

Collaborative Meaning-Making:  
Programming Collections with Source Communities

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### Abstract

Museums are seen to be shifting towards an increasingly participatory structure, and museum staff are always looking for new ways to engage community-based audiences. This capstone research examines ways that museums support community engagement through polysemic meaning-making opportunities, specifically in relation to Alaskan source communities, suggesting that polysemic meaning-making can take place through collections-based programming, resulting in ongoing relations through these spaces of contact. These concepts are examined through the lens of capstone course work, bolstered by an extensive literature review.

*Keywords:* Polysemic, Source Communities, Collections Programming, Contact Zones

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In a single museum, even narrowing in on a single collection, artifacts can hold different importance for different people within a community: “Objects are legitimately interpretable in a variety of ways...” (Cameron, 2012, p. 235). A definition or label created by a museum may have a different meaning than one created by a source community, the community from which the artifact being described originated. At the root of this plurality of meaning is the understanding that artifacts within a museum collection are polysemic, “holding plural, cross disciplinary, alternative and sometimes conflicting meanings” (Cameron, 2012, p 230). An individual’s understandings and personal definitions of an artifact develop over time, influenced by experiences that the individual may have had, as well as by family tradition or heritage. “...We, as individuals, do not arrive at the lives we live only through our personal experiences and choices. Rather, we are largely defined by the values, attitudes, beliefs, and deeds of those who precede us...” (Worts, 2012, p. 252). Within the last century, it has become increasingly important for museums to present collections from multiple viewpoints, to reflect this understanding of polysemic worldviews. Through the creation of collections-based programs, museums can create opportunities for community involvement to develop these multifaceted meanings as they relate to individual artifacts. In this study, I was particularly interested in the question of how Alaskan museums and source communities currently collaborate in polysemic meaning-making, and whether these collaborations could be maintained over time.

Each region of the world has cultural complexities that make it unique. In the United States alone there are over 500 federally recognized indigenous tribes (US Department of the Interior, 2013), as well as numerous immigrant cultures and traditions. While the findings of this

research could be applicable to many regions of the world, for purposes of simplicity, this capstone research is limited to Alaska as a geographical focus. Alaska is a rich environment for exploring collaborative efforts in museums, as the state has the ability to integrate both source community and regional resources, such as archaeological surveys and recorded oral traditions, as well as knowledge from tribal organizations and active community members, to form polysemic understandings of the world. This research draws on existing literature to define aspects of these types of collaborations in Alaska, and explores examples of programming in Alaskan museums that display opportunities for polysemic meaning-making.

Through the development of collections-based programming, where artifacts in a museum collection are the main source of discussion or activities, polysemic meaning-making, the act of collaborating to create multi-layered, multi-vocal meanings, becomes focused on the artifacts within a collection, pulling community members together to form a deeper understanding of the story of a place. Artifacts can then be referred to as contact zones, "...The space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations..." (Pratt, 1992, p. 6). These contact zones establish a principle for ongoing collaborations in the museum, encouraging museums to continue to provide collections programs in an age of participatory engagement. This research explores how Alaskan museums and source communities collaborate in polysemic meaning-making, how this relates to collections programming in Alaska, and how contact zones can arise from such collaborations.

## **Method**

This paper is the outcome of a capstone research project for the Arts Administration (AAD) program, wherein the process and content of the research is inspired and informed by the

materials presented in additional coursework. The following material is an examination of course work, extensive literature review, and case studies as they relate to polysemic meaning-making in Alaskan museums. The courses that were taken in order to direct this research were University of Oregon courses AAD 510 Museum Theory and AAD 510 The Cultural Museum. The Cultural Museum was taken during the fall term of 2012, while Museum Theory was taken in the winter term of 2012. For the purpose of this research, the courses are presented out of order, as it seemed more logical for theory and history to inform the content of the more specific focus of the Cultural Museum course. These courses helped to coordinate content, specific terminology, and theoretical and conceptual frameworks. A connecting literature review highlights specific examples of how community collaboration directly develops polysemic meanings of artifacts in an Alaskan context. The capstone option of the AAD program is a unique way to approach a research question, as the course work informs source community involvement in museum programming in a way that has never truly been explored before because of the distinctive combination of courses and literature review.

### **Museum Theory**

Museum Theory is a course designed to introduce students to aspects of theory and practice important to understanding contemporary museum structure. Before setting into more detailed themes, the course offered a brief introduction to museum theory with a survey of key issues and theoretical orientation that carried over into the subsequent weeks. An important aspect of this course was the crossover between cognate discipline theories and museum practices, especially in response to current issues of museum practice such as social representation, interpretation, public accountability, participation, controversy, sustainability, and professional ethics and

authority. As a unique way to present these topics, several guest speakers were brought in to share their knowledge of the field and current practices.

