place in society as a tool or an educational and civilizing mechanism to help bring culture the to the masses. To understand the current culture of exhibit making today it is important to recognize the historical setting and cultural atmosphere of museums globally. In Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's *Interpretive Communities, Strategies and Repertories* (2007), she describes the traditional focus and function of the cultural museum. The cultural museums' missions broadly centered on collecting objects and interpreting their collections through exhibitions from a western and scholarly perspective. They served as centers for education, they represented absolute truth, and their authority was based on objective knowledge. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 80).

Colonialism as a practice was viewed by an extremely important mission, a means of sharing and spreading European culture and values with non-civilized societies. This ideological practice was readily incorporated into museums' means of representation. Dominant themes of exhibit design included the notion of "progress", generally represented through technological innovations of the west (MacDonald & Alsford, 1995, p.279).

Museums traditionally, represented the ideals and cultural values of the dominant group in their respective society (MacDonald & Alsford, 1995, p.279). They influenced public perceptions of entire peoples, both negatively and positively, regardless of conscious exhibit design strategies or choices. Historically, museums took control of ethnographic representation, which heavily influenced social perceptions of entire groups of people. Two aims of ethnographic exhibits were to elevate the masses through

education and to present an evolutionary perspective on global cultures, heavily influenced by colonial practices of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Traditionally the voice of the visitor was not heard, they only viewed. Museum going was (and still in some cases, still is) a strictly didactic form of learning. In George F. MacDonald and Stephen Alsford's *Canadian Museums and the Representation of Culture in a Multicultural Nation* (1995), they explain,

> Museums' own history reveals the barriers that hinder their adaptation to social change. The public museum (as opposed to private cabinets of curiosities, or for-profit fairground shows) of the nineteenth century is sometimes seen as an expression of democracy: an attempt to educate the working classes (1995, p.279).

Museums were supremely academic institutions, designed to impart visitors with knowledge. MacDonald and Alsford explicate, "[the museum] can also be seen as a tool of the dominant socio-economic group, controllers of the state seeking to reinforce their values by promulgating them among the ruled" (1995, p.279). High standards of art and culture were perpetuated as more valuable than the material culture of folk and popular culture, furthering the notion that the working classes needed to be exposed to correct culture.

Through their mission to educate and civilize, museums sought to bring *primitive* cultures to European audiences. European cultures were dominantly represented as superior whereas, non-western cultures were a fascinating and curious foreign *object* to be studied and even admired. Non-western civilizations were deemed exotic and *otherized*. Less overtly, museum displays represented non-European cultures as

primitive, static and not modern. Museums' collections became a way to preserve perceived *dying cultures*.

Inside the walls of western or European institutions colonized groups were interpreted and presented in a very different way than the original culture intended. Macdonald and Alsford (1995) write, "once in museums, the objects were adapted into western classification frameworks or judged according to western aesthetic standards" (MacDonald & Alsford, 1995, p.280). Their use value changed; they become art rather than functional tools, or objects of curiosity rather than every day items.

The western colonial duel missions were to educate the working classes and represent themselves as a technologically advanced culture. Museums of the time created displays representing this mission. The modernist museum, arising in the 19th century perpetuated this colonial ideology by emphasizing the work of western anthropologists, curators and academics.

The Modernist Museum

Emerging in the 19th century, the modernist museum centered on the belief that objects could speak for themselves and exhibits were driven by the vision and perspective of curators. The cultural contexts of objects were redefined in the space of the museum (McTavish, 2003). In Lianne McTavish's article, *The Decline of the Modernist Museum* (2003), she writes, "critics charged that these institutions ripped ethnographic objects from their original contexts, resignifying them in the interests of Western patrons and viewer" (2003, p.8). The museum as an institution transformed cultural items into academic objects: to be studied, to be viewed and to be a spectacle of curiosity; striped of

their use value within their respective culture. McTavish uses the example of Gloria Canmer, founder and former director of the U'mista Cultural Centre, who believes, "those objects…really don't mean much by themselves, sitting on shelves. They only come to life when they are really used" (2003, p.1). Museum practice devalued native culture's knowledge of the object in favor of western academic interpretation.

Museums of the 19th century viewed themselves as preservers of dying cultures and safe guarders of the rare and culturally significant. Objects were preserved to represent a universal human history. In North America in particular, "the acquisition and display of Native objects was justified by the myth of the inevitable decline of the 'noble savage' in the face of modernity" (2003, p.8). The displays of "primitive cultures" generally presented them as locked in a distant past and not part of modernity (2003: p.10). In contrast to the romantic notions of the "noble savage, western art and history displays presented their own cultures as technologically and socially superior and advanced" (2003, p.8). Eilean Hooper-Greenhill writes, "The museum of the modernist [period's] characteristics…were shaped in relation to the ideas and values of the period" (2000, p.21). The modernist museum strove to present a "universal representation of the world," presenting themselves as universal museums, where people from around the world could come and learn about exotic cultures (McTavish, 2003).

