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Power & Protest: Using Community Exhibition Practices for Engaging San José's African American Community

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Power & Protest: Using Community Exhibition Practices for Engaging San José's African American Community

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Keywords African American Community; Community Engagement; Museums; Exhibition Models; Emotional Intelligence

Abstract Community engagement and representation are essential to keeping museums relevant to their surrounding communities. Exhibitions are a fundamental instrument utilized by museums for telling a story or presenting a point of view. However, communities of color rarely feel they are represented within the exhibitions nor that their stories are being told by their local museums. This project explores community exhibition engagement practices within museums and outside of the museum field to examine what can be learned from San José's African American community organizations. It is clear, based on research and speaking with community members, that San José's African American community does not feel engaged by their local museums. Primary research consisted of a series of interviews, an online community survey, and a one-time focus group. Secondary research consisted of a literature review in both museum and business engagement practices. Findings reveal proven practices and processes for community engagement as well as measures of success and challenges for both museums and African American community organizations. Project recommendations call for museums to reach out to African American organizations and leaders and provide tools to create and maintain meaningful relationships with their communities.

About the Author Azha Simmons completed a dual MA/MBA degree in Museum Studies at John F. Kennedy University and a bachelor's degree in History with a minor in Africana Studies at San Francisco State University. Azha is currently the Development Associate and Stewardship Coordinator at the Museum of the African Diaspora, and is an active member of the Association of African American Museums, the Western Museums Association, the California Association of Museums, and the American Association for State and Local History.

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Museums are trusted public institutions that have a responsibility of preserving, collecting, and interpreting objects. By performing these functions, museums help the public better understand the past and present and appreciate other cultures. The interpretation of museum exhibitions from curators and exhibition developers can help provide a rich cultural experience for visitors. However, there is an additional responsibility that some museums are not fulfilling - museums must represent their surrounding diverse and unique communities. They need to record and preserve the local community history. They should present the untold stories that are missing from the national narrative.

African Americans have been preserving and collecting their own history since the segregation era (Wilson and Bunch 2016). African Americans began to open their own museums to display

their history, “[b]ecause mainstream American museums at the time, including the Smithsonian Institution, did not dedicate resources to collecting African American artifacts and artworks.” (Wilson and Bunch 2016, 25) Museums should represent African American history because African American history is part of American history. Bunch highlights the responsibility museums have to their visitors and surrounding communities when interpreting stories: “If museums are truly to be institutions that the public admires and trusts, then more museums should expend [their] political and cultural capital, take risks, [and] help their visitors find a useful, usable, inclusive and meaningful history that engages us all.” (2010, 65)

During the 1960s, African American artists were nearly invisible in museums across the United States. In the book, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Susan Cahan (2016) recalls the struggles African American artists faced during the Black Power movement of the 60s and 70s. During this time, a few museums denied artist of color museum shows. African Americans and other people of color demand to be represented in mainstream museums. Cahan states, “The art world has been particularly resistant to racial equality.” (2016, 2) Cahan explains museum exhibitions validate the work of artists and their stature on a local, national, and global scale. Mainstream museums bring press and play an important role in the art business. Museum exhibitions communicate what art they deem meaningful or valuable. She asks the following questions: “why do we find many of the same challenges in the major museums: a persistent belief that token inclusion is synonymous with institutional change; a scant number of people of color in curatorial and management positions; a preference for using guest curators of color over hiring permanent staff; and a dearth of consistent, sustained research that explores cross-cultural histories and relationships?” (Cahan 2016, 2)

This article will explore the community engagement practices of local museums and other African American community organizations in San José. Through interviews, a community survey, as well as a focus group, the author curated an informed and community-oriented exhibition to address some of the best practices learned throughout the process. This research sought to answer how historical and cultural exhibitions about past and present stories of personal struggle and triumph within the African American community can create a safe space for conversations about equality. Further, how can museums in San José collaborate with African American community members and organizations to create a platform from which African Americans can celebrate and share their cultural heritage with one another and the public? This paper advocates for underrepresented and marginalized communities to tell their stories and have them interpreted through museum collaboration. Communities want to hear their stories told, “they want to navigate deeply personal concerns, which reflect their communal histories as well as their current-day experiences, while needing to have the physical space to mourn, heal, or [grieve] as a cycle or restorative justice.” (Trivedi and Moore 2016, 27)