In response to those issues in museum practice, the course focused on several themes: History of museums, reinventing the museum and 21<sup>st</sup> century practices, collections as public property, cultural practice, interpretation issues, visitor experience, sustainability, and the future of museums. While history of museums was a small aspect of the course, it was informative to understanding the efforts of current practices, the “reinventing” of the museum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in particular. The associated guest lecturer with this section, Gail Anderson, professional museum consultant, elaborated on her own views of the topic, and gave some important insight into the future of museums, particularly to this research, her views on the role of museums in community partnerships and engagement. Anderson suggests that there is a global trend shifting museums from more traditional insular institutions to a more community-based collaborative organizational structure. “A global world of interconnectedness requires a shift to a more expansive and inspired thinking of museums as integral players in contributing to meaningful change for the future” (Anderson, 2012, p. 8). This paradigm shift requires museums to truly think about how they will become active members of a community, exuding vitality and demonstrating relevance on all levels. “A museum’s participation in the cultural life of the community is not taken for granted” (Anderson, 2012, p. 7). Community members become more invested in museum practice because of the creation of participatory programming opportunities. This active engagement of communities presents a relevant application of contemporary museology, and extends collections management themes towards an emphasis on participatory engagement.

Elaborating on course themes, a panel discussion on collections as public property provided detail on issues of ownership and museum collections policies, especially as related

through the practices of art museums. Current and local practice in art museums were presented through a panel of experts, including lawyers, curators, and educators. The information from that panel informed in-class discussions of issues of material culture and context as they relate to interpretation, an issue that arises when artifacts are defined in an culturally-uninformed fashion, and representation, where indigenous and minority populations have consistently been misrepresented through misinterpreted museum content. "...Materiality establishes potent and charged relationships among people, things and spaces" (Welsh, 2005, p. 105). Material cultures, and the artifacts that are created by them, have been a contentious issue throughout the history of museum practice. Course-related discussions established a context for the role of artifacts in creating museum products that are culturally accurate and acceptable to multiple audiences.

Also as part of the guest lecture series, John Falk and Lynn Dierking presented on the theme of visitor experience. Drawing on their considerable experience and research, Falk and Dierking described the why, what, and how of the museum visitor experience, and how museum professionals can improve those experiences. According to Falk and Dierking, the museum experience happens "from the moment the thought occurs to someone that visiting a museum might be a good idea, through the visit itself, to the recollection of the experience days, weeks, and even years later..." (2013, p. 23). In addition, visitors bring an array of personal experiences and expectations with them to the museum when they come to visit (p. 27). "Cultural differences among individual visitors are complicated by the fact that museums themselves are created by people with cultural values and beliefs that shaped their decisions about what they deemed to be valuable, worthy of keeping and caring for, and important to communicate to visitors," (p. 27-28). Contemporary audiences have come to expect a level of participation and engagement from the museum experience. Museums now appear to effectively be required to provide museum-

goers with participatory activities and interactions, a vastly different experience than that provided to them in the past.

This course gave a solid foundation in contemporary museum practice from the point of view of leading professionals in the field and extensive literature. The course revealed how museums have shifted paradigm and practice to become what they are today, and where they could go in the future. The course also showed that issues facing the museums are not isolated to individuals or institutions, they are interconnected. The best solutions to these issues also come from an interconnected collaboration of organizations and individuals. For instance, in order to understand representation and reception in museums, museums conduct research with the public so that an answer can be found.

### **The Cultural Museum**

The Cultural Museum was the second course that informed this research. In particular, the cultural and collaborative aspects of museum practice that were presented through course materials were particularly inspirational to the direction that this research took. The course was designed as an introduction to museum studies, focusing mainly on the history of theory and practice in museums from an anthropological perspective. Through seminar discussions and critical interaction with assigned literature, the class explored the intricacies of culture as it relates to museums, and the elaborate shifts in thought and practice that have occurred over time.

Thematically, the course was focused on the important interactions between the museum and cultural communities. Given that, main topics included issues in museums and anthropology, the ethics of displaying humans, shifts in the cultural museum over time, cultural representation issues, issues of interpretation, the role of repatriation in museum practice, the concepts of source communities and their collaborative efforts with museums, comparative curatorial perspectives,

and the future of museum practice in relation to these cultural concepts. Cultural museum practice and ethics have evolved over time, driven by social demand and influenced greatly by contemporary issues. The course explored these shifts as they relate to aspects of anthropology, ethnicity, race, and culture. A particular emphasis was placed on the role of museum artifacts in representations of this shift. “Increasingly, museums face similar challenges about the use of *things* to represent culture, particularly when material objects displayed in exhibits convey conflicting symbolic messages to different audiences” (Cruikshank, 1992, p. 5). Controversy that surrounds museums often is focused on the representation issues when artifacts are placed on display, but lack appropriate interpretations from appropriate sources. The evolution of object-based storytelling as it relates to cultural collaboration acknowledges the intricacies of representation, and has taken steps to integrate source communities more fully in the decision-making process.