The modernist museum was space where elite values were catered to and elevated. Critics of the modernist museum claimed they were created and sustained by the privileged classes. Similar to the museums before them, institutions of the 19th century functioned as sites of cultural comportment, where patrons learned how to behave as civilized members of society, "these institutions should be understood as ritual

spaces, not unlike churches, that shape visitors into civilized members of society" (2003, p.3). Rather than functioning as spaces for everyone, they were exclusive, class reaffirming institutions.

By the 1980's museum's philosophies began to change. They began to make representation choices that incorporated the *native* voice and catered to more diverse visitors, "especially people of colour, women and the working classes" (McTavish, 2003, 11). Source communities became a core component of museum exhibitions and representation strategies "various curators, especially those working in anthropology museums, have begun both consulting and collaborating with the communities they represent, engaging seriously with such issues as Native self-determination and the repatriation" (McTavish, 2003, p.12). Museums are increasingly striving to include the voice of the represented in their exhibits and displays. The museum practice characterized as "new museology" emerging in the late 1980's strives to reconsider old professional standards.

The New Museology

With the rise of Post-Modern and Post-Colonial theory of the 1960's and 1970's philosophers, writers and social critics alike began rethinking and re-evaluating social practice and hegemonic cultural trends. With this shift in thinking, different theories and practices arose in museums; the idea of "authority" began to change and whose voice created "true" meaning was questioned. The academic curator's dominant opinion was rethought as a tool of certain knowledge. In Steven C. Dubin's article, *The Postmodern Exhibition, Cut on the bias, or is 'Enola Gay' a verb?,* he writes,

> Exhibitions today commonly reflect the interests of groups that are ideologically different from those previously in control-groups that are only recently flexing their muscle, having just elbowed their way into the cultural spotlight. To be sure, new viewpoints are being expressed in established institutions, channeled along disparate racial, ethnic, and doctrinal lines (2007, p.213).

More and more, museums are recognizing that the most authoritative voice may not be that of the academic curator. Museums are becoming more pluralistic in their practices, incorporating more voices into their representation strategies.

The idea of the museum as an objective authoritative institution where people were enlightened and made "better" was and still is a dominant trend when the word "museum" is conceptualized, but slowly the idea is being rethought and reconsidered. Moira Simpson explains in *Making Representations, Museums in the Post-colonial Era* (1996), museums have moved beyond serving the culturally elite or the unwashed masses; their purposes are much more complex. Simpson discusses the value of community input in exhibitions either through informants, collaboration or community driven displays, which employ objects or ideas solicited from the community. Simpson explains

> The Boston's Children's Museum has worked with a Native American advisory board since 1973. When the Museum was planning a new exhibition entitles *We're Still Here-Indians in New England Long Ago and Today*, they worked closely with the advisory board to address stereotypes and correct misconceptions (1996, p.53).

Working with the people whose culture the museum is exhibiting, adds legitimacy to the

message and the exhibit's contents. The information presented is further legitimized if multiple voices are displayed. Community or "native control" gives indigenous curators a chance to present their own message in a public format (1996, p.58). As museums and native groups recognize the benefits of collaboration, the two groups are becoming more conscious of various means of collection care, representation, power dynamics and a multitude of other concerns surrounding their partnerships.

In Lidia Guzy, Rainer Hatoum and Susan Kamel's article, *Globalisation and Museum - Perspectives from North America, India and the Arab World* (2009), they explain,

> The issue of imparting knowledge became eclipsed by that of the "authenticity" of that knowledge, of those who impart it, and of the frame of discourse. The result was a veritable boom of newly emerging community museums of an ethnic character. Many of the Native American tribal museums sprung up in the course of that process (2009, pgs.2-3).

The traditional museum professional or those in the community without formal training can create exhibits. Exhibits made for museum display by those who are not museum "professionals" often are driven by a personal connection to a given community. Exhibits that are designed, implemented and installed by native populations exist in a multitude of settings including native run museums, state run institutions and non-profit museums and art organizations. There are two community-based museum models of this study examines, the community center and the native museum.

Community Centers

With an eye towards the needs of the local community, some museums are moving to becoming community centers: places where visitors can interact with the museum, each other, their experiences and the messages of the exhibit. Museums are transforming into spaces where communities can represent themselves. Community centers, rather than catering towards or promoting academic thought, focus on the needs of the community and their perspectives.

The traditional conception of the museum is its academic and colonial practices of elevating the working classes. In order to move towards a more egalitarian museum, Nina Simon in her online article, *Community Museums & Museum Communities* (1996), expresses a need to make the visitor feel like they are in a space that is "theirs". She promotes a place that is "community owned", where everyone who enters has their voice heard (*Community Museums & Museum Communities*, 2010). She writes, "there's a major shift going on in museums around opening up authority and ownership, propelled by the rise of the social web and visitors' expectations of greater participation and involvement" (2010). This new and innovative museum models focuses on creating an environment that is welcoming, creative, and visitor centered; limiting many of the traditional practices which once drove the *museum's* ideology. Museums have begun asking visitors to "talk-back", where they provide a space for patrons to answer questions, create and continue dialogs and share their own knowledge.

