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NICOLE VASCONI
SHARING AUTHORITIES
PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM
EXHIBITIONS WITH LOCAL
COMMUNITIES

Nicole Vasconi

Sharing authorities. Participatory Museum Exhibitions with Local Communities.

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Participatory Museum Exhibitions with
Local Communities

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1. Introduction

As the definition of the museum is changing, it reveals a global conversation surrounding the museum sector's desire to transition to hosting spaces that are more participatory, equitable, and promote access to heritage for all. Evidenced by the definition proposed by the International Council of Museums' General Assembly meeting on 7 September 2019, there is an emphasis on developing museums as "democratizing, inclusive, polyphonic spaces," which also reveal sector-wide conversations about re-focusing curatorial trends to highlight museum social responsibility (ICOM, 2019). More of the proposed definition reads as:

"Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights access to heritage for all people" (ICOM, 2019).

But how can the museum be a space of democratization, dialogue, and multivocality? What are the practical ramifications for the museum's baseline functions, like curating exhibits, that have for so long relied on a sense of professionalization? Democratization, dialogue, and multivocality mean that more people from outside the museum need to be involved. To this end, in the second paragraph "participation" is specifically mentioned:

"Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality, and planetary wellbeing (Ibid.)."

This proposed definition should invite questions and criticism. For example, what does it mean that the museum is a place of democratization if that is even possible? Can participatory work through active partnerships with local communities really move the museum towards being a place of "global equity and planetary wellbeing" for all?

Participation in the museum sector is situated within discussions on "democratizing" museum spaces, including how museums provide access to resources and content. As Robinson notes:

"...participation effectively encompasses a range of engagements, beginning with freer access to museum information and ideas ('democratization of culture') to sharing of authority over interpretation and the ability to play an active role in shaping how collections and ideas are represented ('cultural democracy')" (2017, p. 861).

It is important to note that *Cultural democracy* and *democratization of culture* differ in that *democratization of culture* is the access to cultural resources but not necessarily the permission for outside groups to use the museum as a conduit for their own voices and experiences. *Cultural democracy* uses participation to ensure that the people can represent

themselves and their stories in the ways they feel need to be heard and the museum is as a facilitator and a mediator. But how can the museum sector democratize and empower those who utilize their facilities, partake in exhibits, or co-plan special projects?

Barrett (2010) challenges that the museum sector can even be democratized, arguing that museums can become more accessible but not actually democratic unless the sector changes administrative policies. Poletta (2016) adds to this argument by explaining how often the term “democracy” is misused and mistaken for being granted “access” (2016, p. 234). “Democratization,” Barrett contends, “is not something the museum can perform, because it is an unrealistic expectation” (2010, p. 14). There is a limitation to how much equity museums can encourage by simply engaging with the public. The modern museum may have morphed over time to be easily accessed, but it was never intended as a sphere to produce democratic discourse. The idea of the museum being a democratic space is a fairly new concept. This signals that museums may very well be incapable of going from a discourse of access to one of equity or actually sharing authority.

The way the museum sector understands the idea of “community” exemplifies how it still seeks to establish authority by controlling the outcomes of participatory projects that aim to produce multivocal narratives and create polyphonic space in the museum, yet may fall short in that they do not grant participants any sort of decision-making power. The sector’s definition of “community” is often loosely based on Public Relations and not policy (Watson, 2007, p. 9-10; p. 27). Additionally, the romanticization of “community” in museum work can occur when the necessary staff time and resources to research and define it are lacking (Crooke, 2016). Unexamined definitions of “community” reinforce stereotypes and “otherizing,” where “community” is defined generally to fit the purposes of a given project or exhibition (Golding & Modest, 2013, p. 20; Waterton & Smith, 2010). From a sociological standpoint, the idea of community is much more fluid, and in reality should be defining the projects themselves (Waterton & Smith, 2010, pp. 8-9). This points out negative consequences for exhibitions that aim to be participatory in their development by inviting communities to co-create and/or co-produce. This in turn has an effect on how participatory exhibits with communities are pursued.

Participatory art or work in the museum is not a revolutionary practice and has been occurring in museums since the early 20th century (Greco, 2014, pp. 7-12). One common application of participation in the museum includes museum professionals—individuals specially trained in operations and management (Murphy, 2016, p. 397)—guiding visitors, groups, or individuals in content production that can be added to something already curated. However, participation has developed and influenced by the Internet and the advent of digital platforms, external communities now expect to participate via producing content (Phillips, 2013). So it is not enough simply to partake, but the emphasis has transitioned to influencing content and control of the experience. These are now given and expected outcomes of museum participation.

The museum-as-platform concept was partly influenced by Nina Simon and their book *The Participatory Museum* (2010), which argued that museums need more participatory

curation practices to be relevant and audience-centered at a time when museum attendance was largely declining in the United States. Simon defined participation around the actions of creating, sharing, and connecting, where a museum is a "...cultural institution as a place where visitors can create, share, and connect around content...[and] visitors' conversations and creations focus on the evidence, objects, and ideas most important to the institution in question" (Simon 2010, para. 4). Participation in the museum sector, so far, has largely been understood as a process involving external communities in content creation that can be shared and forge new connections. Participation is about creating an environment where collections, objects, issues, themes, or interpretations important to communities are mediated by the museums.

While the changing ICOM definition refers to participation as a standard part of museum practice that will help make the museum more equitable and its spaces more democratized, it does not get to the heart of the problem that prohibits museums from truly achieving this as a sector: that within instances of exhibiting cultural heritage—and especially where the community actively practicing it is involved in the exhibition process—participation ultimately should be about sharing authority between museums and involved communities. In this sense, participation can be a way to extend the museum beyond its limitations as a contact zone (Clifford, 1997; Boast, 2011). This thesis, therefore, looks at participatory exhibition design beyond simply mediation or facilitation. It is about sharing decision-making power between participants and the museum as a way to initiate sharing authority between communities and museums. This is particularly valid within the context of practicing an Intangible Cultural Heritage tradition in a space like a museum, where different relations, contexts, histories, and meanings need to be constantly negotiated for the museum to function as a democratized, polyphonic space.

Participation and democratization are important enough to the museum sector in that these terms are included in the new working definition of the museum. However, the sector is still exploring a clear mechanism or method to process how to do participation in a way that is equitable or shares authority in a given context, as it will naturally differ from case to case. A range of studies over the past decade have positioned participation in the museum sector as part of community engagement. However, this can be problematic, as the museum sector tends to tokenize and trivialize community involvement through this professionalization of community relations (Davies, 2010; Lynch, 2011; Mygind et. al, 2015). Often, communities or community members were invited to curate exhibitions only halfway through the exhibit planning process. These case studies highlighted that a limited level of participatory exhibition-making, while started under good intentions, reinforces unequal power relations between the museum sector and communities whose heritage or histories are being curated.

While growing in popularity as a best-practice tool within the museum sector, community-driven projects like participatory exhibitions lack financial support within the museum sector, leading to issues in sustaining participatory exhibition design before, during, and after a project at a necessary level. A study by Lynch (2011) looked at 12 museums

in the United Kingdom found that community-driven and participatory exhibits are still poorly funded and side-lined despite their growing prevalence (p. 5). In their study, the museums could not involve participants at decision-making levels. This reinforced professional views of communities as beneficiaries and not as critical partners, which held up policies keeping participating communities from actually influencing how the exhibit was curated.

Davies (2010) and Mygind et al. (2015) echo that decision-making in participatory exhibitions can be limited and affect exhibit outcomes particularly during endings or beginning phases of projects. In Davies' study, even when external parties were involved in the exhibit creation process or "in the initial idea" generating phase—museums limited the extent to which the co-productive relationship could function by controlling participants' decision-making capabilities in the final, key phases of exhibitions (pp. 308-318). External participants "were rarely involved in management planning or in defining key interpretative messages...[and] appeared to be distanced from key decision-making" that occurred towards the ends of projects (Ibid.). Similarly, Mygind's study concluded that museum participation exists on a continuum of from being consultative to being about participant empowerment—where participants made executive decisions surrounding projects and exhibits (Mygind et al. 2015, pp. 126-127). However, the study provided contrasting information to Davies (2010) in that communities were most often called in as consultants during later phases of projects. In both instances, this led to tokenization or feelings of being "used" by the museum and staff (pp. 124-125). However, in Davies' study, this was most notable in beginning phases, while Mygind's study emphasized endings. This points to an issue that participatory exhibition design needs to be strengthened as a process throughout.

Participation or participatory exhibits are employed by the museum sector as a best practice tool or accountability mechanism to address inequity and instill trust with partners (Lynch & Alberti, 2010; Morse, Macpherson, and Robinson, 2013; Morse, 2018). Accountability can be made to assess how museums "speak to" and work with communities (Morse, 2018, pp. 175-179). Additionally, studies have shown how participatory museum exhibits can encourage reconsideration of the relationships between museums and communities, as well as evaluate how to do "true democratic exchange" in the face of "difficulties and complexities" (Lynch & Alberti, 2010, pp. 20-21). In this sense, sharing authority is a tool for making museums more socially responsible within the framework of appropriate museology or socially responsible institutions (Kreps, 2015; Yerkovich, 2016). These studies concluded that participatory curatorial practices sometimes reinforce authority in the museum with the co-production process becoming a way for museums to reassert their authority rather than challenge it.

Given the problematics around participation in the museum, what if participation was introduced as a way to inspire changes to policy, and to make museum policy more equitable through sharing authority? The idea of "sharing authority" in the museum emerged in the early 2000s, particularly around participatory museology that focused on museums

establishing equitable partnerships with source communities (Peers and Brown, 2007). Source communities include individuals or groups whose cultural heritage is held in museum collections and/or exhibited. In an equitable partnership with source communities, the museum shares curatorial authority with source communities and decisions surrounding exhibition policies, and the museum shares its role of being an “expert” (Wayne and Golding, 2013). This includes sharing the process around representing histories, approaching contested pasts in a multivocal way (Hutchinson 2013, cited in Wayne and Golding, 2013). Ultimately, sharing authority is the act of communities and individuals—outside of museum staff—influencing and creating user-generated narratives (Adair, Filene, and Koloski, 2011). For this research, sharing authority is the act of individuals or groups—situated outside of museum staff—making decisions around curatorial content in a way that creates a multivocal narrative.

How is this conversation playing out within the museum sector, and notably within a museum that is trying to establish critical partnerships with local communities around a shared heritage? In 2018, I investigated a *Día de Los Muertos* festival at Denver Botanic Gardens and their *Community Altars* exhibit to further examine the questions and topics posed above. I noted that community participation in exhibition development—no matter the size of the exhibit—becomes particularly complicated when it involves an exhibition on cultural heritage or traditional practices of local communities. For the context of this research, then, sharing authority is analyzed as it may happen in the *Community Altars* exhibit at Denver Botanic Gardens (USA) through participatory exhibition design around cultural heritage topics. I applied White’s (1996) theory of participation developed in their paper “Depoliticising development: The uses and abuses of participation” to lend a theoretical lens to discussing how to make participatory practices more balanced and aware of relational power.

1.1 Research Question

How can the *Community Altars* (CA) exhibit at Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG) be analyzed as a participatory process to initiate sharing authority between DBG and the communities involved in the CA exhibit?

This thesis will answer this question by doing a critical analysis of the CA exhibit that took place on 4 November 2018 at DBG. It offers an analysis of interviews from select DBG staff and *Community Altars* participants who constructed *ofrendas* (altars) onsite at DBG for *Día de Los Muertos* (Days of the Dead). These interviews will be analyzed using White’s model of participation to discuss how the participatory process of planning and setting up the CA exhibit may be able to initiate a sense of shared authority. *Community Altars* exhibition was a participatory exhibition produced as a part of a larger *Día de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebration at Denver Botanic Gardens in Denver, Colorado, USA.

This then creates four primary sub-questions, including:

1. How can “sharing authority” be basically defined in the museum sector and applied to DBG?
2. What are some ways that participatory exhibits are already being used as a best practice tool in the museum sector?
3. What are the social, cultural, and political contexts surrounding the *Community Altars* exhibit, and how does this problematize the participatory element of the exhibit design?
4. How can select theoretical models of participation to be applied to the museum sector to analyze how sharing authority can be initiated?

1.2 Aims, Objectives, and Scope

There are three main aims of this thesis: one, to critically analyze a community-centered and created an exhibit at a museum—specifically the *Community Altars* (CA) exhibit at Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG); two, to discuss how the *Community Altars* exhibition may be embedded in an authorized discourse that keeps communities at arm’s length and not fully participating due to a lack of shared decision-making; and three, to critically examine the context of participation as it happens in the *Community Altars* exhibit and ask how can this initiate sharing authority between DBG and the involved communities?

This thesis research will accomplish its aims through three primary objectives:

1. debate how structures of authority in the museum may be impacted by participatory exhibition design, using the CA exhibit as an illustrative example;
2. narrow down the idea of sharing authority for the purpose of this thesis research to focus on shared definitions of exhibit narratives through storytelling about exhibit participants’ personal and lived experiences;
3. analyze the CA exhibit based on a theoretical framework of White’s typology of interests in participation (White, 1996).

This thesis research is limited in its scope to be most effective. It pertains to analyzing participation in a museum exhibit and how the participation process shares authority. This, therefore, excludes museum visitor studies, museum interpretation, material studies, or debates around the usage of (museum) objects and object meanings, cultural memory, or cultural identity production in the museum.¹ While this thesis does attempt to apply White’s (1996) “interests in participation model” to analyze how a participatory exhibit (CA exhibit at DBG) could possibly share authority in the museum, White’s model of participation—and participation models in general—have been applied extensively to

¹ For studies on museums, memory, and identity start with Davison, 1999; Coombes, 2004; Sutherland, 2014.

heritage studies and tourism studies, but this thesis is not focused on community participation in heritage governance or tourism.²

This thesis does incorporate museum studies and critical heritage studies insofar that it understands cultural heritage can be shaped by heritage institutions like museums (Harrison, 2013, p. 96). This research also takes for granted that heritage is more complex than the way it is defined by heritage institutions that have historically shaped heritage understandings through a Eurocentric lens (Harvey, 2011; Davison, 2008; Winter, 2013). The purpose of this research, however, is not to debate the authorized heritage discourse of the museum sector, but to reinforce that the *Community Altars* exhibit at DBG is problematic when social, cultural, and political complexities surrounding heritage are not fully considered. *Día de Los Muertos* is more than just a festival or holiday but is a safeguarded intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tradition, which complicates its placement in a museum and botanic garden. This research will attempt to apply White's theory of participation as a guide to working through issues presented when navigating these complicated relationships. Furthermore, this thesis does not intend to investigate or better define "source communities" in the context of practicing *Día* at DBG. While *Día* is rooted in Central American indigenous practices, this thesis does not intend to debate who has *ownership* over this traditional practice or how to account for appropriation. I am more interested in exploring how authority is relational, how it manifests itself through cultural heritage practices in museum spaces, and how problematics can be worked out through a self-reflexive, empowering participatory process of exhibition curation that brings communities together in deeper appreciation and understanding of one another.