The concept of source communities emerged through the course in relation to material culture. The concept evolved over the term’s discussions to include collaboration efforts in the museum space, comparative curatorial perspectives concerning collection policies, exhibition and storage, and representation issues. Historically, at the height of museum collection, objects were collected for the sake of collecting, without much thought to value to source community, but this ideology has evolved over the last century into something much less ethnocentric.

Museum collections don’t ‘just happen’ as the general public assumes. They are shaped by explicit objectives of the collector and the funding institution. Their meaning frequently requires an understanding of the social conditions under which they were collected as well as the conditions under which they were produced and used.

(Cruikshank, 1992, p. 6)

Contemporary museum professionals must pay close attention to the origin of artifacts and how they are interpreted, and shape a collection closely to an established mission that understands the complexities of society. This understanding of meaning can only be gained through collaborative work to understand these values.

This course contributed to the concepts of source communities, contact zones, and participatory museum practice. These terms go beyond identification of a museum as ‘multicultural’, instead, identifying with the origins of collections and how they relate to the surrounding community. Without the recognition that artifacts in the collection have a link to existing cultures, representation and interpretation within a museum would be ethnocentric, biased, and possibly incorrect.

The liberation of culture is not only about giving back or restoring a people’s right to and control over the management of their cultural heritage. It is also about liberating our thinking from the Eurocentric view of what constitutes a museum, artifact, and museological practice so that we might better recognize alternative forms. (Kreps, 2003, p. 197)

By recognizing that alternate meanings exist, museums are able to appeal to a wider audience. They maintain authority as a place of knowledge by supporting the meaning-making process, instead of relying on biased views. Source Communities become integral to the understanding of collaborative meaning-making, influenced by the participatory nature of modern museum practice. “Working collaboratively with those whose material history museums hold is essential to the work of these institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” (Harrison, 2005, p. 210). The museum can be an active community partner that creates opportunities for relevant and meaningful connections with people and place, but not without recognizing that artifacts have complex histories.

As a result of the discussion of collaboration with source communities, this course also helped explore how the concept of contact zones helps to solidify the role of a museum in a community. Contact zones are spaces that bring together multiple groups of peoples who may have been separated by societal or political issues through a collaborative effort in one space. The term also explains the phenomena of increase participatory engagement in the museum exhibits and programming. Theoretically, this is a reason that museums should invite source communities and residents to participate in meaning-making opportunities.

### **Literature Review**

In addition to the courses attended, this research was bolstered by an extensive literature review. Key concepts from both capstone courses informed the direction of this literature review, as did the core question of this research. The following will explore some elements of community engagement that allow for the polysemic meaning-making process to occur in the museum setting.

### **Source Community**

One of the most pivotal terms for this research that emerged from the course work was Source Community, as introduced in AAD 510, The Cultural Museum. Peers and Brown define the term source communities to be directly comparable to the term ‘originating communities’ or ‘communities of origin’ wherein both terms refer to the community that produced or created an individual artifact (Peers & Brown, 2003, p. 2; Holm & Pokotylo, 1997; Clavir, 1996). The term’s basic defining principle, as Peers and Brown mention on the first page in their book *Museums and Source Communities*, is: “source communities – the people from whom collections originate,” (p. i). For this research, the term refers most often to Indigenous

stakeholders in collections, in particular, Native Alaskans, and how they relate to artifacts within collections at a local or state level.

A source community is often located in the same geographic region as the artifacts in a collection. However, sometimes a social or political divide exists that separates the originating community from the artifacts, regardless of physical proximity. Though the early part of the last century was less attentive to these issues, museums of today recognize that source communities have a claim to their material culture, and that the role of the museum is less one of a collector and more one of a steward of artifacts for these communities.

...Artefacts play an important role in the identities of source community members, that source communities have legitimate moral and cultural stakes or forms of ownership in museum collections, and that they may have special claims, needs, or right of access to material heritage held by museums. (Peers & Brown, 2003, p. 2)

Source community contributions are not only important for visitors to museums. Members of those source communities can use the museum as a teaching resource for their own future generations, eliminating divides of time and geography. “The tools of our ancestors, the objects that they created and used, are invaluable to the understanding of ourselves...” (Capture in Ogden, 2004, p. v). Artifacts of material culture in museum collections are legacies of past generations, and the museum is only another step in the story of an object.

Source community involvement in museum practice is something that has evolved over the last few decades. Recent endeavors towards equal representation, as well as relevant interpretation have overtaken practices of the past. A view into the history of an object from a source community perspective, can help realize the context of artifacts in a real world setting, outside of the museum space. “Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them. Museums provide an experience of most of the world’s art and artifacts that does not bear

even the remotest resemblance to what their makers intended” (Vogel, 1991, p. 191).

Contributions of source community knowledge help bridge this separation between the boxes in collections storage and the intended real-world application of the objects within them.