In recent years, community centers have begun exhibit practices and representation strategies where community members can design and implement their own exhibits. Simon (2010) cites the Glasgow Open Museum which, "In 1989, the director of

the museums of Glasgow decided these objects could be more useful if they were made available without restriction to community members to use for their own exhibitions and research" (2010). The practice of community driven exhibits and displays opens up the space for more dialogue, more voices and a deeper understanding of diverse cultures and peoples.

Another example of community collaborative exhibit making is from the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle, Washington. The Wing Luke Museum was built by and for the community surrounding it, predominantly Asian immigrants. All exhibits are created and displayed with first hand perspectives. Simon writes, "Even as an outsider to the community, walking into the Wing Luke feels like walking into the center of an ongoing discussion about how to understand history and make the future a better place" (2010). The practice of allowing "outsiders" to design and implement their own exhibits reshapes the museum in interesting ways. It makes the museum a space where everyone is welcome and makes the practice of exhibit making something everyone can do.

The exhibit, *Brain Injury PhotoVoice* at the National Steinbeck Center, is a one-room exhibit focusing on living with traumatic brain injuries (TBI). The exhibit has several voices represented. In the introductory panel, the exhibit developers from the Central Coast Center for Independent Living write,

> Our Brain Injury Photovoice project was originated in the support groups as a recreational activity. Brain injury Photovoice grew into a community awareness project, where the participants, who are all people with a brain injury, tell their stories through photographs and writings. It is our sincere hope that this project

> will bring awareness to the community of how brain injuries respect no boundaries and can happen to anyone at anytime, as well as the need for resources for those with brain injuries (introductory panel).

The National Steinbeck Center hosts the exhibit presented by the Central Coast Center for Independent Living (CCCIL), whose mission is to, "promote the independence of people with disabilities by supporting their equal and full participation to community life. CCCIL provides advocacy, education and support to all people with disabilities" (exhibition panel). The CCCIL received a grant from the California Department of Mental Health, called New Options, which provides in part for survivors of TBI in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties. The success of this grant has helped create seven sites in California intended to care for adults with Traumatic Brain Injury.

The exhibit uses a projector to show video recorded interviews of people with brain injuries, detailing their everyday lives, perspectives and the impact their injuries have had on them. The exhibit itself is rather stark, focusing on the content of the project: the participants' voices. The exhibit allows the individuals to speak for themselves and showcase the photos they choose to. The participants discuss their daily lives, their goals for the future, their relationships with their families, and how their lives have changed as traumatic brain injury survivors. Community centers, rather than catering towards or promoting academic thought, tend to focus on the needs of the community and their perspectives.

Native Museums

A similar model to the community center, the native museum, represents the concerns, opinions and culture of native people, traditionally indigenous people of North America. Native museums and indigenous curation in museums and cultural centers are rapidly becoming more prevalent in the United States and globally. Once seen (and still today, to a degree) as colonial institutions, museums (sometimes termed "cultural centers") are becoming a popular platform for native groups to represent themselves and share their cultures' histories. Similar to the philosophy of the community center, native museums are a means of giving a voice to those generally not represented accurately in mainstream museum exhibits.

A current and ongoing exhibit at the California Museum's exhibit *California Indians: Making a Difference*, is laid out in regions around California where Native Americans have lived and still do. Divided into six sections, each area focuses on a different California region, including the Central Valley, the Coast, Lakes and Mountains, the Desert, and Urban Indians. The exhibit aims to present a personalized experience by representing over 100 California tribes (Figures 1-4).

In Deana Dawn Dartt-Newton's *Negotiating the Master Narrative: Museums and the Indian/Californio Community of California's Central Coast* (2009), focusing specifically on central coast museums in California, she offers a critical point of view on the current state of representations of native people in California cultural museums. She explains exhibits, which group Native Americans regionally, are designed from organizational parameters created in large part by 20th century anthropologists, such as Alfred Kroeber, considered a leading anthropologist on native tribes. She writes,

> Kroeber's maps and theories are still the most widely used in museums, the web, and popular literature about California's indigenous people. These oversimplifications, however erroneous continue to define California cultures and ethnicity in the popular as well as scholarly realm (2009, p.25).

She argues, native people did not create these regional parameters, rather these definitions were imposed upon them by academic and culturally etic anthropological assumptions. In terms of the impact anthropologist have had on representation strategies, Dartt-Newton writes,

> The idea of 'culture areas' was initially developed as an organizational response to the notion of designing educational museum displays, and remains deeply problematic… "I argue that not only is the culture area concept problematic, but that these groupings are actually quite misleading (2009, p.25).

Dartt-Newton asserts that representation strategies, which are seemingly designed by native groups are appropriations of a western hegemonic means of classification.