1.3 Addressing a Research Gap

This research hopes to address two main gaps: one, that White's theory of participation can be further applied to participatory exhibition development around cultural heritage in the museum sector; and two, that applying White's theory may help articulate how a participatory exhibition could initiate authority as a process of sharing higher-level decision making and exhibition narratives (in this case, sharing occurring between DBG staff that represent the institution, and CA exhibit participants).

The studies selected for the Literature Review focused on discovering what is wrong with participation rather than exploring what can go right to initiate sharing authority and create a more equitable environment. Previous studies highlighted by this research are concerned with what participation looks like as a process rather than what can be done to improve. Participation in the museum sector as a mechanism through which to practice sharing authority remains relatively unexplored, especially in curatorial contexts and through sharing narratives and introducing multivocal perspectives.

² For more examples on community engagement and participatory heritage, see Chitty, 2017; Waterton, E. and Watson, S., 2011; or Waterton, E. and Watson, S. 2015.

To explore this problem area further, this research will also look for commonalities around why CA exhibit participants and DBG staff chose to get involved or start the exhibit, as it may point to shared values that could serve as a primer to furthering common goals and planning to encourage shared decision-making at higher levels of exhibit management. This thesis will compare these values through interviews, as many of the studies successfully included interviews but few did a comparison of what was said across staff and exhibit participants—analysis usually focused on one set of interview data or the other.

In all, there is already a well-formulated understanding of what sharing authority means as a movement in the museum sector. There is ample argumentation around why sharing authority is a necessary development to advance museum management. But what remains unclear is how sharing authority can be *initiated* as an ongoing process and used as a tool to drive equity. In the context of this thesis, the question would be how can sharing authority begin to take place between Denver Botanic Gardens and local community groups involved in a project like the *Community Altars* exhibit? The idea of sharing authority can be further focused on the notion of sharing of who can define exhibit narratives, interpretation, and how this can help align values between DBG and CA exhibit participants so that sharing authority can be initiated.

1.4 Reflexivity Statement

The epistemological focus of this thesis is situated within the social sciences, i.e. Heritage Studies and Museum Studies, which work through a post-positivist lens. Therefore, my personal and professional background influenced my lines of questioning, observations, data collection, and analysis for this research. This is apparent on two levels: one, in my background; and two, in my professional connection to DBG. Firstly, as a white woman of a well-educated family background—who grew up in a predominantly middle-class suburban area situated within the United States/Western cultural norms—I could enter the museum for research in an advantaged way. My personal history and background contrasted with some of the interview subjects, and I was aware that interrupting their construction of *ofrendas* to pose interview questions might influence decisions or their levels of comfortability. Secondly, my connection to DBG as a former employee advanced my research project because it allowed me to access information and conduct fieldwork, but it also biased my results towards optimism about the outcome of the CA exhibit. As a heritage and museum professional, I aspire to this research will help develop the field from an organizational context. In all, writing on this topic of creating *ofrendas* at DBG, reinforced my position(s) of power, as I have professionally benefitted from referencing and using their experiences as my case study. I want to be clear that it is not my intention to critically analyze the practice of *Día de Los Muertos* itself or the construction of altars and social identity in the vein of critical heritage studies. It has been my intention to foremost critically analyze how DBG is forming relationships with local

communities and CA exhibit participants in order to learn more about sharing authority in the museum sector.

1.5 Research Limitations

This research has potential limitations resulting from a constrictive research design that can be improved. Overall, my research process could have been enhanced through a more focused literature review using practical case studies specific to sharing authority in the museum, having a larger and more diverse sampling size through more staff and participant interviews from over a longer period, and by applying participation theory that has already been tested in the context of the museum sector and participatory exhibits.

There is a lack of research analyzing participatory exhibits of *Día de Los Muertos* and the construction of *ofrendas* to initiate sharing authority between the museum and local, involved communities or participants. Therefore, the Literature Review was scattered and could have been more specific to the research problem. The case studies explored in the Literature Review were only generally applied to the situation of the CA exhibit at DBG. This may have resulted in a weaker formation of categories for analysis. Additionally, the research may have been strengthened through doing a comparative literature review of participatory projects in the museum sector compared to the heritage sector and heritage site management, where participation, civic/community engagement, and stakeholder analysis have been thoroughly analyzed for decades.

Having a larger interview sample size may have strengthened this research. The selection process for interview participants was affected by flaws in White's model and theory of participation, which has been criticized for taking granted that participants are "presented as...homogenous groups" (White, 1996, p. 10). This brought ambiguity to the study, because the CA exhibit participants and DBG staff are more diverse, depending on vocation, demographics (ie. age, gender, ethnic background), and socio-economic circumstance. Capturing this information would be impossible without a demographics survey, which was not incorporated into this research (which will be explained in the Research Methodology section). Therefore, data collection relied heavily on who was involved in the CA exhibit for 2018 and available for interviews while I visited DBG for fieldwork during 1-4 November 2018. This research also failed to deal with the question of how to best measure who should be considered part of the participatory exhibit planning on the community level. This may have been improved through surveys that expanded beyond the 2018 CA exhibit and into other years, or perhaps by surveying visitors on the day of the *Día* celebration at DBG.

Using White's theory on participation limited this study in some ways. While this study utilized Qualitative Content Analysis (Ulich, Hausser, Mayring, et al. 1985)—which is highly effective for analyzing case studies and applying literature to interview findings (Kohlbacher, 2006, para. 85), Qualitative Content Analysis emphasizes theory-guided

analysis³. Therefore, this introduced limitations because White's theory of participation has not yet been thoroughly tested in the context of the case study or in the museum sector. This flaw may be addressed in future studies by adapting models of participation more relevant to the museum sector that better account for principles around sharing authority, exhibit dynamics, and intangible cultural heritage values. Additionally, more in-depth interviews with staff, exhibit participants, and review of museum policy documents over a longitudinal study of multiple CA exhibit years could produce richer results. To this end, Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001) and Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1965) could prove more effective in assessing how to initiate a shared authority in the museum through participatory exhibit design by looking at museum discourses. Ultimately, these methodologies were not selected in the end because they extended beyond the scope and requirements of a master's level thesis.

In all, a limited amount of research on *Día de Los Muertos* exhibitions and sharing authority in the museum, lack of prior research that applies White's model of participation to the museum sector, and an absence of information on interview participants introduced limitations to this study. The next section will focus on the methodology that was selected and why.

2. Research Methodology

This thesis is a critical analysis of a participatory museum exhibition— *Community Altars*—displayed at Denver Botanic Gardens in Denver, Colorado, United States on November 4, 2018. Mayring qualitative content analysis was the best methodological choice considering the research limitations because it allowed for a thorough reflection on existing literature, theory, and iterative comparison to interview findings to create as full of an analysis as possible (Ulrich, Hausser, Mayring, et al. 1985). The critical analysis follows Mayring's research methodology of qualitative content analysis (see Figures 1 and 2). Qualitative content analysis was applied to analyze interview data and other content text analysis. Namely, this included interviews with CA exhibit participants and DBG staff members and reviewing planning documents for the CA exhibit (i.e. the call for participants and application). The qualitative data was contrasted with literature research and theory through inductive and deductive development to create categories for content analysis. The categories were coded by themes or categories also established through the literature review and then used to analyze the data to allow for a “replicable and valid methodology for making specific inferences from the text” (Mayring, 2000, para. 4). Additionally, the qualitative content analysis provided a reliable analysis of interview data that compares the “communicator to the situation of text production, [their] socio-cultural

³ For additional information about qualitative content analysis, see Lune and Berg, 2017.

background...or effect of the message” to the established categories (Ibid., para. 7). This is what allows the interview data and planning documents to be analyzed in the context of the research question, literature review, theory, and the social context of the case study.

2.1 Evolution of the Research

The beginning phases of this research looked at ethnographic case studies of museums as

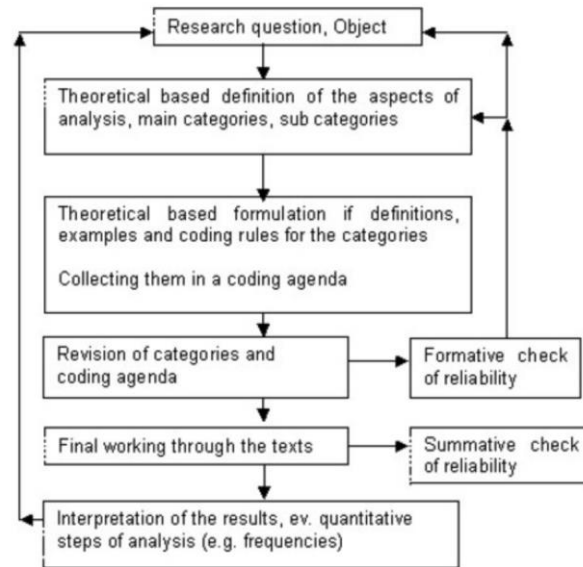


Figure 1: Step model of inductive category development. (Mayring, 2000, para. 11).

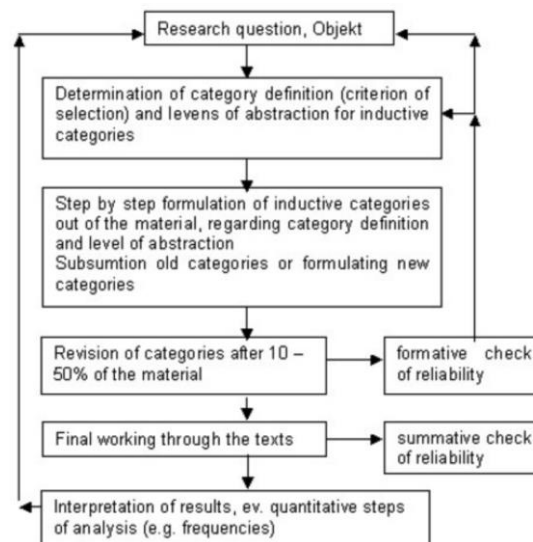


Figure 2: Step model of deductive category development. (Mayring, 2000, para. 14).

a research model. An institutional ethnography⁴ would have worked for this research

⁴ For an example of museum ethnography, see Macdonald, Gerbich and Oswald, 2018.

question, however, that would have required a more robust data collection phase, including in-depth research on DBG's history, gathering more museum policy documents, conducting focus groups with key DBG stakeholders, and looking at additional aspects of the *Día* festival. I focused instead on one exhibit—the *Community Altars* exhibit—and interviewed DBG staff and exhibit participants from 2018. Qualitative Content Analysis was selected to make the analysis more focused, streamlined, and appropriate for a master's level thesis, which aims to be critical about how sharing authority can be initiated between DBG as a museum and CA exhibit participants as local communities. This addresses a research gap of critically applying theories of participation to participatory museum exhibits to criticize sharing authority and how the process can begin.

2.2 Research Ethics

Before every interview, I explained what I wanted to do with the research, why I was doing it, and how the results of this thesis would be shared. Before being recorded, all interviewees reviewed and signed a consent form explaining the research in writing. The results of the interviews and recordings remained anonymous and were stored on a password-protected laptop. The recordings will be deleted after submission. During the *Día de Los Muertos* celebration and *Community Altars* exhibition on 4 November 2018, Denver Botanic Gardens staff members were aware that I was there to conduct interviews and observations. I did one day of observation in the *Community Altars* exhibition room on 4 November 2018. The notes were recorded in a private notebook for personal use.

2.3 Fieldwork and Observation

I visited Denver Botanic Gardens from 1-4 November 2018 for fieldwork. The *Community Altars* exhibit took place on 3 November, which I also attended. During this time, I conducted six CA participant interviews and six DBG staff member interviews. A description of these interviews is found below. I also conducted observations on November 3 and 4, 2018, at Denver Botanic Gardens. This was done in the style of participant observation. While at the CA exhibit and *Día* celebration, I helped as a volunteer. Participant observation can produce a better understanding of the behaviors, attitudes, and activities that surround the subject being studied (Kawulich, 2005, para. 21; 81). After volunteering, I returned to do observations of the *Community Altars* exhibition. I wanted to see how the CA participants presented their altars, how they interacted with visitors, staff members, and how they talked with each other. I wanted to gain a better understanding of how the exhibition would play out. In the end, I decided not to code my notes from my observations in the findings and analysis. This was left out because I wanted to focus on conversations with DBG staff and CA exhibit participants. This focused the analysis process, as it was concentrated on DBG staff and CA exhibit participant motivations for engaging in a participatory process.

2.4 Interview Process and Methodology

During the entire research period of November 2018—November 2019, I conducted 20 interviews in-person and on the phone. In total this included DBG staff, CA exhibit participants from 2018 and 2017, two DBG volunteers working at the *Día de Los Muertos* festival, two former DBG staff members, three DBG community partners, and local arts or cultural nonprofits, and one artist who performed at the 2018 *Día de Los Muertos* festival. To make my results more comprehensive, I excluded many of these interviews from my analysis and focused only on DBG staff and CA exhibit participants from 2018. The final analysis includes six CA participant interviews (out of eight total CA groups) and six DBG staff member interviews. In all, this includes 18 individuals. Two of the CA exhibit interviews occurred in groups—one with a family and one with a friend group. Another joint interview happened with two DBG staff members who requested to be interviewed at the same time. There were two CA participant groups that declined an interview due to time constraints and/or personal unwillingness.

Concerning the data used for analysis, the CA exhibit participants were all local Denver community members. One identified themselves as a nonprofit administrator from the Westwood Creative Arts District, two identified as graduate students and teachers at a local elementary school, one identified as an artist, and five of the eleven CA participants identified as being Latin American, Hispanic, or Latino/Latina (in their own words). Additionally, over that weekend, I interviewed five Denver Botanic Gardens staff. A sixth Denver Botanic Gardens staff member was phone interviewed on 3 January 2019 due to limited availability in November. Names, ages, job titles, and background information were kept anonymous in compliance with the interview guidelines distributed to interview participants and to prevent bias. Demographic data of age, demographic, education, occupation, etc. were not requested. Some interviewees are self-selected to provide this information by mentioning it themselves within the interview. However, it was decided that, because the thesis is mainly concerned about participation as a process and how it initiates sharing authority, and not forming social identity or describing heritage, it was not relevant. Outwardly asking may have made some interviewees feel uncomfortable.