A museum can go to the communities of origin to find these stories. This may not even be limited to just one source, as communities have evolved over time and multiple perspectives may be available for discussion. “Just as the nature of museums is diverse, so is that of the communities involved in these new relationships. Communities are not homogeneous, and source community members inevitably represent a range of perspectives...” (Peers & Brown, 2003, p. 4). By involving multiple viewpoints, the museum can reduce the possibility of misunderstanding or misrepresentation in general, and meet the needs of multiple parties (Peers & Brown, 2003, p. 13; Marstine, 2006, p. 16 ).

Involving source communities in museum practices and policies can build trust between institutions and organizations. In the past, indigenous cultures have been wary of museum representations, based on experiences with misrepresentation and ethnocentrism.

These communities became more certain that mainstream museums were places of intolerance and abuse...consequently, when American Indian communities became active in cultural preservation, they were eager to develop photo archives and to preserve oral histories, but many were loathe to create something called a museum. Many Native communities...instead decided to use terms like cultural center or heritage center...

(Cooper, 2008, p. 6)

However, not all indigenous groups have responded in such ways. Contemporary museums have found ways to partner with source communities at the institutional level through consultation with representatives of source communities, implementation of steering committees in exhibit

development, creations of advisory boards for implementation of museum policy, and many other cross-cultural collaborative efforts (Clavir, 1996; Fienup-Riordan, 1999; Chan, 2013).

### **Polysemic Meaning-Making**

Source communities are not the only participants invested in meaning-making of museum collections. Artifacts with any cultural origin can be considered polysemic, a term that can refer to museum objects as “holding plural, cross disciplinary, alternative and sometimes conflicting meanings” (Cameron, 2012, p 230). Often, the artifacts have existed for many decades, if not centuries, and have acquired multiple meanings for multiple groups of people over time, nor are these meanings static (MacDonald, 2011, p. 20; Merriman, 2008, p. 13). “Through the life of the object, meaning and relationships may evolve, ‘as people and objects gather time, movement and change they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and objects are tied up with each other’” (Lippert, 2006, p. 432). Cultural museums hold in their collections a plethora of unique artifacts that have accrued multiple meanings through their complex histories. This multiplicity of meaning may or may not have been documented at the museum level.

There are many ways that museums support polysemic meaning-making, without labeling it as such. Any opportunity that a museum creates where multiple voices come together to explain or discuss an artifact or story produces a result that can be considered polysemic. Many museums already have mission statements that support community involvement or education as core values, understanding the importance of linking past and present and being relevant to the community.

A history museum seeking to achieve a participative relationship with its local communities should be committed to incorporating their voices and life experiences. It should work to connect present and past, enabling people to make fundamental links with

the past lives of their own communities and thereby draw out commonalities. (Black, 2012, p. 268)

Creating opportunities for community members to contribute to the convoluted history of an object is one way that museums maintain relevance with a community. Relevant content and contributions encourage community members to engage with museum materials (McRainey & Russick, 2010).

Often, the generation of a polysemic meaning of artifacts in a collection is facilitated through the construction of narrative that is gathered from source communities. Artifacts brought out for programming or exhibition can easily act “as prompts for memory narratives” (Macdonald, 2007, p. 155), and engage participants in conversations and dialogue surrounding different knowledge bases. In a sense, polysemic meaning-making is only an extension of collaborative practices in the museum that already exist. “...Museums act as an island of order in a network, a place where this poly-vocality can be performed...” (Cameron & Mengler, 2009, p. 208).

### **Contact Zone**

While the "contact zone" idea first emerged in this research during the Cultural Museum course work, the term has been around for many years. It was used in a more contemporary sense when referring to research by Mary Louise Pratt in 1992, as she spoke of the term in relation to her study of travel writing. Pratt had coined the phrase using terms from linguistics, and resulting in her own definition: “...the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations...” (Pratt, 1992, p. 6). Pratt’s definition was meant to further describe “speech communities” that emerge when two or more groups of people come together and have to collaborate to create a new form of language in

order to communicate (Pratt, 1991, p. 37). The cultural collaboration that was suggested in Pratt's work inspired museum theorists to apply the concept to museum practice.

The definition of contact zone was considered in relation to museum work in 1997 by James Clifford. Clifford used the term to describe the social divides that are conquered through collaborative museum exhibitions that he came in contact with through his travels. Through his critique of individual exhibits in several different locations, he derived a generalized concept that applied Pratt's terminology to the museum world:

The notion of a contact zone, articulated by Pratt in contexts of European expansion and transculturation, can be extended to include cultural relations within the same state, region, or city—in the centers rather than the frontiers of nations and empires. The distances at issue here are more social than geographic... (Clifford, 1997, p. 204)

He suggested that the Museum was the *space* that Pratt suggested is where people who were separated came together. Clifford also suggested that the collaborative efforts of the creative process initiated 'ongoing relations' between the museum and the community, much the same way that the creation of a language did. This analysis of contact zones considered the cultural nature of the institutions, and praised collaborative efforts of Native source communities and museums in their development of exhibit material. In a sense, these collaborative efforts created a space where different ways of thinking of a subject could come together and intertwine into a remixed ideology, resulting in ongoing partnerships between the source communities and the museum.