In Lidia Guzy, Rainer Hatoum and Susan Kamel's article *Globalisation and Museum - Perspectives from North America, India and the Arab World* (2009), they explain, "Besides reproaches concerning the colonial origins of ethnographic collections, the most frequent criticism uttered by Native Americans is that museums are mouthpieces of the dominant (western) elite" (2009, p.2). Native museums can serve as a means for groups with a long history of colonial control and oppression to reclaim public representation of their cultures.

Guzy, Hatoum and Kamel continue by explaining that much of the progress of accurately and progressively representing native cultures in museums is not coming from established academic institutions. They write,

> In spite of a process of self-reflection that has been ongoing for almost five decades, surprisingly little has changed, at least with regard to the area of presentation…,not much has changed in the touched-up Native American exhibitions in terms of content: They basically remain committed to the environment/culture paradigm (2009, p. 3).

They do concede there are attempts to refer to Native American's lives now and to integrate community-based perspectives through some exhibiting strategies, such as direct quotations, but conclude, "most…museums still have a long way to go" (2009, p. 3). Indigenous populations are often still represented as exotic, traditional and as Guzy, Hatoum and Kamel claim, do not incorporate current anthropological findings (2009, p.3).

With the civil rights movements in the United States of the 1960's and 1970's as well as legislation promoting greater Native American self-governance, there was a reawakening of cultural pride in Native American communities (Simpson, 1996, pgs.135-136). In Moira Simpson's *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (1996), she discusses the effort by many Native groups to reclaim their cultures' representation. She writes, "there was a growing movement towards cultural revival and self-representation by the preservation and revival of traditional culture, history and art, and to counteract the negative and stereotyped image of the Indian" (1996, p.135). One manifestation of this new philosophy was the founding of native museums.

Museums run by the native members of a group have a particular aim, In Peter Davis' (2007) article he explains,

> [Community museums] operate at a different geographical scale and with a local, sometimes introspective, political agenda. They are more concerned about collecting, conserving and displaying what is important to the people of their geographical area: in other words, acting on behalf of their immediate local community (Davis, 2007, p.59).

Native museums can serve duel purposes: entertainment and education. They serve as both a tourist attraction to bring revenue into the local economy and to pass knowledge to its younger members (Simpson, 1996, p.136).

Authenticity is an important attribute of any display; George P. Horse Capture expresses the desire to retain Native American cultural identities when establishing museums, "To [preserve culture and tradition]…successfully, we must adapt some the white man's ways and methods, but do this in such a way that revive and preserve our 'Indianness' (Simpson, 1996, p.137). Simpson details the representation strategies employed at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in North Carolina: "Audiovisual equipment enables visitors to hear the sounds of the Cherokee language, and nearby displays contain examples of books and newspapers written in Cherokee" (1996, p.143). Exhibits on Native American culture often intermingle information on historic events with contemporary life.

The Museum of the Cherokee Indian also contains historic photographs, fibre-optic maps detailing the Trail of Tears, modern day arts and crafts and a film on contemporary cultural life (1996, p.143). Simpson writes, "[Ken Blankenship, the

director of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian] has found that many visitors still carry images of Indians in feather headdresses and tipis and do not realize that most of the people around them in [Cherokee, North Carolina] are Indians" (1996, p.148). Museums, native and non-native alike, view themselves as forums to represent factual and accurate depictions of people alive today. Cultural museums and native museums alike are striving to present the Native American as modern, western, yet still a preserver and perpetuator of strong cultural traditions.

Keeping Communities in Mind

The term "community" does not have one clear definition: it can mean a collection of people centered around geography, interest, appearance, ethnicity and a variety of other factors. Communities are composed of people with similar interests, experiences, and beliefs. Often communities can be insular and misunderstood by others, Museum exhibits offer a platform to create better understandings between communities and are working to integrate their perspectives through "consultation, guest curatorship and community exhibitions" (Simpson, 1996, p.51).

Moira Simpson in *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (1996), explains that community involvement in exhibit making, "enable[s] those represented to contribute information which reflects their perspectives and concerns and demonstrates their survival as a unique cultural group within a society which often shows little regard for the distinctiveness of cultural identity" (1996, p.51). Participation by community members can take on a variety of forms. Community members may contribute oral history recordings, research, networking, photography, loaning artifacts or

objects. Simpson recommends contacting leaders of the community as well as community members with a wide variety of contacts to provide diverse perspectives (1996, p.51). Another form of public involvement comes from community exhibits. Moira Simpson explains, "the community group is responsible for writing the text and labels, selecting the [artifacts] and images to be used, and any supplementary information to be provided" (1996, p.64). The subject of the displays generally must be in line with the views, mission and agenda of the museum or cultural center. The museum may assist in checking the text for accuracy if needed (1996, p.66).