Moreover, this paper illustrates that museums and cultural institutions are becoming sites for advocacy and social justice: “Understanding inclusion in museums as a matter of social justice beckons us to move beyond a focus on increased attendance, to rethink the details and processes of museum work. From this perspective, an exhibition, for example, becomes as much about the process of building relationships with community members as about

building an installation.” (Roche et al. 2018, para 6) Social justice and community history is something in which the African American community takes pride in, yet there is also a major concern in the community that younger generations do not know their history. While telling someone else’s story can be tricky, museums can collaborate with appropriate groups and offer their venues for these groups to share their stories. This approach can provide one of the best solutions to the problems connected with authentic representation. Exhibition collaboration is a great tool to engage targeted communities and help foster relationships. Museums in San José can reach the marginalized population of African Americans by offering co-created exhibitions that represent their culture and history.

Project Research

Interviews: Museum Professionals and African American Community Organizations

This project conducted a total of ten interviews with museums professionals and leaders of African American organizations that focus on community engagement and have action plans in place. Interviews were conducted with individuals and organizations based on their community engagement initiatives currently in practice. Questions for both museum professionals and African American organizations included community engagement practices, African American community involvement, social justice issues, and operations/budgeting.

I spoke with museum professionals from the following four institutions: San José Museum of Art, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Oakland Museum of California, and Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. During these interviews, a wealth of knowledge was learned from museums with Engagement Departments that specialize in engagement strategies, public programming, and exhibits. Additionally, I spoke with six leaders from San José’s African American organizations: African American Community Service Agency, San José/Silicon Valley Chapter of the NAACP, Garden City Women’s Club of San José, Silicon Valley Black Chamber of Commerce, National Council of Negro Women- Santa Clara County Section, and Dr. Harry Edwards, who led the athlete revolt at San José State in 1968. These organizations are rooted in San José’s African American community and their missions are to serve the community. By looking more closely at how these organizations understand the wants and needs of the community, and how they serve their community, I learned how museums can reach, understand, and better serve the African American audience.

When asked how their institution defines community engagement, all interviewees from the museums above mentioned a form of interaction or conversation between the museum and its community. For example, Michelle Kumata, Exhibit Director at The Wing Luke Asian Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, mentioned empowering community members is how her institution defines engagement: “The museum empowers community members to share their stories in the way they choose. We use the community-based exhibition model to engage community members with the exhibition topic to develop content and shape the exhibition.” (M. Kumata, personal communication March 29, 2018)

In addition to recognizing community engagement success, museum professionals were also asked: How do you foster and maintain relationships with surrounding communities? Trami Cron, Special Project Manager at the San José Museum of Art (SJMA), explained it has to be a reciprocal interaction between the museum and the community, “Reciprocity is key. It can’t

be one way, and the one way only works once. You just come in and take, you have to give first really and then you ask.” (T. Cron, personal communication, March 2, 2018)

Interviews were also conducted with some of the oldest African American organizations in San José. These organizations are rooted in San José’s African American community and their mission is to serve the community. Museums can learn by looking closer at how these organizations understand the wants and needs of the community, and how these organizations serve their community. When speaking with African American organizations, interviewees were asked how they think museums can engage the African American community in San José. All interviewed participants agreed museums need to engage San José’s African American community and should take the initiative to reach out. Milan Balinton shares his experience with local San José museums:

I think having African American history traveling exhibits, they can invite the community by providing discounted or free tickets. Nowadays grandparents are raising the children while both or single parents are providing the income, so I think that is very important to remember. I also think having better outreach is important. I have reached out to the local art museum to invite them to Juneteenth and other functions, but they never show up or communicate. (M. Balinton, personal communication, March 17, 2018)