Table 1: Organization of interviews

Interview	Staff or Participant	Situative Details
Staff Interview 1	Staff	Entry to mid-level management
Interview 2	Staff	Upper to executive level management
Interview 3	Staff	Entry to mid-level management
Interview 4	Staff	Upper to executive level management
Interview 5	Staff	Upper to executive level management

Interview	Staff or Participant	Situative Details
Interview 6 (joint)	Staff	Entry to mid-level management
Participant Interview 1	Participant	Master's student and local teacher
Interview 2	Participant	Artist, local community member
Interview 3	Participant	Master's student and local teacher
Interview 4 (joint)	Participant	Family, local community members
Interview 5 (joint)	Participant	Friend group, local community members
Interview 6	Participant	Nonprofit administrator for local cultural organization

The interviews had originally been designed to be semi-structured. I prepared questions based on the research question developed through a literature review (Angrosino, 2007, pp. 42-47). Interview questions were not shared in advance and were simply used to start the interview process. I wrote two sets of questions. One set was for DBG staff, and the other set was for CA participants. The CA participants relied on me to guide the conversation, compared to the DBG staff who provided much lengthier narrative accounts. However, the semi-structured approach was abandoned during the research process, because all the interviews became narratives. The original questions included:

Community Altars Participants

1. So you're doing a Community Altars. How did this come about?
2. What was it like to get involved and work with DBG?
3. Who do you hope will see your altar?
4. How would you say your Community Altar adds to what the Gardens is doing?
5. At what point did you feel this project was meaningful to you?
6. At what point did you feel this project connected you to something?
7. At what point have you been happy with the results of your altar?
8. How would you change or alter your project?

Denver Botanic Gardens Staff

1. So you're doing the *Community Altars* again this year. How did this project come about?

2. Which staff has been involved?
3. How did you plan for community participants to get involved?
4. Who are you trying to reach with this project?
5. How have you used what you know about previous years to develop programming for later years?
6. At what point have you had any fears about the outcome (this year or past)?
7. How do you see the *Community Altars* project fitting into what DBG is trying to achieve?
8. At what point(s) have you been happy with the results of this project?

This script was abandoned during the interview process, and the first question became the same launch point and the main focus for all interviews: “How did you get involved with Community Altars?” This question and the narratives that frame it is the focus of the analysis. Most interviews were about 30-40 minutes in length, two ranged 60 minutes, and two lasted less than 20 minutes. I followed an interview methodology that prioritized recognizing when interviewee points-of-interest developed that differed from the script. I wanted to simply let the interviewees talk (Willis, 2019, p. 90). The interviews functioned in this way as “friendly conversations” that obtained information in a structured, yet informal way (Flick, 2015; Flick, 2014, p. 232). I also referenced the Problem-Centered Interview method, particularly its instruments of developing an interview guideline, tape recordings, and postscript (Witzel, 2000, para. 5). This helped me organize the data analysis.

2.5 Qualitative Content Analysis

The content analysis included interview transcripts and exhibit planning documents provided by the DBG Marketing and Social Responsibility department staff. I was provided with internal planning documents, education and interpretation documents, and administrative documents for the exhibit (sign-up sheets, call for applications, etc) (Please see Annex 2 and 3). In the end, the call for applications was the most relevant for data analysis because it focused on setting up the exhibit and the participatory exhibition design process. The data was then entered into notes and coded to establish an ongoing reflective analysis. Interview transcripts formed the bulk of the content analysis. However, this method is limited in that it does not arrive at the coded themes in a “methodologically controlled manner,” as one could in more quantitative studies or mixed methods (Maiwald, 2005, para. 16). Additionally, Maiwald critiques that picking out themes in a literature review, tends to “fix” the researcher in limited ways regarding the institution or case study. Therefore, it’s important to try and remain objective when describing results. Content analysis was still the best choice in the end because of its usefulness in analyzing

both the CA exhibit and DBG staff experiences to discuss how sharing authority can be initiated through participatory exhibit design.

2.6 Coding

Codes were identified within the collected data and turned into key themes to point out patterns and relationships that establish connections between the generated data and studies established within the Literature Review (Lune and Berg, 2017, pp. 182-183). This was carried out in three cycles. The first cycle set up the overall idea of what was being coded or written about. This was modeled after “attribute coding,” or attributing codes to specific passages of interview text to try and separate larger ideas into general categories (Saldaña, 2012, p. 64). The second cycle collapsed the codes, taking out what was no longer important, and expanded codes that were. Cycle three included memo writing and factored in research specifically looking at White’s model of participation, or the Theoretical Framework. These cycles provided an iterative process of data analysis to further develop conceptual categories and anchor the critical analysis. A coding sheet was created. The coding sheet determined factors for decision-making and dialogue created between the exhibition participants and the museum (for an example of my full coding sheet, please see Annex 1). The codes were developed around the following questions:

What were some ideologies, rules, etc., mentioned when staff and participants talked about why they decided to do the *Community Altars* exhibit?

- How was the CA exhibit organized?
- What were some hierarchical/organizational aspects mentioned?
- How were decision-making processes described?

These questions led the analysis, primarily organized by larger categories for analysis adapted from White’s 1996 paper “Depoliticising development,” or:

- Nominal participation
- Instrumental participation
- Representative participation
- Transformative participation
- Sharing authority

In summary, the research for this thesis included interviews, observations, and analysis. The main methodology for the critical analysis referenced Mayring’s Qualitative Content Analysis with the formation of categories or coded themes. These categories were revised iteratively during the process of data analysis. While the results may be subjective, they

were still thoughtful and analytical, and relating these coded themes to a literature review makes the thesis reproducible. This methodology was selected to examine how the idea of sharing authority through a participatory exhibition was being discussed by museum staff and exhibit participants. This methodology was selected to effectively apply White's theory of participation to the CA exhibit and examine how the exhibit can be approached to initiate sharing authority between CA participants and DBG as a museum and institution that has a sense of authority over the creation of exhibit narratives.

3. Literature Review

This research primarily investigates participatory curation practices as a method to initiate a shared sense of authority between the museum sector and local communities, or in this case, the CA exhibit participants and DBG. The Literature Review utilized case studies, journal articles, books, and theories that deal with "sharing authority" as either a matter of principle or as illustrated through participatory exhibit design. Additionally, I searched for literature and case studies on participatory exhibition development set up between the museum sector, local communities, and/or external groups that became involved in a special exhibit, project, or other curating activities.

3.1 Sharing Authority

Sub-question 1. How can "sharing authority" be basically defined in the museum sector and applied to DBG?

This first sub-section on "sharing authority" reviews some of the existing literature on how museums have established an authoritative voice-over cultural heritage particularly since the provision of the modern museum. By modern museum, I generally refer to the museum sector after its transition from private to a public institution, post-19th century (Walsh, 1992). Additionally, much of the museum studies literature on "participation" and participatory museum practices are analyzed within a "post-museum" context (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). This takes for granted that museums are doing much more than simply collecting objects and mounting exhibitions, but are actively engaging and forming relationships with various communities external to the professional museum.

Sharing authority was introduced early on in the discipline of history by historian Michael Frisch in their book *Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (1990). Frisch questioned the authority and ownership of oral histories, particularly in the context of cultural politics and other social contexts that prioritize a more official view on history. Frisch advocated for a shared authority between historians and those presenting oral histories, or shared authorship. This has since been extended to the museum sector to argue that sharing cultural authority is vital to retain visitors and present museum stories in a multi-perspective way (Adair, Filene, and Koloski, 2011), as well as address issues surrounding equity and social justice (Peers and Brown, 2007; Kreps,

2015; Modest and Golding, 2017; Harwood, 2019). This is to counter the museum sector's history of categorizing and defining cultural heritage in a singular way, investing in public education as a matter of societal reform, and reinforcing notions of national identity.

That the “museum” can “speak” with an authoritative voice takes for granted several points. One is that the museum as a sector produces what Laurajane Smith would define as Authorized Heritage Discourse (2006), and exclusion of others' voices from interpreting their heritage. Furthermore, this establishment of authority is linked to the canonization of social and cultural memory, related to the process of museums selecting what is relevant or dominant cultural memory (Assmann, 2008, pp. 100 & 106). While this thesis research does not focus on the production of cultural memory in the museum by visitors, communities, etc., this supports the point that the museum sector has over time been selective and authoritative on how it presents topics like cultural heritage (Bal, 1996). As Witcomb succinctly summarizes, museums have “traditionally organized their exhibits with a strong linear narrative which allows space for only one point of view—that of the curator/institution...the traditional authority of the museum” (2002, p. 128). This thesis research is interested in exploring how the initiating of sharing authority through a participatory exhibit adds a more multivocal perspective.

3.2 The Museum Sector and Narratives of Authority

In *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Hooper-Greenhill reviews a historic case study of the public opening of the Louvre, which occurred around 1792. She uses Foucault's governmentality thesis as a framework to argue that as early as this period, the museum sector was emerging as a disciplinary technology to guide public behavior and thinking (1992, p. 171). Museums became tools of public education to enforce ‘regimes of truth’ (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 171 citing Foucault 1997, p. 14). In this vein, Hooper-Greenhill argues that the museum sector utilized its authoritative voice through curating exhibits as an “apparatus for the production of knowledge,” while also guiding behavior and thinking (Ibid., p. 172). This apparatus was supported by curation that centralized information and visualized research in the frame of a singular narrative (1992, pp. 168; 188). Curation and exhibition, therefore, signaled importance and articulated for the public authorized definitions of what was scientific knowledge, art, and culture. To this thesis research, the emphasis here is on cultural heritage.

Museums have influenced narratives in hopes of affecting progressive societal reform from the standpoint of defining social identities, and especially around reinforcing Western nationalities. Bennett argues this point in how the museum sector was influenced by the “exhibitionary complex” of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bennett, 1995, p. 59; 1988; 1998). This is not to conflate developments in the modern museum as being the same as occurs in the stand-alone exhibition (for example, giant expositions associated with events like the World's Fair). However, museums of the time adopted and responded

to some exhibition techniques of these popular expositions that were, in part, set on promoting nation-state ideals to process colonialism and imperialist expansion. In this sense, the museum sector conflated exhibition techniques with promoting authorized discourses to reinforce cultural power (Bennett, 1998, p. 84). The “exhibitionary complex” illustrates one facet of the museum sector’s development that shows how it has over time adapted to popular thinking and cultural norms, as well as its being used as a tool to influence social behavior and thinking. This has affected how the sector works with and negotiates cultural heritage, presenting the material aspects of it from a Western-oriented authorized discourse.

The museum sector has functioned as a space of social development since their transition to public institutions circa the 19th century, becoming a sector or tool of “social service,” which continues into today (Silverman, 2010, p. 13). By the New Museology era of the 1980s, the museum sector was discussing “democratization” through visitor involvement in programming and exhibitions as standard practice (Vergo, 1989). The New Museology age further defined the notion that museums could be “a powerful tool for development and social change” (Ibid., p. 12), with participation being the tool. However, how the museum sector continues to use participation—and especially participatory exhibition design with external communities—is problematic, making the “guarantee [of] equal rights access to the heritage of all people” (ICOM, 2019) questionably possible, given how museum sector policies around participatory exhibition design are generally still defined. However, this emphasizes the point that the idea and ways the museum sector goes about “participation” is outdated and needs to be thoroughly examined in the context of how it makes it more equitable by allowing participants to share the authority of the museum sector’s definition and usage of heritage.

Smith, in *Uses of Heritage* (2006), echoes this point that the museum sector historically adapted techniques to promote authorized discourses on culture, heritage, nationality, etc. as a socially disciplinary tool. Smith notes this was manifested in the museum sector through Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), influencing narratives around cultural heritage in a top-down, institutional manner to “promote a certain set of Western elite cultural values as being universally applicable” (p. 11). As the museum sector modernized and took on the role of transmitting and simplifying information to the public masses, it aimed to “improve” society through reducing references to cultural heritage and identity to form a more cohesive, national one that primarily referenced Western heritage and cultural norms. As Smith notes, “integral to the development of museums was a liberal sense of pastoral care that the emergent historical disciplines and Victorian society as a whole identified as important in fostering national pride and social order” (p. 197). In this sense, museums established a sense of social inclusion, particularly through enforcing authorized notions of cultural heritage.

AHD is a one-sided conversation influencing museum policy and knowledge structures, guiding narrative(s) on what is and is not cultural heritage. Smith supports their AHD

theory with a methodology of critical discourse analysis to point out how heritage institutions like the museum can be linguistically analyzed, with its exhibits acting as a tool of AHD that re-enforces authorized versions of heritage and/or culture (p. 195). In their chapter “Labour heritage: performing and remembering,” they present a case study exploring museum visitor understandings of labor heritage at an English social history museum. Smith found that museums play an integral role in facilitating the remembrance and forgetting of local, less authorized versions of cultural heritage, particularly of minority groups, groups with less socioeconomic power, or groups that experience marginalization on institutionalized levels. The “new museology” trend has already openly challenged the museum as the sole narrator of a given history. However, Smith’s study shows that as the museum sector is still set on presenting material culture—rather than engaging with the intangible values associated therein—the museum visitors may still unconsciously reproduce AHD (p. 209). To this end, intangible cultural heritage is “a range of experiences and not simply material culture” (p. 211). Therefore, it is critical to be aware of AHD presented through material culture in the museum sector as an (in)validation of cultural heritage, and its connections to the material, or economic, and political representations and reinforcement of power.

Macdonald (1998) emphasizes that simply by being involved in contemporary issues, the museum sector will continuously re-engage with AHD because of its “discursive relationship” between politics and culture, which authorizes what can be counted as cultural heritage (1998, p. 12). Therefore, the museum’s association with contemporary society and inherently political nature will always create opportunities for singular perspectives as a given, with multivocal perspectives being the rare exception. As Macdonald summarizes:

“...museums are thoroughly a part of society, culture, and politics. As such, they are sites in which we can see wider social, cultural, and political battles played out...Museum displays are also agencies for defining scientific knowledge for the public, and for harnessing science and technology to tell culturally authoritative stories about race, nation, progress, and modernity” (1998, pp. 16-17).

This active influence on and within society further reinforces authorized discourses and power structures. As Macdonald points out, museums are sites of “wider social, cultural and political battles played out,” situated within the context of today (p. 16). Museums are a reflection of the times and reveal contemporary battles occurring within society that can be explored by examining what happens with how cultural heritage is shared, presented, or (dis)respected.

Some museum scholars like Witcomb would agree with Macdonald in that museums reflect the times. Contrastingly, Witcomb counters that the sector’s willingness to enter debates surrounding popular culture and the emphasis of multiple narratives is an intentional confrontation of the museum sector’s authority, as “it is part of the museum’s intention that its interpretation should be unstable and capable of constant renegotiation” (Witcomb, 2003, p. 161). Particularly utilizing dialogue as a process that engages both

professionals and communities in curation, Witcomb argues how seeing the museum as institutionally oppressive is skewed and not wholly accurate. Examining the modern museum's development "exclusively with the operation of power" presents a one-sided argument that does not consider ways that some museums have countered AHD (p. 165). The sector's willingness to engage in sensitive topics shows that the museum sector is dynamic and more accurately a reflection of the social fabric in which they are situated rather than just disciplinary tools. Furthermore, in that the sector also focuses on forming relationships and being communities in of themselves (Witcomb, 2007), it can be argued that the museum is aware of its institutional authority and is actively pushing back against it.