Julia Harrison's article, *Shaping Collaboration: Considering institutional culture* (2007), posits there are four factors which contribute to effective collaboration: the character of the source community, the political connection between the source community and the museum, the geographical closeness of museums to these communities and the individual culture of the respective museum *(*2007, pgs.195-212). Developing a relationship with community collaborators is a vital step in any exhibit development project, either by establishing permanent or long-term collaboration projects or short-term feedback sessions. Feedback from community members can often take the form of surveys (paper or electronic), suggestions boxes, formal focus groups, interviews or comment book or area as well as anecdotal evidence.

Long-term collaborative efforts may include indigenous curation, a community exhibit, or an active advisory board. Indigenous curation is an easier endeavor if the museum is in close proximity to the culture represented, but can be more difficult when the museum is overseas or distantly located from the indigenous culture. This is a persistent problem for former colonial powers displaying objects from cultures in a

foreign country. European museums in the late 1980's and 1990's began making efforts to bring native elders and representatives in to help consult on collection management and display techniques. For instance, in 1987 the British museum hosted a small exhibit entitled *Inuit/Eskimo: People of the North American Arctic*. They used material from their collection to give a concise explanation of the Inupiat Eskimo, Canadian Inuit, and Greenlanders histories. To add contemporary culture to the display, the museum, "organized demonstrations by Native American artists to 'show more vividly than any conventional display how native traditions of design and technology still flourish in the United States today" (1996, p.59).

Advisory boards can serve a more formal and continuing function in the exhibit development process. They are often are made up of knowledgeable academics but more and more are being utilized to give a voice to representatives of cultural groups. In the exhibit *California Indians: Making a Difference*, from the California Museum in Sacramento California, the Native American Advisory Board designed, created and installed the exhibit over a two-year period. This is an ongoing exhibit at the California Museum in Sacramento, California, whose goal is to "use Native voice and to represent over 100 tribes across the Golden State." The exhibit, a 3,000-square foot space, contains artifacts, oral histories, and six video stations.

The exhibit's press release explains, "[by] utilizing the voices and experiences of the state's Native peoples, the exhibit presents stories of adaptation and triumph that ultimately reveal California Indians have not only survived but continue to thrive in California's constantly changing conditions." The exhibit highlights the importance of understanding a culture's history and how it impacts them as people now.

(http://www.californiamuseum.org/exhibits/california-indians-making-difference). The exhibit includes works by contemporary Native artists Frank LaPeña, Harry Fonseca & Fritz Scholder, and an interactive language station, where the visitor can listen to phrases spoken in regional dialects.

The oral histories and traditional customs of these tribes are closely interweaved into the display. One station allows visitors to feel the pelts of different animals and guess which animal belongs to which pelt, giving the audience a sense of the different material certain tribes used then and now. The exhibit allows the participants represented to speak for themselves. Only a limited number of representatives from a the community have a voice, either through the video stations or quotes used within the panels. Through the use of videos, the visitor can better understand what the life of a Native American is today. Through oral histories, video stations, objects, photographs and other tools the visitor interacts with the exhibit participants on a more personal level. Personal narratives and authentic material culture help connect the community groups' heritage to the viewer and adds greater meaning to the visitor's experience (Crooke, 2007, p.21)

Who is speaking?

Museums cannot pretend to be objective; every museum and every exhibit has a predisposition. In *Representing Diversity and Challenging Racism: the Migration Museum* (2002) by Viv Szekeres, she writes "Given that we cannot be objective, then at least let us honestly own our own bias and author displays. Let's ask the public for their opinion and include these responses" (2002, p.239). When creating an exhibit it is important to keep in mind some consideration and questions. Viv Szekeres contends it is

important to consciously and critically assess the perspective of the exhibit. For instance she recommends posing these questions, "whose history [is being exhibited]? [And] told from which point(s) of view? Who is included and who is left out? Whose voices are fore-grounded and whose silenced and is this typically the case?" (2002, p. 234). Considering who is speaking and whose opinion and narratives are being delivered can radically change how the information is presented. These issues factor into the meaning making of the exhibit and the *truth* presented. As Simpson explains, "even within one community there can be differing views between individuals" (1996, p.54).

At the National Steinbeck Center, in Salinas, California, they have a temporary display entitled, *Valley of the World* (Figure 10 and Figure 11). This regionally specific display is constructed as large photo blocks, which offers a kinesthetic approach to learning; the visitor must physically interact with the display in order to see a new photo and piece of information. The large photo blocks contain images of farmhands' daily lives, their work, and their community, with accompanying quotes about their lives in the Salinas Valley.

Many photos are used to depict the daily life of the farm worker, with accompanying quotes. One example is, "Let the people and the government...know that we are ready to work. But let them know that we must have what we ask for. It isn't very much...only that they look upon us as human beings" (exhibition label). There is Spanish used, but most of the exhibition is in English. The opening panel writes, "While major changes have occurred in Salinas Valley agriculture, the core of the region's success has always been its people. Individuals from many different cultures and background have merged together to make the Salinas Valley truly the 'Valley of the World'" (exhibition

panel). The opening panel in particular presents a very optimistic view of the farm working and farm laborers, without addressing the political and social issues that exist today. In Stephen Weil's article, *The Museum and the Public* (2007), he explains that history museums in United States are focused on the success of the local community and highlight the positive attributes of the community. This trope is similar to community run museums, which tend to showcase the best aspects of their community.