Another point from the African American organizations interviewed, was that the agreed first step for museums to take when engaging a targeted community is to speak with community members and leaders, and learn and understand their history. These organizations also echoed the importance of African American churches to reach the community. Carolyn Ellzey states:

We disseminate information [through] other organizations and also churches. Each one reach one outreach and spread the word, focus on the church and advertise there. Churches are vital because at one time they were the only outlet of information. Churches go back a long way and are vital in getting the information out. (C. Ellzey, personal communication, May 3, 2018)

Community Survey

To gather more information, a survey was also distributed to 75 African American community members through Google Forms to hear the voices of the community and their suggestions. Through this distribution, I was able to hear from people from across the generational spectrum, including senior citizens, adults, young adults, and youth. The survey consisted of ten questions and included whether respondents (a) like to spend their leisure time visiting museums, (b) are currently members of a museum, and (c) feel that museums engage the community. In addition, questions gauged community members’ cultural interests within museums and exhibitions about African American history.

Surveys were distributed throughout four African American churches as they are the heart of the community and many people gather there on a weekly basis. African American churches have played and continue to play an important role in African American communities. The church's social networks helped spread the word about the survey and encouraged community members to participate. Churches typically distribute weekly or monthly newsletters and weekly announcements at Sunday church services. These churches also distribute monthly newsletters via email and send special emails for events and special activities for members to attend. Collaborating with African American churches and organizations is a great outreach and marketing tool for exhibitions and public programming: "Some churches may willingly include announcements in weekly bulletins or newsletters about your repository and its programs and services." (Church 2011, 5)

Surveys were also distributed through the African American Community Service Agency (AACSA), which is perhaps one of the most well-known African American cultural centers in Silicon Valley. Their mission "is to preserve the dignity and culture of a diverse African American community and to provide services that promote full participation of all of Santa Clara County and the general society." (AACSA website, 2014) The AACSA distributes monthly newsletters to their members, the African American community, and other African American organizations in San José. The survey link and project information were published in the monthly newsletters.

Community Focus Group

From the survey, six participants and volunteers from San José's African American community agreed to participate in a focus group. The two-hour session was held at the California History Center at De Anza College campus on March 24, 2018. The goal of the focus group was to gain community input and stories for a forthcoming exhibition. Participants were very knowledgeable of African American history in San José. Through conducting this focus group, I was able to hear from people from across the generational spectrum, as well as people who do not visit museums, people who frequent museums, those who have never participated in a focus group, and those who have previously participated in a focus group.

The focus group also provided the opportunity to display potential artifacts and procure community input about exhibition content. Artifacts were displayed in such a way to provide the participants with a unique experience. Simultaneously, the artifacts were used to enhance the group's experience. Various brainstorming activities were used, such as a listening circle and a timeline to expand on different themes and narratives from the exhibition. The listening circle provided insightful discussion and exhibition themes. Throughout the focus group themes of youth, housing, and activism reoccurred. The group also found music to be an important concept that should be included in the exhibition. There was concern that the community narrative might get lost within the national narrative. Through the different brainstorming activities, it was possible to obtain a better sense of what community members want from museums and exhibitions that display their history and culture.