This awareness of institutional authority can be seen in examples of museums working to incorporate different points of view of sub-alternative narratives. But Hooper-Greenhill notes this with an air of caution, bringing our attention to how these new technologies of display and conversations are nevertheless biased towards a singular voice or narrative. As Hooper-Greenhill states:

"New technologies, new articulations of space, individual subjects, and objects, have emerged to enable the new themes and structures of knowledge to do their work. The functions and targets of this work have perhaps changed less. Museums and galleries are still able to subdue and control bodies, and to establish social and cultural divisions" (1992, p. 198).

New technologies—i.e. participatory curation methods—do not necessarily remove bias that prioritizes the museum's narrative over others' because they are intrinsically situated within said bias. In other words, they simply allow for *intervention* and are not an immediate fix. By introducing new perspectives and multiple points of view into the curation process, Hooper-Greenhill notes that the AHD of the museum sector can still be confronted in a significant way. Presenting multivocal narratives is a valid process for initiating sharing authority with communities through participatory exhibits to encourage the "fragmentation of monolithic messages" and prioritize viewpoints from outside the established canon of knowledge and museum personnel (1992, p. 198).

Specifically, these "new technologies" can be as basic as communication and interpretation techniques that re-frame museum narratives as one among many other valid sub-alternative discourses. Hooper-Greenhill exemplifies these technologies in *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (2000) through her interpretation of the museum sector as being in a "post-museum" age. The post-museum is a frame of thinking in museum practice and curation shifts the focus from collecting and accumulating objects towards the *use* of those objects and the intangible cultural heritage values represented within and by them. The post-museum utilizes performance, workshops, dances, songs, shared meals, enactments, and other live cultural events as communication tools to invite multi-sided, nuanced conversation, interpretation, and understanding. The post-museum creates space for community groups to use the museum in their specific ways. This can even include displays of museum campuses in satellite locations like local pubs and shops.

With so many events, exhibitions, performances produced co-jointly, the post-museum focuses on being more “fragmented and multivocal,” where the “voice of the museum is one among many” (ibid, p. 152). In this sense, the post-museum is highly participatory and directly involves communities in cultural meaning-making processes. This may establish a more multivocal narrative in the museum sector, which could create space for a shared sense of authority between museums and communities.

In *New Museums and the Making of Culture* (2006), Message argues against the effectiveness of the post-museum and participatory turn. Today’s sector is unsuccessfully dealing with or resolving problematic pasts through participatory exhibition practices because the museum sector largely only engages with these contested histories on the surface to “expose pedagogical power structures or issues...like the authority of the curator’s voice” (pp. 50-51). In other words, the museum sector uses participation to pay lip service to ideals they fail to enact on a deeper, policy-oriented level. This manifests as adapting administrative language around multiculturalism, diversity, sustainability, social inclusion, etc., as a means for reinvention and self-critical language, but is nevertheless enforced through a one-sided conversation. This includes using participatory exhibition practices to incorporate varied perspectives that challenge the museum’s voice, but as a mechanism of control. Nuanced dialogue of the “new”, more self-reflexive museum may look good, but it does not challenge the museum’s framework for presenting ideas or values:

...the new museum...privileges above all a (historical) image of newness and that it orders and controls its objects and spaces to emphasize this image of newness...its primary techniques [of order] are not tied to objects or material culture, but to the image and allusion of newness that is largely produced through intertextual promotions and rhetorics” (pp. 199-200).

The message points out that museums re-assert a sense of authority through self-critical language steeped in the cultural politics of multicultural inclusion (p. 102). This discourse prevents more open dialogue on complicated histories, claiming historical issues are the sector’s alone to fix. This new discourse allows the museum sector to ignore policy and/or structural changes that would allow communities to shape decision-making.

Alivizatou (2012) also examined this notion of “newness” in museum discourse but from the standpoint of museological practices in curating cultural heritage in North America and New Zealand. In these cases, the museums were more effective at adapting new strategies to challenge institutional or curatorial authority. Museums represented in her case studies were not only aware of popular discourse around multiculturalism and diversity but larger systemic issues affecting minority groups and their ability to participate in their cultural heritage in the museum sector or beyond. Alivizatou defines participatory museology and its role in creating a “new museum” as focused on the cultural exchange that is aware of cultural politics:

“Participatory museology invites, therefore, a broader rethinking of the museum and its role in society. Envisioned like a cultural center, a public space for sharing ideas and bringing people together, the new museum is based more on dialogue rather than on one-dimensional dissemination of knowledge” (p. 190)

Alivizatou’s research elevates museums that use dialogue to build bridges or two-way engagement systems that are not just community-driven but created *in tandem* with the community that prioritizes equity over-representation. This allows for deeper meanings and bottom-up definitions of the authenticity of intangible cultural heritage to come to the foreground of the museum. In Alivizatou’s case studies, museum experts are actively working towards sharing authority through policies that change curation practice. This includes community-generated exhibitions, performances, and live events that focus on telling stories from community perspectives in an empowering way (pp. 49-75). This moves away from a “traditional canon” and towards a “cross-cultural dialogue” that results in exchange, understanding, and new community-based definitions on cultural heritage (p. 57; 68-75). Furthermore, the outcomes and ways of enactment varied from museum to museum, community to community. Full awareness of social context is vital to sharing authority, which is both a transformation of the communities in which these museums work, as well as the provision of a platform for elevating shared narratives, personal stories, and hidden histories.

To work towards sharing authority, as Message and Alivizatou point out, museum policies need to be confronted and changed when they still prohibit active engagement and dialogue between museums and communities. Peers and Brown (2007), in *Museums and Source Communities*, advocate prioritizing multivocal narratives and perspectives into co-produced exhibitions as a matter of museum policy or function overhaul, or of actually spelling out these techniques as museum functions in addition to traditional practices like collecting and research. They emphasize the importance of source communities making and executing higher levels of decision-making at curatorial levels. They put forth that sharing authority is:

“...a commitment to an evolving relationship between a museum and a source community in which both parties are held to be equal and which involves the sharing of skills, knowledge, and power to produce something of value to both parties...It involves learning from source community representatives what they consider appropriate to communicate or to display, or about traditional care practices, and implementing those desires and suggestions” (2007, p. 2).

The most important element of sharing authority is that communities can decide major decisions around cultural heritage projects and while doing so are seen as stakeholders in the museum itself. In addition to crafting new policies, sharing authority is cultivating relationships built on respect, accountability, and skill-sharing. Incorporating the points above, sharing authority also means measurable change at the ground level that allows communities to enter and guide the conversation on the museum’s problematic pasts, and the involved communities are experts of their heritage and lived experience.

Golding and Modest (2013) build upon the idea of defining sharing authority in the museum as a policy shift and responsible public engagement. Their book introduces various authors and case studies to “move beyond dualistic conceptions of curatorial practice versus community” through a fuller understanding of what collaboration between museums and communities could look like if it shared authority (Ibid, p. 1). As other authors have mentioned, sharing authority is about creating an environment where the museum is more perceptive of its uniquely complicated social role by pushing curatorial practice to be more collaborative. This is particularly emphasized in Hutchinson’s chapter “Collaboration, Curatorial Voice and Exhibition Design in Canberra, Australia,” which stresses “shared authority” meaning a “platform for discussing the whys and hows of embedding collaboration between museum curators and participants from outside the museum in exhibition-making,” and particularly in a way that pays attention to the “agency of curatorial voices as well as those of participants” (Hutchinson, 2013, p.143). Essential to this process of ensuring the agency is the potency of individual, lived experience. This prioritizes individual, lived experience in the context of intangible cultural heritage as a social practice, right alongside the curatorial authority of experts. Most importantly, Golding and Modest’s book emphasizes sharing curatorial authority in a way that promotes the narrative and voice of participating communities “without abnegating curatorial responsibility and expertise” (ibid, p.2). Therefore, it is a sharing of responsibilities, skills, and expertise with museum staff and local communities involved in exhibit production.

Horwood in *Sharing Authority in the Museum* (2019) also offers a comprehensive study on the “assemblage” of cultural heritage in the museum over time, focusing primarily on the selection of objects, curatorial responsibility, and rights to access are explored. Object selection and assemblage are not irrelevant for this thesis research. Rather, my research is interested in exploring sharing authority as a process that can be initiated by participatory exhibits that focus on participants being able to tell their narratives through objects. Nevertheless, Horwood offers some key insights that are relevant to this research context.

Specifically, Horwood’s study of the democratization of museum practices over indigenous collections in museums in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, looks at sharing authority as a responsibility of the museum. Denver Botanic Gardens—the museum of this case study—does not have any indigenous collections of objects. However, hosting a *Día de Los Muertos* celebration—which is an intangible cultural heritage practice with indigenous history and roots—brings up interesting questions of how local communities can be engaged in a participatory exhibit ethically.

Horwood’s study is particularly relevant in terms of evaluating ongoing relationships between the museum sector and local communities with which it aims to engage. Horwood argues that sharing authority is about establishing ongoing relationships where power and authority over collections and cultural heritage can be actively and openly negotiated. In this sense, Horwood establishes sharing authority as a process of:

“recontextualizing the discourse on the new museum ethics...including museological themes for moral agency: social inclusion, embracing democracy and diversity, radical

transparency acknowledging accountability, and shared guardianship of heritage” (2019, p. 6).

In short, Horwood’s research adds to the discussion on sharing authority as a museological practice within indigenous communities that emphasizes social responsibility and building healthier relationships. It advocates pushing boundaries beyond the museum being a two-way contact zone (Clifford 1997; Boast 2011) to provide a framework in which the museum sector and local communities can create exhibits together without appropriation. This thesis research is specifically interested in this framework and builds off Horwood by critically looking at the process of participation within sharing authority. Furthermore, it is interested in investigating the relationship between museums and communities, particularly in the context of inverting power relations and the voice of authority.

Previous research by scholars including Hooper-Greenhill, Smith, Macdonald, Bennett, and Message built a case for how authority can be visualized and discussed in the museum sector. They particularly relied upon historical case studies and evidence detailing the way museums utilized knowledge, culture, and science to maintain a singular narrative and to position themselves as authorities within these subjects. Museums have responded to criticism by sharing their curatorial voice with communities through participatory approaches that aim to share authority within the museum. Sharing authority may be initiated by directly involving participants in the decision-making stages of the exhibition process and sharing space for narrative. Participation and participatory exhibit design have been cited as a best practice tool for sharing authority, but its effectiveness is debatable. This is particularly evident in the case study of the *Community Altars* exhibit at Denver Botanic Gardens, which aims to involve external community members in the construction of *ofrendas* on-site at DBG for their *Día de Los Muertos* festival. It creates an opportunity for participants to share their own stories and to create space out of remembrance for loved ones. To what extent and how this may initiate a shared sense of authority will be explored further.

An earlier study reviewing how Canadian museums are responding to debates around sharing authority, Ashley (2007) tries to offer an investigation on how museums are transitioning from “acting for and about diverse communities to moving towards representing the museum’s voice in exhibits as one among many” through participatory exhibit design (p. 486). But how can this move beyond simply sharing a narrative, allowing communities space to voice concerns, moving the museum from being an arena for discussion to one of societal transformation?

3.3 Participatory Exhibit design and Sharing Authority

Sub-question 2. What are some ways that participatory exhibits are already being used as a best practice tool in the museum sector?

The Literature Review included studies on participatory exhibition design (PED) that involved local communities in co-production. PED is defined by Davies (2010) as a co-

creative activity, or “a spectrum of activity across the production process, performed by a range of individuals and groups with a varying impact on the final exhibition” (p. 307). It also recognized exhibit as “an outwardly directed activity: ‘to exhibit’ can also mean to ‘present’...or [from the German *ausstellen*] ‘to deliver’...and is about showing objects to public audiences” (Heesen, 2013, pp. 50-1). According to this definition, *Community Altars* at DBG is an exhibition where groups and individuals are outwardly displaying their work—an *ofrenda* or altar—to public audiences. Additionally, the co-production process is focused on combining the work of DBG and local communities. Although DBG does not have a formal definition of “community” in any policy or marketing documents, the CA exhibit is managed by the Community Relations Manager and is part of DBG’s community engagement programming (Y. Garcia Bardwell, personal communication, 25 September 2018). The definition of a community is left flexible as groups and/or individuals that celebrate *Día de Los Muertos* for cultural or traditional reasons. Resultantly, this section of the Literature Review deals with cases where the definition of community varies, but the binding factors are co-production of exhibitions and co-creation in design or content.

Developing participatory exhibitions is a process that includes work before the exhibitions’ main ideas are even formed. To this end, running a stakeholder assessment program can work towards sharing authority and as a primer for participatory exhibition development. A case study by Legget (2018) of Canterbury Museum in Christchurch (New Zealand’s South Island) museum assessed how the museum measured to what extent activities and responsibilities were of importance or value to various stakeholders, both from Maori and non-Maori backgrounds including paid staff and volunteers, museum board members, community advisory groups, schools and universities, donors, representatives of local iwi (Māori groups), elected government officials, colleagues from nearby museums, local media, and other special interest groups, totaling 53 individuals (p. 728). The focus group was asked, “how do museum stakeholders, including those who self-identify as Māori, assess how their museum performs?” (p. 727). The study revealed that by developing formally recognized accountability mechanisms in museum planning and programming, authority can more evenly be shared in a context that makes sense for the local social setting (p. 724). In this context, it meant developing a mechanism that effectively integrated Māori interests and experiences. A standardized process for assessing museum performance can be a way to further incorporate participatory project partners into inclusive decision-making processes at a structural level.

Developing participatory exhibitions reveal and publicly display structural issues of the museum sector (Coghlan, 2018). Therefore, the museum needs to be prepared to do this level of work and self-reflection. A study by Coghlan examines dialogue in the *Power of I* exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy to work through these rough spots. Coghlan calls for the adoption of a “participatory culture” where: “the museum itself becomes a participant, sharing its power...and subvert(s) the typical power relations to become more democratic in practice and more relevant to a democratic society” (p. 796).

Dialogue overturns authority to “embrace non-expert knowledge alongside expert opinion” (p. 800) in a way that sees multiple viewpoints as valid. Dialogue then is a way to create space for a more poly-vocal narrative in the museum, rather than a singular view.