In 2003, the museum context of contact zone was taken a step farther by Peers and Brown. Through a discussion of source community involvement in museum practice, Peers and Brown suggest that Clifford was too broad in his definition of the entire museum being a contact zone, and that the term should be established, instead, over a single museum artifact. Peers and

Brown elaborate that individual *objects* can function as more efficient contact zones than museums because objects can be both knowledge and “catalysts for new relationships” between communities (Peers & Brown, 2003, p.5; Kreps, 2003; Nicks, 2003). In the introduction to their book, Peers and Brown note several instances where objects have become the space that initiates partnerships between source communities and museums.

Artefacts in museums embody both the local knowledge and histories that produced them, and the global histories of Western expansion which have resulted in their collection, transfer to museums, and function as sources of new academic and popular knowledge. As ‘sites of intersecting histories’...artefacts have overlapping, but different, sets of meanings to museums and source communities, and tend to be interpreted very differently by each group... (Peers & Brown, 2003, p.5)

According to Peers and Brown, artifacts can be an important focus for discussion, a means for partnership, and can be eloquent interpreters of the past. This can all be performed without the overbearing restrictions that including the entire museum, exhibits and all, that Clifford’s definition of a contact zone might entail. Their definition placed the artifacts in the role of Pratt’s *space* because the often-turbulent relations between source community and museum could be alleviated through discussions and actions concerning these individual objects. Often, these collaborations are then seen to have lasting, ongoing relationships.

At the very basic level, even when applied to museum contexts, a contact zone remains a space where people who have been separated, for whatever reason, come together over something, and then continue to have ongoing relations with one another. Because of this, Pratt’s inspired term and definition remain true, whatever context. However, this *space* continues to be a concept of contention, and can be debatably applied to any well-described perception. Harrison suggests that the “unique culture of the individual museum” may also have value in applying the

descriptions of a contact zone to community interactions (Harrison, 2005, p. 196). Thus, contact zones are particularly effective in communities that are willing and able to come together in that one *space*.

### **Collections Programming**

Often in the world of museums, programming is delegated to the realm of an Education Department or tacked on to an exhibition plan (Simon, 2011, p. 274). Both of these facilitators, education and exhibition, serve their purpose: they engage visitors, they encourage community participation, and support mission values of the institution. When applying the concept of programming to source communities and polysemic meaning-making, programming that directly involves collections departments is an additional example for participatory programming that encourages conversation and dialogue over legacy materials. "...By comparison with text, objects might be seen as relatively open to alternative interpretation..." (Macdonald, 2007, p. 155). Artifacts within a collection are part of the museum, but are often only brought out for education or exhibition. Within the realm of collections programming, dialogue without the context of education or exhibition spurs conversations that prompt participation spanning multiple departments of the museum, as well as communities and beyond.

Contemporary museum practice holds participation and engagement in high regard. They are often referred to as an integral part of mission statements and institutional values, and a basic tool for gaining community interest. "Participatory techniques are another 'and' for the cultural professional's toolbox. They are tools that can be used to address particular institutional aspirations to be relevant, multi-vocal, dynamic, responsive, community spaces..." (Simon, 2012, p. 333). By involving community members in the actions and programs of a museum, they aspire to be considered as a community space that represents the diversity of voices from the community. The participatory museum engages not just one audience but many, presenting

events that generate a wide variety of community members who bring with them a wide variety of experiences.

As an element of the participatory experience, a community becomes a resource for the museum as it strives to maintain its relevance. This concept has been around for several years. “For the historians of twentieth-century popular culture the contextual idea carries crucial implications. It involves a translation of ‘context’ to ‘community’, and hence an involvement in the local community and its relationship to its material culture” (Pearce, 1992, p. 113). The twenty-first century has taken that translation of context a step further, from community, to participatory cultural engagement. Specific programming that targets community members willing to engage in participatory experiences, and provides a distinct focus on the objects within a collection contextualizes museum collections with community members.

Contemporary museum practice has evolved beyond merely collecting for the sake of collecting. Today, museums are affected by limitations of storage, ethical considerations concerning the collection of particular pieces, and the over-all museum shift from displays to participatory programming.

We do not speak any more about the past as an accumulation of objects which are natural or artificial remnants of time. They can or may be used as a way, a vehicle, but we are more concerned with human experience, collective experience, and sublime memory, that is *memoria vitalis*. Institutions, like objects and the physical testimonies they embody, are themselves just one possible form of serving the phenomenon and the logic of its existence. (Sola, 1992, p. 394)

By bringing these artifacts that have been neglected by time out into programming, they are given renewed meaning through community conversation, collaborating a story of the collective experience. This can contribute to conversations around other associated objects, and promote

ongoing interactions between community members over time, supporting trends of participatory museum practices, and bring a new sense of purpose to ongoing preservation and collection efforts.