Designing the Exhibit

For any of the deeper meanings and messages of the exhibit to succeed and engage the visitor, the space of the exhibit must be comfortable and designed appropriately. Exhibits designed with the visitor in mind must be inviting; as Stephanie Moser explains in, *The Devil is in the Detail: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge* (2010), "words, objects, and pictures are combined and grouped and added to by such elements as space, light, and colors-props that help create a content, atmosphere, and ambience for displays" (2010, p.23). Exhibits should engage as many senses as possible without overwhelming the visitor.

"How an exhibition smells, sounds, and feels may be just as important as how it looks, or what it says" (1993, p.17). The visitor experience is everything the visitor will see, touch, hear, smell, feel, learn, and discuss. From the color of the walls to the docents' attitude, all interactions the visitors have (even subconsciously) affect their experience. It's impossible to know how *all* visitors will react to an exhibit and pleasing everyone is virtually unrealistic.

Using a multitude of media can reinforce the message, bringing authority and better engaging the visitor. *Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*, is a current exhibit at the California Museum in Sacramento, California. Although the exhibit focuses in large part on the historical significance of the Catholic Sisters in America, the exhibit does offer insight into the lives of Catholic nuns today. The design and production team is comprised of The National Network for Women Religious (NCNWR), project advisors including scholars and practitioners and the LCWR History Committee. One area in particular focuses on the contemporary culture of nuns today: a projected video entitled, "Seven Sisters Talk about Their Daily Lives". This video is an edited video of seven sisters describing their daily lives, belief systems, backgrounds and cultures. One bench is facing inwardly to the half circle, allowing the visitor a comfortable viewing experience. The intimacy of the display makes the visitor feel they are communicating, or speaking with the interviewees (Figures 5-7).

In the video, "Seven Sisters Talk about Their Daily Lives", the seven sisters who participated discuss the details of their daily lives, their beliefs, their religious views, community engagement, educational programs, social services and a variety of other practices important to them and their collective identity as nuns. It is an extremely positive vision of their lives and highly celebratory of the work they have done in the United States and around the world. They were only a select group of women from diverse backgrounds and could not speak for all nuns everywhere.

Another example of multi-media exhibit is found at the Oakland Museum of California. The exhibit *Question Bridge: Black Males*, created by Chris Johnson and artists Hank Willis Thomas, Bayetèt Ross Smih and Kamal Sinclair, *Question Bridge:*

Black Males is a video driven exhibit showing black men discussing issues important to them. The artists who constructed this display, "created 1,500 videos of conversations with men representing a range of geographic, generational, economic, and educational levels" (introductory panel).

Situated in the art gallery floor of the museum, the goal of the exhibit is to weave, "the conversations together to simulate a stream-of-consciousness dialogue, allowing important themes and issues to emerge, including family, love interracial relationships, community, education, violence, and the past, present, and future of Black men in American society" (introduction panel). The format is very simple: one man asks a question and several men answer. The *Question Bridge* exhibit is part of a national initiative that includes a user-generated website questionbridge.com, that includes a curriculum for high schools and universities, while hosting a series of community discussions. The exhibit offers iPads in the Media Gallery allowing visitors to experience other avenues of the project, as well as adding their own content and participating in the experience. The project is on view (on view at the Oakland Museum of California until July 2012) at four other museums around the country including: OMAC, the Brooklyn Museum, the Castain Art Center in Atlanta, and Salt Lake City Arts Center.

The exhibit is a constructed room with two entrances depending on how the visitor wanders upon it. The atmosphere is very dark making it a very intimate experience. The temporary "room" is constructed from two temporary walls, which created a very personal and private setting. Six video screens are mounted on black walls. The lights are dim, and there is enough seating for about ten people; five stools and one bench were provided. Some visitors can sit on the floor (Figure 14).

The exhibit provides a comment book; a simple, unlined spiral bound notebook for visitors to write their experiences, perspectives, opinions and other thoughts down. This tool provides visitors the opportunity to talk back to the exhibit developers, the museum and each other. Often, many of the comments would receive responses from other visitors. This simple and very low-tech forum gives the community an opportunity to speak to one another.

The exhibit developers traveled around the country and interviewed 150 black men in 11 cities. The African American artists Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas in partnership with Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair video recorded "conversations" between black males from the United States. The project lasted four years. The exhibit's narrative was clearly constructed by the exhibit developers. In the opening panel, Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas write, "*Questions Bridge: Black Males* presented video-mediate conversations among Black males from a variety of backgrounds on critical ideas related to Black male identity in the United States." The Goal of *Question Bridge* is to reach all people, the exhibit aims to foster dialogue and question notions of Black male identity. The artists/exhibit developers believe the display should resonate with both viewers and the subjects. They intend to provide visitors with insights into the complicated community of African-American male. They write, "In this light, "Blackness" ceases to be a simple, monochromatic concept." *Question Bridge* aims to change how audiences' understand this cultural identity.