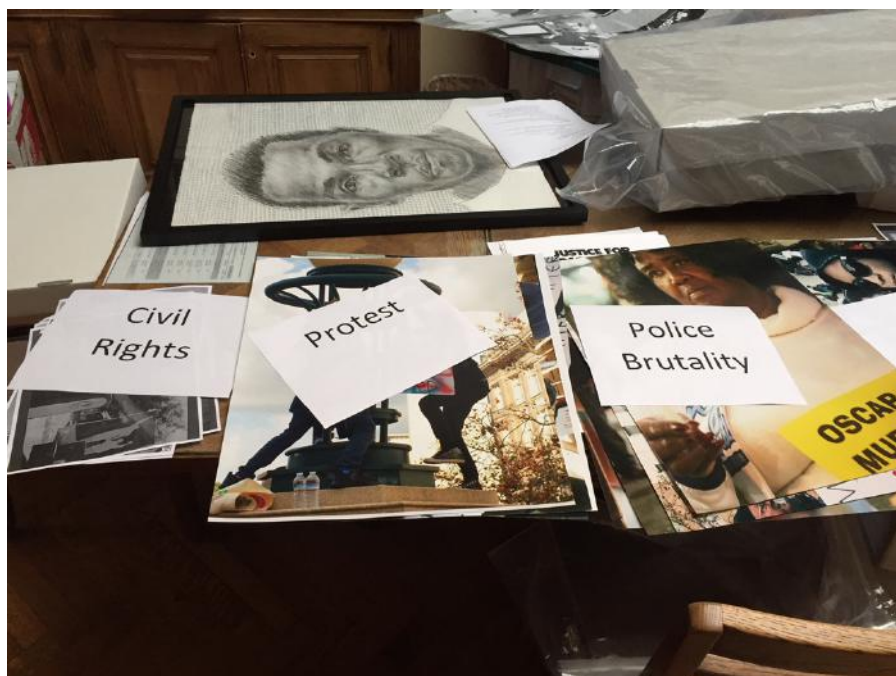


Figure 1: Materials used during focus group, California History Center, March 24, 2018.

After the focus group, the narrative of the exhibition changed direction and suggestions that could realistically be produced with limited time were included. For example, music, a timeline, new themes, and suggested vocabulary were included. Participants were willing and eager to connect me with people for oral histories and experts in San José's African American history. Participants shared the following points of San José African American history and community dynamics:

- High tech has taken over the area
- A lot of kids go away to college and people come home to California
- There is not a lot of communication between the well-off and not so well-off African American community
- We tend to concentrate more on the outside of the valley than the inside
- People have migrated out of San José because of the increase in cost of living driven by the Silicon Valley tech industry
- The community is spread out
- Sunday is the day I see black people at church that's just the way it is out here
- Alum Rock at one point was predominately black but it has changed so much within the past few years, due to gentrification
- Blacks can be found at church and community events

Exhibition

Power & Protest opened at De Anza College in the California History Center (CHC) on April 17, 2018, and a community reception was held on May 12, 2018. Included in the exhibition are oral histories from San José's African American community members, which bring life to untold stories of personal struggles, racism, and triumph. The exhibition displayed stories from San José's African American history that are currently missing from the national narrative today.

The CHC was an appropriate place to display the exhibition because it is dedicated to the study of state, regional, and local history. Part of the CHC mission and vision is the Audrey Edna Butcher Civil Liberties Education Initiative. This initiative hopes to foster a deep appreciation of civil liberties and democratic values through the study of local and regional history, California history, and utilization of archival resources. This exhibition embodies the civil liberties and California history that the CHC strives to present to students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community.



Figure 2: *Power & Protest*, community oral histories and poster of Tommie Smith's and John Carlos's silent protest during the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City.

The research guided the exhibition development along with the community input to show the impact and influence community engagement has on visitors. The exhibition model used was a mix between the Participatory Model, echoing the Wing Luke Community-Based Exhibition Model, and the Narrative Approach, incorporating stories and oral histories from community members. The goal was to allow the community voices to shine through the exhibition.

The narrative of *Power & Protest* highlights the evolution of civil liberties and civil rights for African Americans in San José by looking at past and present stories of personal struggle in the ongoing fight for social justice. The struggle for social justice is embedded within African American history and is a constant focus of discussion in the African American community today. This exhibition looks at the San José area, in two different time periods, the "Speed City" era of the 1960s and this decade, with its wake-up call of #BlackLivesMatter, to find stories of individuals and communities carrying forward the struggle. The themes highlighted in the exhibition were: Deferred dreams, Youth leading change, and Dissent and activism. The exhibition was designed to inspire dialogue for meaningful conversations about equality and social justice.



Figures 3 and 4: (left) *Power & Protest*, Shadow box, “Presence and Absence: Remembering Michael Brown.” (right) *Power & Protest*, “Justice for Our Lives” poster.