### **Polysemic Alaska**

As a focus to this study, three Alaskan museums are examined to established ways that polysemic meaning-making, source community involvement, and collections programming are demonstrated. The first two case studies reflect on the programming offered by two fairly small organizations: the Alutiiq Museum of Kodiak, Alaska, and The Alaska State Museum of Juneau and Sitka. Though these museums are relatively small, they present programming that prompts engaging discussions and community dialogue over issues and artifacts important to their towns. “Smaller museums may find themselves better situated than large museums to contribute analytical and practical strategies to discussions about representation...”(Cruikshank, 1992, p. 9). As a comparative example, exhibition programming on a state level is seen to have similar results in successful participatory efforts on a state-wide level at the Anchorage Museum. These three examples are discussed below in relation to the course work and literature review, concluding with a discussion of the case studies as they relate to the key terms discussed above.

Alaska provides a unique combination of cultures and communities, as well as a wide array of cultural museums. Like many places in the United States, Alaska has shown a significant increase in source community involvement in museum practice over the past few decades (Clifford, 2004). “Over the past 50 years, discursive relationships between mainstream museums and Alaska Natives have been renegotiated, reflecting changing attitudes toward curatorial authority and colonial museum policies” (Chan, 2013, p. 19). A renaissance in cultural identifiers such as art, dance, and language, has contributed to changing roles in governance and dialogue in heritage centers and museums (Chan, 2013, p. 20). Over the last thirty years,

Alaskan Museums have made exceptional progress in collaborating with communities to create multicultural explorations of people and place in conjunction with this revitalization of culture. Exhibition development that incorporates Alaska Native perspectives “opened up space for multi-vocal contributions expressing a diversity of cultural concerns” (Chan, 2013, p. 20). These cultural concerns are addressed through many museum programs throughout the state, providing a space for forum discussions, as well as an opportunity for collective meaning-making.

The Alaska State Museum provides an example of how a museum can work to allow artifacts in its collections to remain active in traditions of contemporary cultural groups, as well as facilitate contributions of polysemic meaning. Several objects in their collections remain in a climate-controlled space at the museum, except when they are in use by the local tribal groups in traditional ceremonies and events. For instance, the clan helmet (The Frog Hat, *Xixchi S'aaxu*) of the Kiks.ádi Tlingit was reclaimed at auction through the assistance of the Alaska State Museum and the Native organizations in 1981, and an agreement was created between the parties that outlined the responsibilities of each group toward the future care of the helmet. “The hat is jointly owned by the museum and the Native organizations, and the continuing ritual use of the hat by the Kiks.ádi clan is authorized, while the museum can exhibit the hat and is responsible for its preservation and security” (Henrikson, 1994, p. 95). This agreement was come to through the creation of a partnership, under which a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was drawn up in order to allow both museum and clan use of the artifact.

In addition to the Kiks.ádi clan helmet, the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka, Alaska, which is administered by the Alaska State Museum, provides several additional instances where artifacts were used positively to promote contemporary discussion over traditional practices, and promote community interest in museum objects. Each month, an artifact from the collection is highlighted in a press release, and paired with a museum-hosted event that reflects the historic or

contemporary use of the artifact (Sheldon Jackson Museum, n.d.). The story and context of the artifacts continues to grow as time progresses, and the story of community collaboration becomes a legacy of the entire town, not just the source community.

Through these programs and collaborations, the Alaska State Museum and the Sheldon Jackson Museum provide opportunities for collaborative meaning-making in their local communities. The collections have a history of over a century, starting in the late 1880s to the present, spanning decades of contention, representational issues, and the shift to contemporary collaborative practices. The local Indigenous community has been a major player in the policies and practice of the museum since the late 1980s, as it, like museums around the world, was re-created as a space for participatory experiences and interpretations. The ongoing programming that presents these collections artifacts increases the amount of time that source community members and local community members have to create polysemic definitions of how the artifacts fit into their worldviews. This ongoing relationship suggests that these programs are the contact zones through which source communities and museums create new meanings together and establish ongoing relationships.

The programs of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, engrained as they are in community interest and collaboration, express many values and key concepts that were presented in the course work of Museum Theory and The Cultural Museum. In Museum Theory, Anderson and Falk and Dierking suggested that there has been a paradigm shift in museum engagement. The level of partnership and participation through the Alaska State Museum programs is evidence that this paradigm shift is a legitimate evolution of museum involvement with communities. From Museum Theory it was also inferred that issues of representation were best solved through partnerships of multiple groups. In order to solve issues of preservation and use, the partnership

between the source community, the Kiks.adi, and the Alaska State Museum, ensured that everyone was equally represented in the issue.

The Cultural Museum course suggested that collaborative work is integral to 21<sup>st</sup> century museum practice (e.g., Harrison, 2005, p. 210). This association is deftly illustrated through the partnership of the Alaska State Museum and the Kiks.adi Tlinget. Because of this partnership, when the Frog helmet is on display, parties will feel that they are appropriately represented to visitors, without the fear of misinterpretation. Sitka's solution to issues of representation and interpretation were aligned with the materials that were presented in both *The Cultural Museum* and *Museum Theory*.

The Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak, Alaska, is another example of museum-created programming for community collaboration. The Alutiiq Museum has many educational and cultural programs throughout the year, but their program, *Kaigtuten? Are You Hungry?*, is a good example of polysemic meaning-making, using the community's traditions of subsistence as a conversation topic. The program offers a cross-demographic participatory experience that engages an entire community regardless of age or cultural background in the development of a subsistence knowledge-base. "Through *Neq'rvat: the Alutiiq Wild Foods Project* the Alutiiq Museum is exploring the knowledge of Kodiak's most experienced wild food harvesters and cooks to document, share, and perpetuate tribal subsistence traditions," (Alutiiq Museum, n.d.). The program works to record the traditional and contemporary practice of subsistence living in Kodiak, and establish ongoing rapport with the community over sustainable subsistence practices.

In this case, the point of discussion is cultural knowledge rather than the physical artifact in collections, but the topic clearly relates to artifacts that are available to see at the museum. In the process of establishing programming that encourages storytelling, a contact zone is created in

which the community and source community collaborate to discover a new, sustainable way of subsistence. “These resources will share Alutiiq food traditions with the community and promote the perpetuation of healthy, culturally valued subsistence practices” (Alutiiq Museum, n.d.). The stories that associate with cultural practices of subsistence can be directly applied to interpretation of the larger community’s interpretation of subsistence and living off the land, while building a superior understanding of what it means to subsist in contemporary Alaska.

The Alutiiq Museum’s public programming demonstrated several concepts of participation and cultural representation that were presented through the course work of Museum Theory and The Cultural Museum. Anderson, who was a guest lecturer for Museum Theory, articulated in her book that “a museum’s participation in the cultural life of the community is not taken for granted” (2012, p. 7). The *Kaigtuten?* program is not the only community engagement opportunity offered by the Alutiiq Museum, suggesting that community involvement is an established and appreciated aspect for the small, island community. Issues facing contemporary society are being addressed through the combined efforts of the museum and the source community, collaborating over a shared meaning that is evident in the program at the Alutiiq Museum.

The *Kaigtuten?* program is also an excellent illustration of concepts from the Cultural Museum course. Museums must recognize that a successful way of living life does not have to be Eurocentric in practice, and that storytelling and information sharing is a successful alternate form of collaborative definition making (Kreps, 2003). “The significance of objects is no longer restricted to past contexts of manufacture, use, and collecting, but now takes into account the demonstrated meanings they may have for indigenous communities in the present and for the future” (Peers & Brown, 2003, p. 21). The program uniquely addresses key defining concepts behind contact zones, source communities, as well as programming, and applies them to the local

significance of subsistence held by the larger community of Kodiak as they relate to museum artifacts and concerns.

On a larger level, the entire state of Alaska is an effective example of the key concepts from the two courses, especially as demonstrated through programming at the Anchorage Museum. Establishing individual locations in Alaska can sometimes be difficult, based on the numerous ways of mapping the state. Lines can be drawn around regions, towns, boroughs, and even by Native Language groups. Perhaps because of this, the largest city in Alaska, Anchorage, is sometimes seen as the largest “village” in Alaska (Fienup-Riordan, 1999, p. 347), where everyone travels to get together with family and friends, a hub for rural Alaskans. When the Anchorage Museum presents exhibits in conjunction with the Smithsonian Arctic Studies program, they often include elements from Native groups and museums throughout the state, attracting a wide audience. When openings and exhibit-associated events occur, people come together to share their stories and discuss the material on exhibit, comparing and contrasting similar artifacts, and prompting new meanings and connections to emerge.

This has been the way of many exhibitions, such as in *Agayuliyararput (Our way of making prayer)* (Fienup-Riordan, 1999), *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People* (Crowell et al, 2001), and *Living our cultures, sharing our heritage: the first peoples of Alaska* (Crowell et al, 2010). These programs specifically address the collaborative exchange of knowledge, promote the sharing of stories that have been passed down through time, and establish protocols of continued contact and collaboration outside of the associated exhibits. From conception, through design, and on through exhibition and beyond, the exhibits involve source communities and stakeholders alike in the process of creation. As a final touch, these exhibits often are accompanied by an end product that perpetuates the conversation beyond the exhibition, most commonly, a catalog of exhibited artifacts. In a way, this type of programming

exemplifies the polysemic meaning-making process, and is the epitome of contact zone collaborations.