Exhibits are made for visitors, they are designed to be viewed and discussed. They also provide exciting and thrilling experiences, strive to connect with all (or as many) of our senses as they can, and help the visitor learn and engage in new and

exciting ways. An exceptional exhibit makes the visitor's experience personal; it should be relevant to the viewers' lives and should strive to impact them in long lasting ways.

According to the *Assess the Aspects* section of the *Framework, Assessing Excellence in Exhibitions from a Visitor-Centered Perspective* (2005) worksheet developed by National Science Foundation, there are four necessary features of a meaningful exhibit. These include firstly that the concepts and objects used in the exhibit should be relevant to the experience of the visitor and should not be dependent on their prior knowledge. Secondly, the content of the exhibit has value; the exhibit should be appropriate to the time and place of the museum and exhibit content. Thirdly, the exhibit should not be afraid to address controversial issues. Fourthly, the exhibit should motivate people to "take action" and "change beliefs or attitudes" (2005).

In Deana Dawn Dartt-Newton's *Negotiating the Master Narrative: Museums and the Indian/Californio Community of California's Central Coast* (2009), she explains, "visual culture theory examines the relationships between what is made visible, for and by whom it is created, and how seeing, knowing and power are interrelated" (2009, p.104). Visual Culture Theory posits that cultural symbols influence how viewers interpret cultural identities while influencing the emotions of the visitor. Museums draw heavily on photographs, objects, and artifacts to represent and display culture, using these items to artfully construct meaning and affect visitor interpretations and elicit emotional responses.

For any exhibit design to be successful, participation and interaction between the exhibit and the visitor is essential. Kathleen McLean recommends, "substantial exhibitions attract and reach people; they make things accessible, both physically and

intellectually" (1993, p.34). Exhibits must challenge visitors, but not overwhelm or intimidate them. Their content should be personal and incorporate individuals' narratives in order to make the content important to the visitor. Exhibits should offer opportunities for the visitor to speak through comment books, video booths, spaces for art making and a multitude of other avenues.

Conclusion

The mere fact of exhibiting makes the content important. The information, objects and narratives used are deemed relevant and significant when highlighted in a museum display. Therefore, museums are under immense pressure to exhibit information accurately and respectfully. I believe an exceptional exhibit makes the visitor's experience special; it should be relevant to their lives and should strive to impact them in long lasting ways. The narratives and objects used in the exhibit should be relevant to the experience of the visitor, the exhibit should not be afraid to address controversial issues and should motivate people to "take action" and "change beliefs or attitudes".

In recent years, museums are increasingly sites of diverse identities and beliefs. The need to identify how ethnic and cultural groups are represented or representing themselves, through exhibiting practices is vital. As 'transnational cultural forms', museums, in their historical and cultural settings, are hybrid cultural meeting grounds. They are mixes of different cultural perspectives and are indicators of our cultural times. They are symbols and sites for the negotiation of social relations, where representation is debated and knowledge and power dictate display (Kreps, 1998, pgs. 5-17).

In an ideal world all exhibit developers would strive to achieve these goals, and

while many do, as Lissant Bolton explains in *Living and Dying: Ethnography, Class and Aesthetics in the British Museum* (2008). She states that there are various dynamics of curating in different institutions. "Exhibition curation differs greatly in the three institutions where I have worked. This is a function not only of institutional scale, but also of political and social contexts" (2008, p.341). Each museum, depending on their size, resources, anticipated audience wants and needs, as well as various other components, will have unique exhibitory practices. The environment a curator or exhibit developer works in is determined, Bolton argues, by several factors including the outside world. "Exhibitions inevitably reflect their political and social contexts, whether or not the curators intend this" (2008, p.342). Given the subjective nature of a museums' work culture and our ever-changing social and political landscape, exhibit development must be a flexible and dynamic practice.

One vital aspect of constructing and designing exhibits on contemporary cultures brings up many issues, for instance, *who* is speaking *for* an entire culture. The voice of the native population within the exhibit adds authenticity, which is lost if the dominant voice is solely that of the museum. But when thinking about incorporating narratives and diverse perspectives into the exhibit, even if the leading *voice* in the exhibit is that of a native person, are all *voices* represented? And if not, should they be? It is important to incorporate as many diverse voices as possible and not tokenize a few informants as the voice of the entire culture or else the accuracy of the exhibit's narrative can be compromised.