The Literature Review section highlights several—but not all—sources that examine one aspect of the history of the Western museum as being disciplinary tools that authorize notions on scientific knowledge, art, and cultural heritage. Additionally, while the “authority” of the museum sector is being challenged and unpacked by community-driven programming and participatory museology, there is also a discourse of “newness” and “self-awareness” being adopted by the sector that reinforces this sense of authority or AHD. At the same time, museums are engaging with these processes to review ethics and working towards updating policies through more participatory practices to curation and exhibition. The museum as a sector embeds its arguments for sharing authority in popular culture, but that does not necessarily mean sharing authority is being initiated on a practical level. Sharing authority is about a sharing of curatorial narrative and about making the museum more multivocal. Shared decision-making is vital to create opportunities for empowerment, agency, and establishing trust with participating communities in exhibition planning and curation. What is missing from this literature, however, is a better sense of how these processes can be initiated. What sort of mechanism or framework can be employed to help start the process of sharing authority in the museum in the context of a participatory exhibit that aims to involve local community members, especially in cultural heritage contexts?

The literature was situated within Western museums with a majority representing countries known as “settler societies,” which introduces a bias in the Literature Review (Gregory et al., 2009). This review mainly looked at examples from a Western context, which excluded other valid examples of participatory exhibit design and shared authority from other countries. On one hand, this kept the review concise, relevant, and emphasized cases where indigenous cultural heritage was an essential element to the study and how “otherizing” tendencies of settler societies are reinforced by the museum sector. However, this also may have produced a limited framework and understanding of constructing participatory exhibitions, and especially one created in the context of sharing authority and nevertheless reinforced a sense of Euro-centricity or Western focus in the study.

4. Case Study for Analysis

Sub-question 3. What are the social, cultural, and political contexts surrounding the Community Altars exhibit, and how does this problematize the participatory element of the exhibit design?

Día de Los Muertos has been appearing in U.S. public institutions like museums as celebratory festivals since the early 1970s (Cadaval, 1985, p. 179; Viera, Montiel de Shuman and Bowyer, 2019, p. 12). However, institutions dedicated to Mexican and Central American art, performance, and cultural practices are still emergent to the museum sector. There are few facilities for voicing concerns, holding celebrations, and performances of

cultural traditions as a “first voice institution” from Latin American points of view (Tortolero, Villafranca-Guzmán, 2010, p. 91). Introducing more “diverse perspectives” into the museum sector at large will inevitably interact and challenge the negotiation of “identity [of] a museum...[as it] operates with and between different cultures and knowledge systems”, namely that of Western knowledge production and Latin American or indigenous knowledge systems and cultural traditions (Bojorquez and Nichols, 2012, p. 29). In this sense, the Western museum is limited as a sector rooted by its Eurocentric management frameworks—i.e., focusing on the presentation of objects before cultural values. This makes it challenging to work with cultural heritage traditions like Día. One way of overcoming this is through underlining performance acts that “highlight vocality and affective presence in a public space” (Bojorquez and Nichols, 2012). Curating an exhibition around Día de Los Muertos may be problematic if not critically approached as being a performance, ritual, and knowledge system, not a collection or object for display. This is especially imperative as Día becomes more widely celebrated in museum spaces, which have a history of affecting cultural memory through controlling the canon on whose stories are told in the museum sector and how.

Denver Botanic Gardens is a “living museum” and botanic garden (Denver Botanic Gardens, “Living Collections”, 2019). To critically analyze the Community Altars exhibit, this thesis takes for granted that Denver Botanic Gardens—being an accredited museum and botanic garden—has a complex, multi-faceted past and relationship to colonial power through the history of botanic collection and production of scientific knowledge (Baber, 2016, p. 660). To what extent DBG reinforces such perspectives on knowledge creation is beyond this research focus. However, this point further illustrates that hosting a Día de Los Muertos celebration—and especially the creation of ofrendas in a museum/botanic garden space—is layered with complications. This thesis research will examine how participatory exhibition techniques may address these layers, especially when said techniques are based on philosophies around sharing authority. Who practices Día in what context can be problematic, as this tradition has evolved to highlight cultural politics and the ongoing marginalization of Latin American communities in the United States. Día and the creation of altars is not just a spiritual ritual, but also a movement representing the vital importance of U.S. Latin American culture.

4.1 *Día de los Muertos* as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Día de Los Muertos (*Día*, or “Days of the Dead”) was enlisted by Mexico in 2008 on the Representative List of the Cultural Heritage of Humanity under UNESCO’s 2003 Convention Concerning the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. *Día* was inscribed as part of “traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge, and practices concerning nature and the universe of the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts” (UNESCO, 2011). As ICH, it is alive and constantly transforming. Nominated officially as the “indigenous festivity dedicated to the dead,” a central element is the home shrine—or *ofrenda* (“offering”)—that, “commemorates the transitory return to Earth of deceased relatives and loved ones” (UNESCO, 2008). While known as an “indigenous belief system” with pre-Hispanic roots, it is celebrated particularly throughout North America and parts of South America uniquely (Ibid.). The *ofrenda* usually includes several layers built on ascending levels. Items include pictures of the deceased, their favorite foods, drinks, sweets, alcohol, toys for departed children, or anything that will aid the departed soul’s journey back to the living (see Figure 3). More traditional elements include Mexican *cempasúchil* (marigolds), *pan de muerto*, and brightly colored *papel picado* (Salvador, Morgan, and Laungani, 2003, pp.75-6). The *Community Altars* exhibit at DBG is directly linked to this cultural tradition.



Figure 3: Example of an *ofrenda* (Creative Commons, 2019).

4.2 *Día de los Muertos* and Latin American Communities in the United States

As of July 2016, the “Hispanic” population was estimated by the U.S. government census at 57.5 million, representing 17.8% of the nation’s total population and making the Hispanic population the largest minority in the United States particularly since the 1960s (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Gutiérrez (2004) points out that this population influx accompanies a shift of boundaries and notions around “community” within Latin American migration, as it is more complex and ambiguous than census figures can clarify. What is clear is that in the face of this migration, a particular segment of mainstream discourse on identity in the U.S.—or what it means to be a U.S. citizen—aims to reinforce ideologies connected to white supremacy, or the unfounded belief that the American nation has a particular cultural and economic superiority connected to “whiteness” (Gutiérrez, 2004, p. 11). Additionally, while Central and South American migration to the U.S. has increased overall since the 1960s, there is a correlation to the absence of political rights and representation in social issues (Ibid., pp. 9-11). The Chicano activism movement—which also began in the 1960s—can be a lens to understand the cultural politics of creative expressions like *Día de Los Muertos* that have been repurposed by Latin American communities to confront these aspects of social and economic marginalization.

4.3 *Día* and its Cultural Politics in the United States

Día—as celebrated in the United States—also affirms a sense of pan-Latin American culture, rather than only to “fulfill moral obligations to the dead” (Marchi, 2009, p. 61). It is critical to note how the celebration of *Día* in the U.S. and the creation of the altar has been fused with cultural politics, identity construction, political recognition, and solidarity. Marchi writes how *Día* was taken up by the Chicano movement—particularly post-1970s—to counter political, social, and economic marginalization, as well as media-portrayed negative stereotypes of Latin Americans. Practicing *Día* formed “imagined communities” that signified cultural ownership not acknowledged as part of the American experience (Marchi, 2009, pp. 58-9). This evolution of *Día de los Muertos* is rooted in popular resistance.

In revitalizations of publication practices of *Día*, the Chicano movement drew inspiration from Central American Indigenous history—or Pre-Columbian culture—as *Día* emerged as a form of resistance to colonization during 16th century Spanish Inquisition (Marchi, 2013; Bonfil Batalla, 1996, p. 73-75). So while it originates with Indigenous traditions that at their core honor the life-cycle (Brandes, 1997), *Día de Los Muertos* evolved to protest Indigenous peoples’ death and link them to the violence of colonialism (Brandes, 1988). Similarly, the first documented *Día de Los Muertos* public exhibits—in 1972 at La Galería de la Raza gallery in San Francisco and Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles—displayed altars that commemorated death in a sociopolitical way to encourage public discussion about Latin American marginalization in the U.S. (Marchi, 2013). Therefore, *Día de Los Muertos* is a political memorialization act protesting political injustice, while upholding a moral tradition of honoring the departed and reinforcing a sense of communal identity.

Aparicio, cited in Gutiérrez (2004), similarly notes how cultural expressions like Día create space for collective identity expression to gain socioeconomic and political visibility, mobility, and to overcome marginalization and suppression:

“for politically subordinated groups like [U.S.] Latinos, cultural expressions help them acquire a sense of space and belonging within their local communities and in the larger, dominant society (citing Roach 1995). Given the history of migration, displacement, and marginalization that many Latinos have faced in the United States, forms of expressive culture...have served as important sites for exploring bicultural identity, debates on representation, and the cultural agency and role in the U.S. history of people of Latin American descent” (Aparicio, 2004, p. 355).

That a public cultural institution—in this case, Denver Botanic Gardens—could act as a place for such political, creative, and cultural expression is notable, situated in a movement for self-representation and political advocacy, and to push against Eurocentrism and Anglo-centrism. Therefore, it is particularly crucial to analyze the *Community Altars* exhibit at Denver Botanic Gardens in this context. Furthermore, this emphasizes why this thesis is looking at participatory practices that create space for multivocal narratives and supports cultural agency.

It is because of this unique, complex layering of values and history that the *Community Altars* exhibit should be analyzed, and particularly why and how participants get involved in the act of setting up the altar at Denver Botanic Gardens for their own *Día* celebration. *Día*'s contested past problematizes the notion of making this participatory within the context of a cultural organization like a museum. How Denver Botanic Gardens uses participation to share authority over *Día*—or the narrative over how the tradition is publicly performed through the Community Altar exhibit—can be a way to talk about these layers and how to potentialize and un-problematize aspects of participation by taking these problematics into account.

4.4 Location of the Case Study: Denver, Colorado, United States

Denver Botanic Gardens is located in three separate sites in Colorado, including downtown Denver (Denver Botanic Gardens, York Street), Littleton (Chatfield Farms), and a cultivated garden on top of Mt. Goliath in the Rocky Mountains. As the *Community Altars* exhibit is held at the downtown location in Denver, this section will briefly cover information about Denver.

Denver is a site of rapid population transformation, having grown by 15.3% from 2010 to 2018 (Troyer, 2019). Denver tourism campaigns and national surveys have consistently ranked Denver as “America’s most livable city” for the past several years, adding to a surge in the movement to the area (CBS Denver, 2019). 2018 Population estimates by the United States Census Bureau Population Estimates Program approximate Denver’s pop-

ulation at about 716,492 people. Social demographics included 80.8% white, 29.7% Latino or Hispanic, 9.8% Black or African American, 1.8% American Indian and Alaska Native, 4.1% Asian, and 0.2% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (United States Census, 2018). These population increases have both fomented and revealed ongoing equity and marginalization issues, which have been revealed particularly through health-related issues and housing (Denver Public Health, 2016). In the context of this research, it is important to be aware of these developments, as they may directly affect some parts of the communities, groups, and individuals involved in the *Community Altars* project, having affected the larger Latin American communities of Denver in general.

Organizations like the Strong Prosperous and Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC Denver) are tracking these developments in housing inequity and marginalization. This is particularly evidenced by drops in affordable housing and wealth disparity amongst minority and lower-income communities (SPARCC, 2019). For example, as population growth has exacerbated gentrification processes in Denver (Tracey, 2016; Sakas, 2019), Denver's largest minority group—Latin American and Hispanic communities—has been notably impacted by higher rates of displacement from neighborhoods (Roberts, 2019). SPARCC notes that housing inequities are a change factor for population shifts in historic Latin American Denver neighborhoods, resulting in marked decreases in residency. SPARCC's research indicates this has impacted senses of Latin American cultural identities in parts of the city where Latin American and Hispanic communities once thrived, but are no longer sustainable due to rent increases driven in part by gentrification (SPARCC Denver Regional Profile, 2019).

However, as values surrounding cultural identity are impacted by issues like affordable housing and gentrification, regional and local cultural organizations are addressing these disparities through shared programming. Westwood Creative Arts District and Museo de las Americas—both key partners in DBG's *Día de Los Muertos* celebration—are forging connections to community and encouraging respect for Denver's long-existing Latin American culture (J. Cassault, director; C. O'Brien operations manager, BuCu West; personal communication, 1-2 November 2018). Celebrating *Día de Los Muertos* promotes Latin American culture in Denver and the surrounding areas through arts programming that is co-created by the Latin American communities of Denver along with these cultural organizations. Similarly, regional museums like the Longmont Museum act as a host and platform for these celebrations and for Latin American communities to tell their own stories. Supporting a community committee of Longmont residents, Longmont Museum shares curatorial authority with this committee, as the committee is largely responsible for the planning Day of the Dead programming (Longmont Museum Director, K. Manajek, personal communication, 1 November 2018). Since heritage is a cultural process affected by social, political, and economic processes (Smith, 2006, p. 44), it is vital to view the context of the CA exhibit in part within the wider socio-economic contexts of Denver. It affects how the *Community Altars* exhibit can be approached in a way that aims to promote the cultural heritage of the Latin American tradition of *Día de Los Muertos* in a sensitive and morally responsible way.

4.5 About Denver Botanic Gardens and the *Community Altars* Exhibit

I chose Denver Botanic Gardens and the *Community Altars* exhibition for several reasons. One was for accessibility to the research topic. I worked at Denver Botanic Gardens as an employee from 2016-2017 and have established contacts with professionals whom I respect in the field, and I was confident they would respond well to the research aims. Having worked for the department that manages the *Community Altars* exhibit (Marketing & Social Responsibility), I remembered informal conversations outside the context of this Master's thesis research about the *Community Altars* program being connected to DBG's mission for cultural programming, to be more equitable, community-focused, and to connected with diverse audiences, all within the lens of social responsibility. I selected the *Community Altars* exhibition program specifically as the case study because I find it relevant to current conversations surrounding participation and sharing authority in the museum.

Diversity, among other related topics, is directly addressed in a letter by Chief Executive Officer Brian Vogt, published in DBG's membership newsletter in January 2019. Therein he mentions DBG's Master Development Plan, core values, and how DBG is working to remove barriers between audiences or visitors. Vogt writes that "diversity, outreach, inclusion, appropriation, privilege, equity—all are terms that require a process...learning more about barriers, we have created innovative ways to break them down." He adds, "learning more about inclusion, we see the Gardens as gathering places for countless community celebrations" (Denver Botanic Gardens, 2019). Some staff may categorize the *Community Altars* exhibit as a part of this type of community celebration. The *CA* exhibit is trying to be established in the frame of "diversity, outreach, inclusion," etc., as well as social responsibility.

DBG is a tax-exempt 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, meaning it is partly owned by tax-paying citizens of Denver. Additionally, as a cultural nonprofit, it is legally obligated to provide some sort of public education (Borwick, 2012). To this end, DBG is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums as a living museum and botanic garden. DBG was first incorporated as a nonprofit botanical garden in 1951—then the Botanical Gardens Foundation of Denver—and was the result of a merger between the Colorado Forestry Association with the Denver Society for Ornamental Horticulture (Morley, 1995). The merger was led by local Denver, city administrators, and horticulturists to promote educational and conservation activities around fostering native plants and adopting non-native varieties in the Rocky Mountain region (Peterson, 1980, p. 52). Since its beginning, DBG was created to conduct horticultural research while also connecting to and educating Denver citizens on the natural world. By the 1960s—when the main auditorium was built on DBG's campus—DBG had developed to include public programs around art, literature, and cultural heritage as a civically-minded organization (Morley, 1995).