Due to the sensitive topic of the exhibition, the focus was on incorporating emotional intelligence during the exhibition development process. In the article “Developing a Toolkit for Emotions in Museums,” Norris and Tisdale state the importance of emotions in exhibitions: “In fact, we would argue that an exhibition topic that has little potential to evoke emotional responses in visitors is an exhibition topic that is not worth pursuing.” (2017, 103) Emotional intelligence in exhibits creates sympathy for the people who are the subjects of the exhibits and increases visitor learning (Falk and Dierking 2013). Staff should recognize the types of emotions that visitors might have while looking at exhibitions. Curating exhibitions with historical pain need to have a touch of empathy and emotional intelligence, “[e]veryone does not have the same level of tolerance for learning histories of oppression, which makes the job of developing equitable and sensitive interpretation strategies for history about difficult knowledge extremely challenging.” (Balgooy 2015, 28) Not every visitor will be receptive to learning difficult knowledge as it might change their perspective on history. Balgooy further explains that “[d]ifficult knowledge can lead to learners resisting information in an exhibit so vehemently that he or she will just shut down and refuse further engagement with the subject, the exhibit, or the presenting institution.” (2015, 29)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Both museums and San José African American community organizations participate in community engagement; however, the level of engagement is different between the two. Strategies to engage San José’s African American population through museums can manifest in several ways. Through the process of creating the community exhibition, I discovered

various engagement strategies that led to conclusions and recommendations for the following three categories: exhibition development, community engagement, and social justice dialogue.

Exhibition Development

Marketing is essential to informing the community about exhibitions. I partnered with the African American Community Service Agency and my church, San José Word of Faith Christian Center, to publicize the exhibition. The AACSA and my church were instrumental in distributing my survey and advertising the reception event. They were very eager to help me with anything I needed to be successful. They believed in the importance and impact my project could have within the African American and greater San José communities. These partnerships extended my reach to a diverse audience.

A recommendation is for museums to collaborate with community organizations. In order to reach the targeted community, museums need to connect with grassroots and local community organizations currently engaged within the community. One such organization engaged with my exhibition's target community is the African American church. All of the African American organizations I interviewed emphasized the importance of African American churches. For example, Wilbur Jackson, Chairman of the board of directors for Black Chamber of Commerce, stated:

[C]hurches are very important to the African American community, and go back to the history of slavery. If museums really want to get to the heart of the African American community, they need to reach out to the churches. (Personal communication, April 8, 2018.)



Figure 5: *Power & Protest*, Photographs from a 2016 protest of a visit to San José by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Another recommendation is to create an exhibition model that suits the exhibition and institutional goals. McKenna-Cress and Kamien (2013) explain, the importance of developing a process for creating an exhibition. During my exhibition process, I combined three exhibition models: The Participatory Model, the Narrative Approach, and the Wing Luke Community-Based Exhibition Model. I blended these three models to achieve community involvement, African American engagement, and access untold stories. I heard the hopes and desires of San José's African American community. The community wanted to see their history displayed on museum walls, so I was determined to fulfill that desire and create an exhibition to fit their needs. For many community members, this was their first time working with a museum, making it difficult for them to understand the concepts and language during the exhibition model process. When facilitating discussions, I adapted my language so community members could understand the exhibition process. With a clear understanding, community members could fully participate and let their voices shine through the exhibition. Michelle Kumata, Exhibition Director, The Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience emphasized:

[The] main thing that is helpful is to meet with them [the community] on their own terms. Where and when they choose. Be sure to ask a lot of questions and listen. Ask them what their concerns and priorities are and ask what they want to share. We [museums] are there more to listen and they are directing content. (Personal communication, March 29, 2018.)