Considering this, what are the elements of a successful exhibit on a contemporary culture? My findings include: the exhibit content must be authentic (it should be accurate,

real, and resonate with the visitor and the participants), question preconceived perceptions, be personal (incorporate individuals' stories and make the content important to the visitor), be based on the communities' interests or points of view, it should tell a story (add romance to the experience and make it matter to the visitor) and finally, the participants should speak for themselves, giving first-person narratives about their cultural perspectives.

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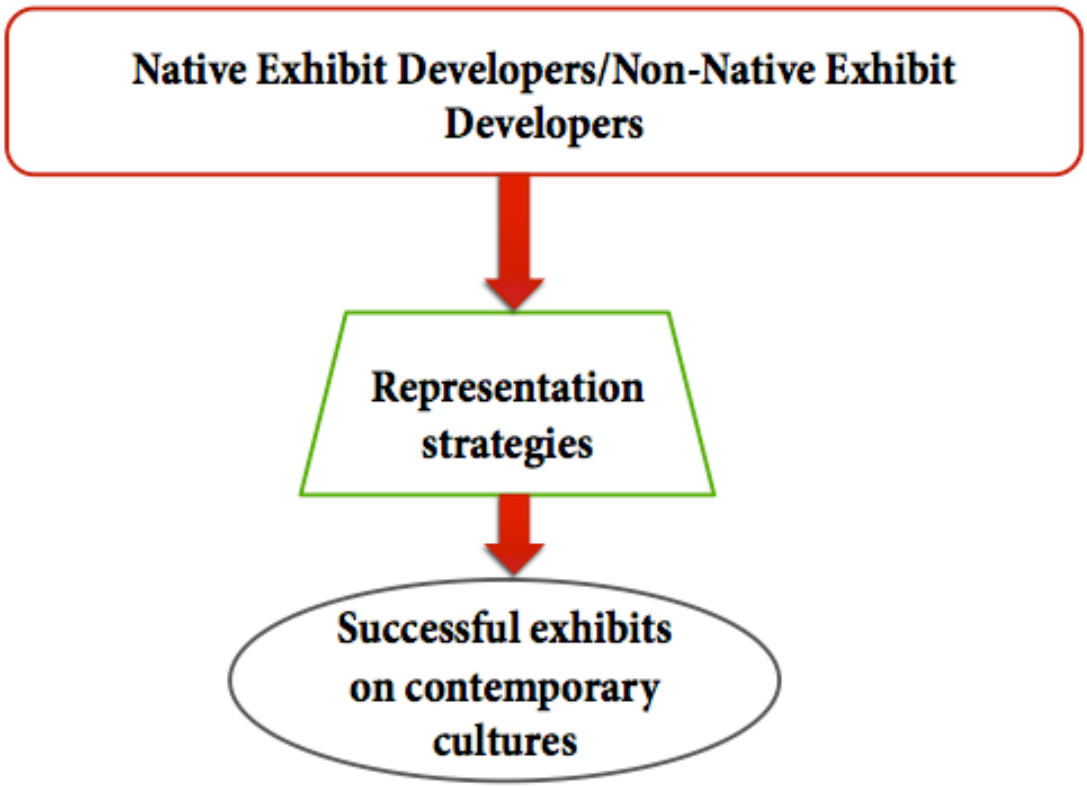
Appendices

Appendix 1: Conceptual Framework



Appendix 2: Figures

California Indians: Making a Difference

Figure 1: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Figure 2: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Figure 3: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Figure 4: One of the six video stations. Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America

Figure 5: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Figure 6: Sister Catherine Bertrand.
Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Figure 7: Sister Maria Elena Martinez.
Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Brain Injury PhotoVoice

Figure 8: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Figure 9: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Valley of the World

Figure 10: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Figure 11: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

National Steinbeck Center interactive display

Figure 12: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

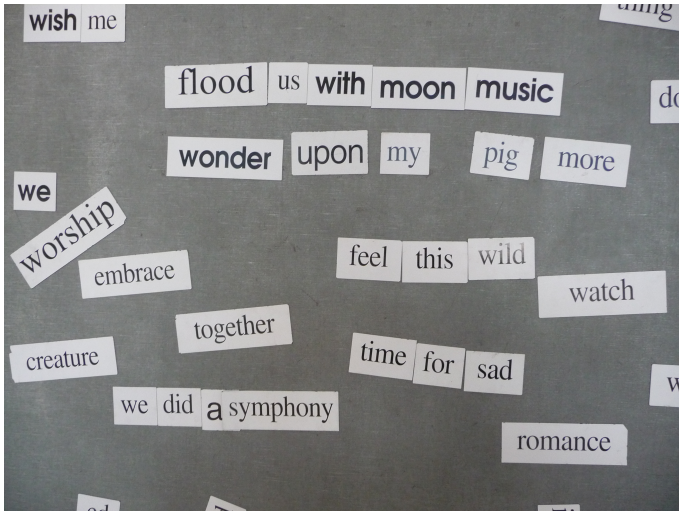


Figure 13: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt

Question Bridge: Black Males

Figure 14: Photo taken by Lisa Hewitt