The aim of DBG has in some ways largely remained the same: to provide access “to the natural world through documentation, research, art and literature...support(ing) scientists, horticulturists, artists, consultants, land managers and educators” in their stewardship of the natural world (Denver Botanic Gardens, 2019a). While the focus is emphasized on living collections (i.e., outdoor gardens, greenhouse conservatory gardens, and a seed collection) and two natural history collections (i.e. herbaria), there is also a library and substantial art collection. To this end, DBG has expanded over time from solely a botanical garden to a civic cultural institution. This is apparent in public programs that range from scientific—the citizen science initiatives (Denver Botanic Gardens, 2019d)—to presenting eight professional art exhibitions per year at their Denver York Street location. This includes outdoor sculpture installations, indoor art installations, featuring artists from around the world, local-to-Colorado, and botanic illustrators (Denver Botanic Gardens, 2019c). This exemplifies DBG’s goal to be regarded not just as a botanic garden, but also a cultural nonprofit museum.

As such, they are amongst the highest-funded in Denver. Additionally, DBG employs 278 full-time, part-time, and seasonal staff members. In 2018, DBG had an annual operating budget of \$22.5 million (USD), with \$19.3 million going towards program services expenditures, or core educational programs. Total annual visitors in 2018 reached 1.3 million, with 43,655 of those being members. (Denver Botanic Gardens, Annual Report, 2018. p. 11). DBG also receives the highest possible tier of funding from Denver’s cultural funding model, the Scientific Cultural, and Facilities District (SCFD). By collecting revenue from sales and use tax, the SCFD funds cultural organizations like DBG (SCFD, 2019). It is divided into a three-tier system, with Tier 1 organizations (including DBG) receiving the greatest amount of funding, as they have the top annual operating budgets and total operations’ costs amongst cultural nonprofits amongst the metropolitan counties that make up SCFD (Scientific Cultural and Facilities District Act, 1987).

4.6 *Día de los Muertos* at Denver Botanic Gardens

On 3 November 2018, *Día de Los Muertos* brought more than 11,000 people to DBG at the York Street location. This includes the *Community Altars* exhibit, which ran from 3-4 November. 2018 was the eighth consecutive *Día de Los Muertos* celebration at DBG, which has included a *Community Altars* exhibit since its beginning in 2011. In eight years it has grown considerably and how incorporates offsite collaborations with local Denver organizations like Museo de las Americas (a museum), the Denver Broncos (American football team), and the Westwood Creative Arts District, also known as BuCu West (Annual Report, 2018, p.8).

While the *Community Altars* exhibit was listed on the official program, there was a variety of other activities occurring around it throughout the day. In addition to the *Community Altars* exhibit, there was also an outdoor sculpture exhibition—*Winged Souls*—by artist Ricardo Soltero (See Figure 4), a craft vendors’ market, silent auction, face painting, dance and theatre performances, candle lighting ceremonies, Lucha Libre wrestling matches, and *Calavera* costume contest. The *Community Altars* exhibit ran from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the Orangery, an indoor structure attached to the conservatory. Marketing and interpretation materials from the 2018 celebration emphasized the celebratory aspect of *Día*, in that it offered free entry, oriented it towards families, and marketed the interactive, performative aspects. Flyers in both Spanish and English emphasized the bilingual, bi-cultural elements (see Figures 5-6).



Figure 4: Example of *Winged Souls* exhibit. (Artist: Soltero, 2018; photo from: Vasconi, 2018).

Additionally, there were other participatory activities targeted at visitors, who could partake in activities such as leaving a comment or leaving a message for a passed loved one in a larger, visitor-contributed exhibit (See Figures 7, 8, and 9). There were also educational activities like making sugar skulls.

SÁBADO 3 DE NOV.
9 a.m. – 4 p.m. ENTRADA GRATUITA

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

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SATURDAY, NOV. 3, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.
FREE ADMISSION

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

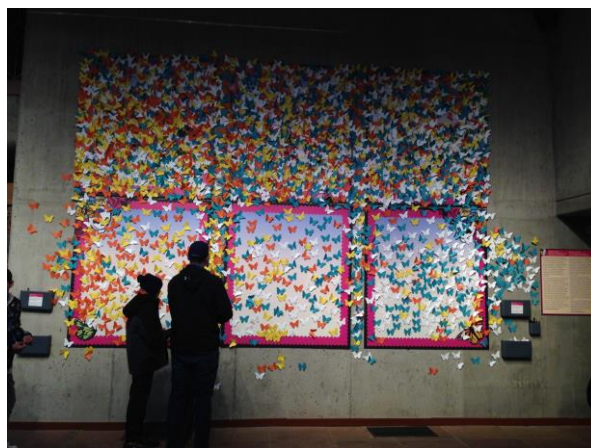
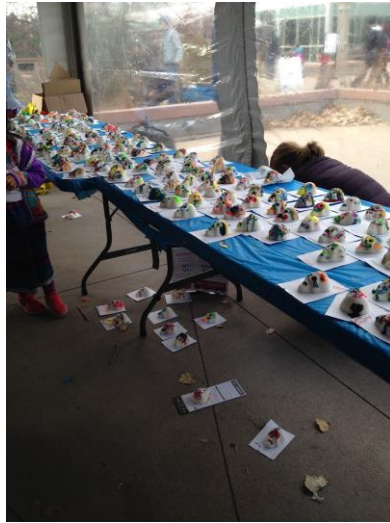
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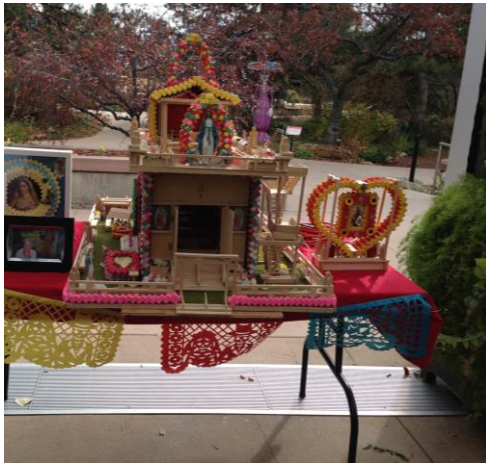
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Figures 5 and 6: Marketing advertisements for 2018 Día de los Muertos at Denver Botanic Gardens (Denver Botanic Gardens, 2018)



Figures 7-9 : Additional participatory and educational activities for visitors at 2018 *Día*, Denver Botanic Gardens (photos from Vasconi, 2018).



Figures 10-13: Some *Community Altars* from 2018 (photos from Vasconi, 2018).

The *Community Altars* exhibit began in 2010, one year before the *Día de Los Muertos* celebration. According to the founder and DBG's Community Relations Manager, the *Community Altars* are considered to be the "main heart and artery" of the entire celebration (Y. Gardwell Barcia, personal communication, 25 September 2018). The *Community Altars* was an initiative of the Marketing and Social Responsibility Department since its inception. For 2018, the Gardens gave people a space onsite for 24 hours to curate and display their own altar. Participants were able to arrive as early as 31 October to begin construction, showing their altars all day on 3 November (See Figures 10-13 for examples). The participants submitted an online application to show their interest, and DBG honored all requests from 2018. The application process included a \$50 refundable deposit to hold space, as in years past people tended to not show up, and the Gardens wanted to guarantee that participants would come and set up an altar. For 2018, there were nine total altars constructed by single families, organizations (i.e., Metropolitan State University Denver and a local elementary school), and all the participants lived in at least one of seven metropolitan counties surrounding the Denver area.

Community partnership and community-driven initiatives with other local cultural nonprofits were a significant element of the 2018 *Día de Los Muertos* celebration and the *Community Altars* exhibit. This included two particular projects partnering with the organizations of Westwood Creative Arts District (BuCu West) and Museo de las Americas (Museum of the Americas). At BuCu West, DBG provided materials for six altars to be constructed in the historically Latin American Westwood neighborhoods (Peterson, 2015). In addition to being a creative arts district, BuCu West functions as an activation site for cultural heritage projects, including socially, economically and culturally-oriented community engagement initiatives. BuCu West is a particularly active site of artistic and creative programming for the neighborhood (O'Brien, personal communication, 2 November 2018). Additionally, DBG provided materials for 40 smaller, tin *niches* for cultural heritage projects on-site at Museo de las Americas (A. Newton, personal communication, 13 November 2018). These projects occurred physically off-site of DBG, therefore they are beyond the scope of this thesis, which is just looking at *Community Altars* as they happened at DBG on 4 November 2018. However, both sites of Museo de las Americas and BuCu West were thematically linked to the *Día de Los Muertos* exhibit at DBG through infographic text provided onsite at BuCu West that marketed the *Día de Los Muertos* celebration and *Community Altars* exhibit happening at DBG. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of connecting *Día de Los Muertos* to community-driven initiatives.

As mentioned above, the scope of this research is focused on the *Community Altars* exhibit as it happened onsite at Denver Botanic Gardens. But moving a portion of *Community Altars* to the Westwood neighborhood and outside of the Gardens—by way of Denver Botanic Gardens operating in tandem with BuCu West—may show that the *Community Altars* aims in part to empower involved actors in creating and displaying *ofrendas* through partnership. This raises an interesting question, in that is it more effective for DBG to host participatory projects that initiate sharing authority off-site of the botanic

gardens' grounds? As it was emphasized to me in an informal staff interview (not included in the analysis), “some people may not feel comfortable here [at DBG], or coming and experiencing [*Día de Los Muertos*] here, so we go to them...hopefully, this inspires them...and maybe it will eventually lead to them coming to the Gardens” (Garcia Bardwell, personal communication, 12 June 2019). The significance of the partnership between cultural organizations in order to share authority or address equity issues in the museum is an outlier of this research—and while not the focus of this thesis—warrants further investigation in another research.



Figure 14: Community altar in Westwood Creative Arts District neighborhood (photo from O'Brien 2018).

This section covered background information on the analysis case, providing context to further investigate the question as to why I chose to ask how “sharing authority” is being initiated in the CA exhibit at DBG. This section particularly aimed to emphasize and contextualize the problematics of celebrating *Día de Los Muertos* in a public space, particularly due to the socio-historical contexts around the practice and performance of cultural heritage. The tradition and practice of *Día* can be linked to parts of the U.S. Chicano movement for public recognition of Latin American cultural heritage as linked with socio-political and economic concerns. Additionally, the city of Denver has faced a recent level of growth that has exacerbated historic and facilitated new levels of marginalization through gentrification of neighborhoods, including historic Latin American areas of Denver.

While examining how this impacts cultural heritage specifically is beyond the scope of this research, it does problematize the *Community Altars* exhibition. This thesis, in addition to the research question, aims to critically analyze *who* is practicing *Día* through the *Community Altars* exhibit and *in what* context? In doing so, it aims to analyze how practicing *Día* through the CA exhibit may be problematic for initiating sharing authority. Particularly, it will look at how participation methodologies can address this. The next section will cover the chosen research methodology for this thesis and review how it supports the analysis.

5. Theoretical Framework

Sub-question 4. How can select theoretical models of participation be applied to the museum sector to analyze how sharing authority can be initiated?

The previous section reviewed existing literature on sharing authority and participatory exhibits in the museum to better position this thesis research. This next section will present the Theoretical Framework, a brief review of some seminal theories that will orient White's (1996) own theory of participation in the context of this thesis research, and will briefly mention how it will be applied to the *Community Altars* exhibit at DBG. The Theoretical Framework will guide the content analysis of primary data (i.e. interview and CA exhibit planning documents) to discuss how participatory exhibit design can initiate a sharing of authority in the context of the CA exhibit at DBG.

5.1 Development of Participation Theory

This section will look at Pateman (1970), Arnstein (1969), and other influential methodologies around participation and civic engagement before concluding with White (1996). Arnstein and Pateman are notable for their shared interest in citizen power, which articulates how decision-making authority determines the effectiveness of participation as a tool to empower everyday citizens, and not just reinforce the authority of project implementers. Pateman—a political theorist and feminist scholar situated within Development Studies—wrote *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970) to re-theorize democracy and democratic processes as active, socially engaged acts and to formulate how civic participation is a vital part of democratization processes. By focusing on citizen power—or individual autonomy—Pateman brought attention to everyday peoples' range of decision-making and how that affected their engagement with institutions associated with work and government (p. 67). Pateman claimed that full decision-making power is essential to an authentic participatory process with democratically produced outcomes. She presented her main ideas of *full* and *partial participation* to emphasize this point.

Full participation is “a process where each member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcomes of decisions”, re-characterizing democratic participation as a space in which leaders and everyday citizens are vital decision-makers together (p. 69-71). Pateman pointed out that frequently, civic groups were only engaging with community leaders in *partial participation*, accepting decisions that were in reality already made for them. Partial participation manifested as leaders openly making decisions

made and publicly encouraging dialogue and debate. Yet, “the worker... does not have equal power to decide the outcome of decisions but can only influence them” (p. 70). This may mirror the consultative, tokenizing participatory curation practices of the museum sector. Therefore, Pateman’s theory is useful in identifying and discussing how power is linked to decision-making, but one-dimensional in that power alone determines outcomes of decisions (Eriksson & Stephensen, 2015, p. 56). That is why this theory was ultimately not selected for analysis of the research findings, but it does show original thoughts on why full participation is vital.

5.2 Arnstein (1969) and the Ladder of Participation

Arnstein developed the “Ladder of Participation” typology in the 1970s during a time of significant fluctuation of power dynamics and cultural change in American politics and society, also while acting as Chief Advisor on Citizen Participation in the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. Her research focused on public policy and community development and has contributed to other areas, including sociology. Like Patemena, Arnstein’s paper outlined different types of participation as they occurred in projects between participants and the professionals or project implementers. Arnstein also used participation as a “categorical term for citizen power” to confront notions of authority and caution that a more equitable distribution of decision-making power is needed for community development projects to be successful and sustainable (p. 216). Power redistribution occurs when participants contribute in a way that regains or forms an outcome of “citizen control.”

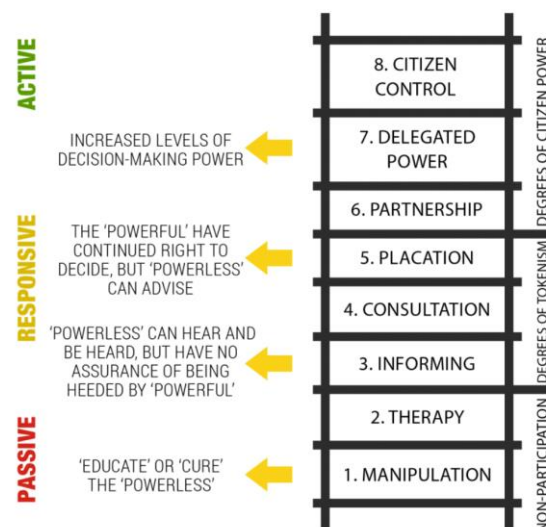


Figure 15: Arnstein’s ladder of participation (from 360participation.com).

Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation was a leading typology in fully analyzing participation and offered a methodology to examine what occurs during participatory projects. It also set the stage for showing participation as a dynamic process, simultaneously representing top-down and bottom-up interests in participating. However, Arnstein does not work for my thesis analysis for three reasons. One, in a given project there are various subgroups with differing motives that need recognition, and the Ladder typology takes for granted two monolith groups: participants and project implementers (Arnstein, 1969, p. 224). Secondly, it is not a useful methodology for evaluating participatory cultural projects today when full participation is the norm and not the exception (Eriksson and Stephensen, 2015). Thirdly, it does not address deterrents that keep potential participants from initiating projects (360 Participation Model, 2017; Cornwall, 2015, p. 275). Therefore, Arnstein does not suit this thesis analysis because it is a mechanism for simply defining participation and is not as applicable to discussing how to share curatorial authority in the museum sector. In other words, it can identify “citizen control” effectively. Yet, Arnstein’s ladder is not as clear on how to create an environment in which citizens initiate levels of citizen control throughout and even after projects.

5.3 Ladders of Participation—Other Models

Since Arnstein, other studies have furthered the ladder typology of participation to work out how social contexts, participant motivations, and relationships are major factors in initiating a sense of shared authority through shared decision-making, among other areas. For example, Hart (1992) applied Arnstein’s ladder model specifically to the context of involving kids in participatory processes and projects. He reformulated the categories to reinforce that, “...confidence and competence...must be gradually acquired through practice” (p. 4) (See Figure 16). It takes time to build relationships, establish trust, and involve people on the level in which decision-making is being shared. Hart used a ladder model to show how participation is progressive and relies upon the strength of the relationship between project participants and implementers to reach a point where participants can initiate making decisions.

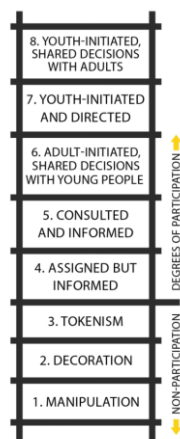


Figure 16: Hart’s ladder of participation (from 360participation.com, citing Hart, 1992).

Pretty (1995) also applied Arnstein’s ladder analogy to review sustainable and community-led agricultural projects and call out bias that inevitably existed in the field, even as management methods changed (See Figure 17). Pretty added that tension is inevitable and necessary to reach the last level (self-mobilization). As a category, it may not always “challenge existing distributions of wealth or power,” but it is about people changing systems that do not work for them through their initiative (p. 1252). Therefore, the participation process needs to be examined as it develops, so that new professionalism can be developed. This is one in which a “wide range of stakeholders and professionals set priorities together: local people’s criteria and perceptions are emphasized”; as well as “professionals shift from controlling to enabling mode”; and “process inevitably comes from a broad range of societal and cultural institutions and movements at all levels” (p. 1257, table 3).

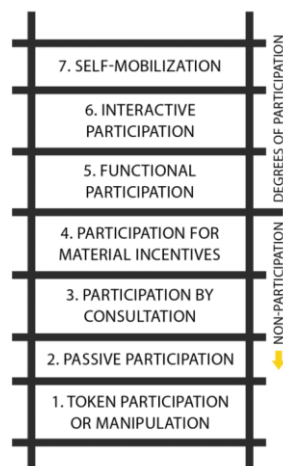


Figure 17: Pretty’s ladder of participation. (from 360participation.com, citing Pretty, 1995).

As a final example, Kanji and Greenwood (2001) also adapted Arnstein’s ladder of participation to better assess collaborative research projects with the International Institute for Environment and Development, an independent policy research institution (See Figure 18). They note that participation is not always “feasible,” or “called for” based on available resources (pp. 30-33). Yet the process should remain transparent and respect relationships. This model recognizes that “full” participation is not always possible. Participation at the highest degree—“collective action”—is then about “local people [setting] their agenda and [mobilizing] to carry it out in the absence of outsiders” (Ibid). Independently created agendas include a shared understanding of meaning, shared knowledge, and shared intention.

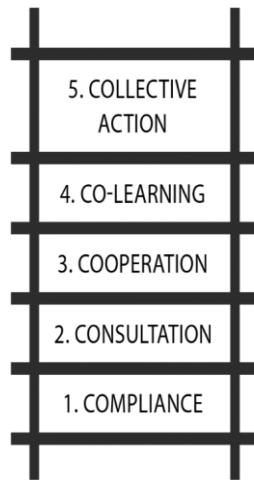


Figure 18: Kanji and Greenwood’s ladder of participation. (from 360participation.com, citing Kanji and Greenwood, 2001).

Pateman’s theory of participation emphasized that shared decision-making is a key aspect of participatory processes that address notions of power and equity. Arnstein and subsequent scholars provided a more robust framework for defining participation as it happens and as a phased process. The ladder typology—created by Arnstein (1969) and modified by authors like Hart (1992), Pretty (1995), and Kanji and Greenwood (2001)—is useful because it shows participation as a process of varying degrees of power and decision-making (Arnstein, 1969). They illustrate that social mobilization depends on the strength of relationships supporting participants (Hart, 1992); that participatory processes sharing authority through partnered decision-making reveals structural biases and therefore require professionalization developments (Pretty 1995), and that participation and shared decision-making are not always feasible due to constrained resources, but shared respect and transparency is always a requirement (Kanji and Greenwood 2001). Additionally, all methods point to social mobilization—or the initiation of shared authority amongst project participants—as the ultimate goal. The ladder models are useful in some areas and not as strong in others. They clarify what occurs *during* participatory processes by exposing power dynamics and revealing disparities. This helps make projects more equitable through active recognition of project participants’ range of involvement. However, the ladder typologies do not support critical reflection on *why* participation is occurring. They also do not reflect on how power holders’ and participants’ interests or motivations modify outcomes. This level of critical reflection could improve the process (360 Participation Model, 2017). My aim in using White’s theory is to minimize these weaker points by capitalizing on areas of White’s methodology that specifically address these issues to encourage a more accurate analysis.

5.4 White’s (1996) Theory of Participation

White (1996) wrote in the context of international development and developed their methodology of participation to criticize internationally-based community development projects in the early 1990s. White augments the theories of Arnstein, Pateman, and the others presented above in several ways. White focused on power dynamics within relationships

by scrutinizing actors’ relationships, as “the arenas in which people perceive their interests and judge whether they can express them are not neutral” (p. 6). Furthermore, White’s typology shows how participation is used “less as a ladder and more of a way of working out how people make use of participation” (Cornwall 2005, p. 271). Applying White’s model provides the framework necessary to analyze participation within the wider context of the society in which a participatory project is embedded (360 Participation, 2017). To this effect, White suggested that moving beyond naming participation to account for motivations to clarify roles and support participant empowerment may introduce conflict, but this conflict can bring about transformation.

White organized their model into a table that defined four types of participation: nominal, instrumental, representative, and transformative (See Tables 2 and 3). The first column (Form) names the type of participation occurring in a given analysis. Column two (Top-Down) outlines the interests of actors who are designing or implementing a given project. Column three (Bottom-Up) represents the perspective of the participants and “how they see their participation and what they expect to get out of it” (p. 7). The fourth column (Function) describes the outcome given the conditions of the first three columns and what sort of participatory process it influences.

The purpose of **nominal** participation is to show or “display” that participation is being done. For project implementers, it is a display that action is being taken. For the participants or groups directly affected by the project, it is a sense of inclusion without actually doing anything or performing.

Table2: Table detailing interests in participation. (from White, 1996, p. 7)

Table 1: Interests in participation

Form	Top-Down	Bottom-Up	Function
Nominal	Legitimation	Inclusion	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency	Cost	Means
Representative	Sustainability	Leverage	Voice
Transformative	Empowerment	Empowerment	Means/End

Instrumental participation is involving local participants as a means of efficiency or to complete a project. For the participants, contributing to the project in some way is done at a cost but yields something valuable in return.

Representative participation occurs when project participants can express themselves and are given a voice. Project implementers pursue this for sustainability purposes—there is the recognition that participants from a local context are needed. Participants become involved because they want to influence outcomes.

Transformative participation is the use of a project to empower participants, with empowerment meaning “considering options, making decisions, and taking collective action to fight injustice” (White, 1996, p. 8). It is shared decision-making and mutual responsibility for the project. Project implementers actively empower participants even if it appears against their interests.

Table 3: White’s interests in participation explained (from 360participation.com).

Form	What ‘participation’ means to the implementing agency	What ‘participation’ means for those on the receiving end	What ‘participation’ is for
Nominal	Legitimation – to show they are doing something	Inclusion – to retain some access to potential benefits	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency – to limit funders’ input, draw on community contributions and make projects more cost-effective	Cost – of time spent on project-related labour and other activities	As a means to achieving cost-effectiveness and local facilities
Representative	Sustainability – to avoid creating dependency	Leverage – to influence the shape the project takes and its management	To give people a voice in determining their own development
Transformative	Empowerment – to enable people to make their own decisions, work out what to do and take action	Empowerment – to be able to decide and act for themselves	Both as a means and an end, a continuing dynamic

White’s model applied to cultural heritage projects

As mentioned previously, White’s model of participation is not usually employed in museum studies, and more often in heritage studies and/or tourism studies. To that end, White has been referenced in different cultural heritage projects and civil society interventions. One notable example is a case study by Eriksson and Stephensen on “The Playful Society” project—part of the 2017 European Cultural Capital award in Aarhus, Denmark. Eriksson and Stephensen applied White’s model of participation to discuss how a cultural project can initiate a deeper level of civic, local community engagement in planning processes. They largely concluded that applying White to analyze their project outcomes was fruitful because it visualized power dimensions and diverse interests (Eriksson and Stephensen, 2015, p. 56). This helped them articulate the necessity of “citizen intervention” and its required scope for activating participation to engage with local cultural heritage in a way that shares authority.

White’s theory of participation—and particularly transformative participation—is a critical choice for determining how participatory museum exhibits can initiate the sharing of authority, as it accounts for the “potential to challenge patterns of dominance”, as well as overall participant empowerment to re-shape systems in which they participate (White 1996, p. 14). This model also accommodates the nuance of cultural heritage projects,

mutually shared interests, and full participation to encourage participant empowerment. Comparing motivations can be useful in formulating mutual goals to sustain shared decision-making and authority over projects. Having an idea of the values behind decision-making is imperative to initiating shared decision-making in cultural heritage projects so that greater cultural recognition is granted to misrecognize cultural groups (Fraser, 2008). Furthermore, transformative participation ideally sustains and transforms social conditions so new policies can be formed (Cornwall, 2015, p. 273). The formation of new policies that reflect lip-service to ethical statements is ultimately the point of sharing authority in the museum. As the museum sector is rife with contested histories surrounding its involvement with non-Western intangible cultural heritage, a participatory model that considers participation as a way to challenge and change dominance patterns is useful. In all, this framework will support an analysis of why people decided to participate in the CA exhibit of *Día de Los Muertos* on several different levels: namely, within the context of *Día* being an intangible cultural heritage tradition and social practice with a rich, political history; the context of it taking place in Denver and in the context of wider discussions on sharing authority in the museum sector.

However, White's model is in some ways not ideal and its usage in this research introduces new issues and questions regarding project implementers' realistic level of responsibility for projects and how space or environment itself can limit participation. Firstly, White's model assumes that the project implementers are always in control of defining their interests, and that project implementers are responsible for project dysfunction. How can this apply to staff members at DBG who are exposed to community-wide or sector-wide pressures they alone cannot influence? One example could be problematic funding models that require grants to be used in a specific way. Secondly, White's model does not account for how space or environment limits participation. Cornwall, in an article that examines White's model, underscored that the "spaces that are created through invitations to participate and those that people create for themselves" produce different outcomes in participation (Cornwall, 2015, p.275, citing Cornwall, 2000). Thirdly, the theory assumes that project participants are unaware of their marginalization until project implementers empower them. How does this theory reinforce marginalization? These points reveal additional hurdles in the context of trying to unpack "sharing authority" in the museum. The *space* of the museum and its environment how it may reinforce marginalization, are factors to analyze. However, doing so is beyond the scope of this research.

In all, White's model was selected for its critical examination of interests, for its ability to call out an ambiguity in participation, and for considering that participation is not a neutral act. This will be crucial for the analysis of how and why DBG staff and CA exhibit participants decided to be a part of the CA exhibit, and how that can be used as a launch point from which to further discuss how authority could be shared between CA exhibit participants and DBG.

6. Analysis of Findings and Discussion

For a participatory exhibit to model participatory processes in a way that works towards sharing authority, the exhibit should be transformative as according to White's model at least in some ways. Participants—or in this case community members who are interested in celebrating *Día de Los Muertos* as a cultural heritage practice through the CA exhibit—should be involved from initial idea-generating phases to co-establish motivations with project implementers. Participants should be key decision-makers throughout the project, particularly about exhibit messaging, interpretation, and should be granted permission to connect the exhibit to the discussion of larger, community-wide, national, or even global issues, all while in a supportive environment. Participants should be granted a level of agency in the project that is equal to their empowerment and consciousness in the fact that they guide how their cultural heritage is performed and represented. To this end, it moves beyond representation and gives the participants space to voice their interpretation of what their *ofrenda* means to them, to the entire tradition and celebration in itself, and also to empower participants to impact the greater Denver community through conscious awareness of *Día's* associated, cultural heritage values.

The main point of applying White's model of participation is to point out that to initiate sharing authority between the museum as an institution and communities that want to be involved as participants in exhibit planning, the exhibit needs to function as a mechanism of participant empowerment. The museum will need to consciously desire to empower others, mediating a process in which local communities are not only empowered through working with cultural heritage but can use the participatory process as capacity-building to raise the consciousness of cultural heritage related issues within the community, like “(mis)recognition” of cultural heritage (Fraser, 2008).

Table 4 outlines and summarizes how I applied White's model of participation to the more general concept of a participatory museum exhibit co-produced by staff and local communities (1996, pp. 8-9).

Table 4: Adapted from Mayring (2000), “Example for a coding agenda”, para. [16].