Community Engagement

Local museums can add to the national narrative by sharing community history. The National Museum of African American History and Culture focuses on broad national narratives and not local community-based narratives. The emergence of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture has fulfilled a lifelong dream for many people. However, it is not enough for one national museum to give voice to the general black story. Museums at local levels need to integrate the African American story into the narrative of American history. There are still untold stories within local communities. African Americans want to see their history represented in a positive way through exhibitions. According to data from the community survey, San José's African American community feel that museum exhibitions do not reflect their history. One respondent stated that there is "No significance or exposure to the culturally diverse history that built San José." For *Power & Protest*, I asked the African American community what they wanted to see in an exhibition. Milan Balinton, Executive Director of the AACSA, listed several strategies museums can use to engage the African American community:

(A) having people who know African American history to provide the interpretations, (B) emphasizing the growth and development of the community because of black contributions and founders, never forgetting, (C) also, getting seniors to engage with youth and getting the youth inspired, (D) creating bridges between the generations helps with

A recommendation is for museums to define community engagement at an institutional level. An institutional definition is important for staff to know their goals and for visitors to know the museum's mission. I was fortunate to have the support of my executive director, colleagues, and board members for this project. It is important to have leadership support, otherwise, the vision for my project would have never come to fruition. If leadership is not supportive then it is important to make them see the importance of the project. Staff can show leadership the importance of connecting the mission, show examples of the project, and demonstrate how the project meets corporate social responsibility. Also, obtaining institutional supports ensures the work will continue within the institution regardless of any one role.

Social Justice Dialogue

Museum exhibitions allow visitors to understand and explore new perspectives about the world around them. Museums can be hubs for social justice. This project advocates for underrepresented and marginalized communities to tell their stories and have them interpreted through museum collaborations. Diversity, inclusion, and social justice is now coming to the forefront of museums and their missions. Social justice is embedded within African American history and talked about very often. Museums offer a unique space to have meaningful conversations that do not happen in other places. Furthermore, museums also expose non-African Americans to the African American experience. Exhibitions allow visitors to engage in conversations in topics, such as economic, political, and current social issues.

Understanding inclusion in museums as a matter of social justice beckons us to move beyond a focus on increased attendance to rethink the details and processes of museum work. From this perspective, an exhibition, for example, becomes as much about the process of building relationships with community members as about building an installation. (Roche, Davis, Stanley, Hurley, 2018, para 6.)

A recommendation is for museums to seek out audiences who might not be your target audience and go beyond that group. Reaching diverse audiences was important in the development of *Power & Protest*. When there is a diverse audience within museums, there are diverse and unique conversations. These conversations allow participants to build bridges of understanding and connection with different groups of people. The conversations, for example, among De Anza staff and faculty were different than conversations within the San José African American community. By visitors engaging in meaningful conversations, people can better understand one another and break down barriers of division.



Figure 7: Power & Protest, protest posters and other archival materials.

The museum needs to offer a space for visitors to discuss issues of social justice. These conversations can be difficult and uncomfortable for participants. In these moments, museums can fill the role of facilitator. Dialogue can be meaningful when the museums guide the conversation in a respectful way for visitors. Community members want to engage in such dialogue without judgment and fear.

A recommendation is for museums to guide the conversation for visitors. During the focus group conversations, participants felt that including political music of the time was just as important as historical facts. The focus group felt that having the upbeat music of the 60s and 70s was a good way to help disgust the difficult topics within the exhibition. Another tool used to assist visitors in digesting the exhibition was the guestbook and supplementary material. Another example is to create a lounge area for visitors to sit, reflect and engage in dialogue with other visitors. Reflection is important for visitors; however, staff interaction is important as well. The placement of knowledgeable staff and community members is another approach to helping visitors reflect on the exhibition. If visitors are able to have meaningful conversations with staff and community members it helps them absorb the information and filter through their emotions.

Curating a cultural and historical exhibition as a tool to engage African-Americans and the public in conversation about equality is a difficult and lengthy process. I have hope that community engagement strategies towards San José's African American community will continue to grow. As stated by Visitors of Color blog "Until the idea of bodies of color goes beyond pawns of representation to attract a larger audience and actually begins to be included in the decision making and curation process, the museum will never be a safe or welcoming space" (2017). If museums want to increase attendance, community buy-in, and maintain relevance they need to engage their communities.

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