As established in *The Cultural Museum and Museum Theory*, collaboration of members of a community is key to gaining an active participatory audience. Issues of representation and interpretation are handled through the input of knowledgeable community members. Programs like *Looking Both Ways* sustain a focus on community, and in doing so, result in opportunities for polysemic meaning-making. “Cultural continuity through change was manifested by juxtaposing ancient, historical, and contemporary objects and images” (Clifford, 2004, p.10). Collaborative efforts within the community allow for the development of a co-created story that elaborates on these juxtapositions of contemporary and historical. By engaging these communities in the entire process of exhibit and program development, concepts like representation and interpretation are clearly established by participants, eliminating issues of interpretation before they arise.

Alaskan museums offer a wide array of participatory opportunities, particularly when engaging cultural communities. These two local examples, viewed in conjunction with a statewide example, provide a very brief encapsulation of polysemic meaning-making in Alaskan museums. The process of engaging a community through discussions of cultural practices is often seen to focus around artifacts, establishing a common point of interest for multi-vocal dialogue. The *Kaigtuten?* program at the Alutiiq Museum pulled together an entire community to generate a polysemic understanding of subsistence as it relates to source communities and contemporary practices. The ongoing public relations of the Alaska State Museum perpetuated the establishment of ongoing relationships that is offered through Pratt’s definition of Contact Zone. The exhibit programs presented in Anchorage offered a larger understanding of collaborative cultural communities, pulling together resources of an entire state to participate in a

polysemic understanding of people and place. Alaskan museums promote themselves as facilitators for the development of propagated polysemic definitions, safe guarding oral tradition as they relate to material culture through the perpetuation of participatory experiences.

### **Conclusions/Recommendations**

The course work that was taken to complete this capstone research provided a unique focus for considering participatory museum experiences. The distinct emphasis on cultural museums allowed connections to be drawn between source communities in Alaska and a larger context of representation of indigenous cultures in the museum, as well as issues of interpretation. Museum theory backed these concepts with a focus on contemporary museum practice, particularly participatory experiences. Collections artifacts can give museums a starting point for facilitating discussions of interpretation and representation. When viewing the coursework in the context of Alaska, it was easy to apply key terms and concepts to current museum practices. Though Alaska is home to many different populations, indigenous cultures of Alaska were an obvious focus for a discussion of source communities, especially in the development of the polysemic understandings of collections artifacts.

In the process of exploring polysemic programming in Alaska, it was interesting to see how closely aligned the programs were to Pratt's definition of a contact zone. Members of society, who have been separated by time, politics, society, or geography, come together in one space to create new understandings of the artifacts and concepts. However, the circumstances do not quite fit with Clifford's suggestion that the contact zone space is the entire museum. The programs outlined in this paper do not strictly have to take place within the space of the museum; in fact, the Alaska State Museum programs through the Sheldon Jackson often do not. The circumstances also do not quite align with Peers and Brown's suggestion that the contact zone

space is limited to the object. Though the museums may use objects as a conversation starter, it is actually the collaboration of meaning making that encourages the contact to be ‘on-going’ as Pratt’s definition states. Because of these discrepancies, the next iteration of ‘contact zone’ in museological discourse should acknowledge ‘collections-based programming’ as the space where contact takes place.

The ever-evolving trend of museums toward an increasingly participatory experience suggests that programming is an integral aspect of museum practice in contemporary communities. “Participatory projects make relationships among staff members, visitors, community participants, and stakeholders more fluid and equitable. They open up new ways for diverse people to express themselves and engage with institutional practice” (Simon, 2013, p. 332). As this shift continues to happen, museums must look for more ways to engage communities in participatory experiences. In Alaska, collections programming is one way of engaging multiple audiences within a singular community.

However, as Harrison suggested that the uniqueness of a community may reflect on the effective outcomes of a contact zone, we may consider that Alaska might be an exception regarding the success of collections-based programming. Further study would show whether this is a limitation of understanding the polysemic meaning-making process in museums. This research has also avoided discussions of authenticity-- a "buzzword" in the world of museums. Often, stories from source communities are collected by museums to present an “authentic” representation of collections (Bonshek, 2008, p. 87). This research only focused on the development of opportunities for community engagement, suggesting that polysemic meaning-making is an obvious link to collaboration, and considers only the fact that museums provide the contact zone *space* for these collaborations through collections programming. Whether or not

these engagement activities present authentic experiences is a possible direction for additional research.

In contemporary Alaska, collections on display at museums are already used by source community populations as education tools and as points of discussion (Henrikson, 2001). Collections programming promotes additional community engagement within the museum by providing opportunities for discussions that are necessary for contemporary society. “Museums provide a forum for learning about the past and understanding how it continues to contribute to who we are today and into the future,” (Sebastian, 2007, p. 153). These discussions can lead to the polysemic understanding of the world around us, facilitated by these object-based discussions in collections programs. As Janet Marstine says: “When objects are not being used, they lose their value” (2006, p.16); They lose their value to communities, to museums, and as contact zones. Let those collections that were accumulated in the past be applicable and relevant to people of the present. If collaboration is successful, the outcome is a contact zone that will draw community members into the participatory polysemic meaning-making experience in an ongoing, sustainable trend, today and into the future.

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