Categories	Definition	Examples	Application/Rules
C1: Nominal	Participation legitimates the project, participants feel included	Exhibit participants are informed and welcomed as a volunteer group, included in logistics, some meetings, etc.	Definition points to “nominal participation”, otherwise if there is a higher level of participation, it points to instrumental
C2: Instrumental	Participants provide value/labor for museum staff; there is an exchange where the participation helps complete the exhibit on time, and exhibit participants feel value for having participated (i.e. learning outcomes, visibility, social connection, skill learning)	Exhibit participants provide services or materials to the exhibit for cost-effectiveness, i.e. donating items to the exhibit display or expertise	If participation levels are higher, it points to representative
C3: Representative	Participants use the project to voice their concerns and represent their interests; museum staff provide a platform through which to do so, and to sustain the overall project	Exhibit participants use the exhibit as a way to bring attention to wider social issues affecting their community; museum staff benefit from participant involvement generating funds, increased attendance, interests, etc.	If the participation levels are higher, it points to transformative
C4: Transformative	Facilitation by project implementers empowers participants as a matter of course. Participation becomes an iteratively transformative process in that project participants are able to take collective action and act on consciousness around key community/local issues beyond the project itself	Exhibit co-production, meaning that participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - devise an outline/manifesto on group operation during the exhibit/rules of engagement; - define their own roles and responsibilities from the bottom-up; - There are rules for coming to census and problem discussion; - Be empowered/conscious of how to be a legitimizing/authoritative voice in the museum; with staff mediating rather than guiding process 	If transformative participation is applied, it may result in sharing authority

6.1 Findings from Interview Data

In the next section, White's model will be further applied to the CA exhibit by highlighting interviews with CA participants and DBG staff members. It will provide relevant quotes to discuss how participants and staff became involved in the CA exhibit and why.

6.2 Nominal Participation

As mentioned in Table 6.1, nominal participation legitimates the exhibit in some way through a top-down process. What this means is that "legitimation" occurs through the project implementers creating a "popular base" for the project, or showing that the institution, organization, or project implementers, etc., are taking action by showing an interest in local concerns (White 1996, p. 8). It is to signal inclusivity, or as Message (2006) noted in their research, the signaling of self-reflexivity in museum practice and curation, dialogue that is more aware of multiculturalism, diversity, equity, etc. This is also apparent in how the museum sector continues to function today as a tool of social progress (Silverman, 2010). In the context of this research, this could include DBG showing how they are interested in being more inclusive of the Latin American and Hispanic communities of Denver in public programming as outreach, not necessarily empowerment. The following section highlights data that indicates a higher level of nominal participation. However, it is worth noting that no one category is set, and some content may illustrate examples of multiple forms of participation at once.

The "2018 Día de Los Muertos Altar Registration" form for the *Community Altars* is a good example of language around nominal participation (please see Annex 4 for the full example). Submitting this form is the first step to participate in the CA exhibit, beginning with a brief description of *ofrendas* as, "the key element in the annual celebration of Day of the Dead...created in honor of places, ideas, and events that people feel are worth commemorating" (2018 Día de Los Muertos Altar Registration form, para. 1). It also details what elements or objects are usually included in this traditional practice. The final paragraph before a list of what makes participants eligible reads:

Denver Botanic Gardens invites you to create your ofrenda (altar or shrine) to honor someone who has passed away. This is an opportunity to pay homage to deceased loved ones (adult or children)—family, friends, ancestors, devastated communities, or those in the military who gave their lives" (2018 Día de Los Muertos Altar Registration form, para. 2).

It mentions that "anyone can participate." However, to do so, they must provide a waiver to participate, a brief narrative describing the honored loved ones, and a \$50 refundable deposit to reserve a spot for the altar. Participants, in addition, bring their tables, any temporary walls, structures for display (i.e. boxes, shelves, tablecloths). Being a botanic garden, certain substances are prohibited to protect the living plant collections (i.e. foreign plant material, food, no candles, etc.). The registration form ends with an iteration

of, “thank you...the altars are truly the heart and soul of this important cultural event” (Ibid., para 7).

This form illustrates nominal, instrumental, and representative participation. As for nominal participation—the registration form makes clear that the *ofrendas* are at the very center of the *Día de Los Muertos* celebration at DBG and highlights the importance of including community members to legitimate the exhibit’s values. As for instrumental participation—DBG can use exhibit participation to create the exhibit at effective costs and publicize community engagement programming. Representative participation occurs here through participants being given a platform for voicing grief, community-wide concerns, issues, etc.

This form indicates that little input from CA exhibit participants is included in the design of the overall project and exhibit particularly in the beginning. Even though it is not intentionally designed this way, a \$50 refundable deposit, a written narrative description (however brief) of a loved one, and providing the proper materials may be a limitation for some. Furthermore, while it is significant that the form emphasizes “all are welcome,” to what extent is this possible when creating an exhibit and project that honors the tradition of *Día* as an intangible cultural heritage and an expression of resilience by Latin American communities? Is this something that could be debated amongst community members who are a bit more involved in the CA exhibit process at an earlier phase?

The registration form infers that there are different levels of decision-making going on within the exhibit. The form also implies that decision-making can exist on two levels: one, on the level of logistics, and two, the level of meaning-making or producing narrative. It is not as vital for creating a fully participatory experience that works towards being transformation or sharing authority so that the CA participants can be involved in deciding what is not permissible material—that is best formed by expert opinion (i.e. horticulturists, DBG operations managers). However, deciding what the exhibition will be about, deciding the flow and structure of the narrative of the exhibit, is. While participants are free to write their interpretation of their *ofrenda* through a short paragraph that honors passed loved ones, the meaning and direction of the inclusion of the CA exhibit have already been decided upon by staff, as is shown by the description. What would it be like if CA participants could define the meaning of the exhibit alongside DBG staff in terms of how it will be a representation of the *Día de Los Muertos* tradition? What if CA participants could define theme(s) for the exhibit that was then interpreted by participants and served as a sort of guide for the overall celebration?

Some interviews discussed how the *Community Altars* began in 2010, and while the evolution of the CA exhibit since 2010 is not the focus of my thesis, it may imply how the initial set-up of the exhibit may work year-to-year. These quotes infer that a nominal level of participation is in effect because there is mention of involving external groups for the sake of inclusion. For example, some staff mentioned how the beginning of the CA exhibit started:

“It started as very grassroots...people heard about it and then they would reach out [asking] if they can build an altar [at DBG]...The whole thing...started as word of mouth...cold calling.../...in the beginning, I didn’t have any connection to that community, to our community...I wasn’t connected, informed, involved]” (DBG Staff Interview 1, entry to mid-level management).

By identifying the exhibit as a grassroots project, DBG signals that it is invested in pursuing a bottom-up approach. However, at the onset, it was somewhat removed from Denver’s various Latin American communities because of DBG’s overall lacking a more organic connection to Latin American communities of Denver. In this way, the exhibit was implemented primarily to connect DBG to more diverse audiences but hopefully in a way that acknowledged the importance of community input. Yet the initial phases of this project could have more purposefully included intentions to create a multivocal narrative via exhibition (Peers and Brown, 2007), sharing curatorial voice without absolving curatorial authority by allowing participants to authorize their own lived experience (Hutchinson, 2013), or establishing inclusion that accounts for why access should be granted to counter-cultural misrecognition (Horwood, 2019; Fraser, 2008).

However, other quotes illustrate that DBG is working towards being a platform and not only initiating involvement to signal inclusivity:

“People heard about [CA exhibit] and then they would reach out... ‘I hear you are needing an altar...can I build one?’” (DBG Staff Interview 1, entry to mid-level management).

However, this may also imply that the CA exhibit was successful marketing, audience building, and community engagement as a means of the display rather than empowerment or transformation. Other staff mentioned how the CA exhibit was first “discussed as a good potential community engagement project in 2010” and for “audience building” (DBG Staff Interview 2, upper to executive-level management).

Community involvement described in this way infers that it is pursued to legitimize the CA exhibit. As other staff mention, community involvement then is not necessarily able to provide a framework in which external parties can become a part of a co-creation or co-production process:

“The DDLM exhibition is a nice hook but it is not community-driven. For the altars, there was community involvement, but it was not community-driven” (DBG Staff Interview 4, upper to executive-level management).

“Community-driven” in this sense may be referring to the idea of community members driving decision-making around the exhibit. This quote from Staff Interview 4 also infers that including external community members may have been a way to legitimize the CA exhibit, promote marketing (“a hook”), and signal that DBG is interested in making different communities feel seen. Similarly, participation and community involvement can also become a marketing strategy:

“Our audience that we communicate to is very mass...DDLMM is mainstream now. This creates opportunities from a marketing standpoint” (DBG Staff Interview 2, upper to executive-level management).

Additionally, community inclusion may display nominal or instrumental participation in that it guards against critiques that the overall *Día* exhibit is unwarranted or out-of-place at DBG:

“Now and then someone will lob accusations of cultural appropriation. We want to be authentic but we want to be welcoming to everyone. Truly, if you want to celebrate something with cultural heritage, you need to be true to the group from which it comes. But you also need to translate it...celebrating it and translating it, that’s what makes it impactful” (DBG Staff Interview 2, upper to executive level management).

Involvement of external parties then becomes may be a way to deflect criticism of appropriation, and as a way to make the overall celebration more legitimate in DBG’s space. On another level, this also shows representative participation in that DBG is committed to the impact of the CA exhibit through giving community members an opportunity to publicly celebrate *Día* in an inclusive, multicultural environment.

Another example is DBG staff mentioning how the CA exhibit was initiated for 2018. Some implied legitimacy in its educational merit and as an opportunity for educational engagement with cultural and/or family heritage:

“It involves the community is giving families a place to celebrate and learn...and provides the opportunity for families to engage with tradition for what may be the first time for some” (DBG Staff Interview 6, entry to mid-level management).

Categorizing these quotes reveal a dance between different forms of participation, particularly in how the CA exhibit helps DBG expand its marketing to different audiences, and more so than other Denver cultural organizations may have been doing at the time:

“My boss...said ‘we are going to host a Día de Los Muertos festival...would you be interested in helping the Events department put this event on? Or help coordinate or facilitate.’ I don’t think they quite know what this would entail, so I said sure...it was a big undertaking. No one was talking about Día, because death is morbid” (DBG Staff Interview 1, entry to mid-level management).

In this sense, the CA exhibit was established as an event to provide space for *Día* in the wider Denver community, as one staff member mentioned it was not being done anywhere else at that time. In this sense, DBG was actively trying to provide a space for the representation of Latin American communities in Denver, as well as provide a mechanism through which to grow their audiences and expand marketing.

Inclusivity is not only about nominal levels of legitimation and placation, but also a way to begin opening dialogue between project participants, DBG, and other community members through signaling interest in representation and giving a voice:

“[CA exhibit is] an opportunity for the community to...add their bit to the much larger scene that we have here at DBG. It’s a great way to be more inclusive.” (DBG Staff Interview 3, lower to mid-level management).

This also brings up another valid point in that DBG is more than its *Día de Los Muertos* celebration. It recognizes it wants to do the work essential for building sustainable partnerships and establishing real relationships within wider Latin American communities. For example, the same interview quoted above mentioned the growing prevalence of bilingual programming at DBG and how that has helped different audiences feel heard at DBG overall. While a bit beyond the scope of this research, it may warrant further investigation if DBG is working towards sharing authority in one way through a bi-cultural, bilingual approach.

Parts of these interviews have emphasized the importance of DBG including external communities to legitimate the overall DDLM celebration. By focusing solely on inclusion, DBG may not make the initial decisions to include external community members for the sake of sharing decision-making authority within narratives and meaning-making of the exhibit; may not share a sense of responsibility for the CA exhibit, and may not lead to a sense of empowerment by entrusting participants with a level of responsibility that leads to skill- or capacity-building.

6.3 Instrumental Participation

Instrumental participation as applied to the CA exhibit at DBG is when exhibit participants are invited to participate to provide services or materials for the exhibit, as it may help with costs and work towards cost-effectiveness. In this sense, participation becomes a means to an end, rather than being valued for its potential to transform relationships and discuss community-wide concerns. Again, these quotes are not only illustrative of instrumental participation but are largely so.

The registration form language implies how instrumental participation occurs throughout the CA exhibit. CA participants bring all of their materials, including means of display (i.e. tables, structural display items, etc.) (See Annex 4). In one way, this allows the celebration and exhibit to be affordable on a limited budget. In some years, this may have been essential due to specific monetary constraints. Similarly, the refundable deposit ensures that participants will remain to see-through the project and guard against loss of resources and time. But this means the CA exhibit participants must submit an upfront cost that could be prohibitive to some, or even seen as a sign of gatekeeping. While CA exhibit participants did not explicitly mention the costs of creating an *ofrenda*, some participants mentioned involvement could be limited:

“We decided to keep [the ofrenda] small because it was just us doing it and I’ll probably have to pick it up on my own” (CA exhibit participant 4, family group).

Other participants mentioned an emotional cost of participating:

“We fell into procrastination because the process is hard...it feels meaningful, but it uses a lot of energy...it’s healing, but it’s hard to share stuff about death and grief when it’s so personal” (CA exhibit participant 5, friend group).

Contrastingly, other CA participants created an *ofrenda* to accomplish another, unconnected project. This included a teacher who invited parents and children at her school to provide photographs representing loved ones to be displayed at the CA exhibit at DBG:

“I would have liked to...include more parents [in the ofrenda]...I want to do something...where that is easier for families...to engage...that makes it more accessible...convenient...so that more of them are participating” (CA exhibit participant 1, local teacher and master’s student).

This implies the opportunity to create an *ofrenda* also enables the participant to fulfill other personal or professional projects. While these might not be completely straightforward, measurable costs, they do require a level of work on the part of the participants that could be seen as the labor that is required to receive the benefits of constructing an altar: increased visibility and awareness of the *Día* tradition and Latin American culture, working with grief and towards closure, as well as sharing in a unique experience, among more.

6.4 Representative Participation

Representative participation is enacting a participatory project as means of sustainability for project implementers, and to provide leverage to voice concerns, beliefs, or values of project participants. It may be a way to recognize the cultural heritage. Representative levels of participation were evidenced in the CA exhibit in several different ways. One way was in that DBG was focused on providing a platform and voice for specific communities and groups:

“[CA exhibit is] really about exhibition planning and knowing what messaging you want to produce...an effort to share stories [through] design...” (DBG Staff Interview 4, upper to executive level management).

In addition to sharing stories—giving a voice to communities in the interpretation or messaging of something like *Día* at DBG—some staff emphasized the importance of representing and sustaining the exhibit through co-produced dialogue. In this sense, dialogue provided a platform through which CA exhibit participants can exercise the right to practicing cultural identity:

“[CA exhibit] is an opportunity for the community to sort of add their bit to the much larger scene that we have here at DBG...and open up space for further dialogue...it is a good opportunity to get together to talk about who we are and why we should not be ashamed of our identity...so people don’t feel ashamed about celebrating their culture publicly” (DBG Staff Interview 3, lower to mid-level management).

“[The Gardens is trying to reach] underserved populations in Denver that wouldn’t know [the Ca exhibit] exists or that it exists for them. The demographics in Denver are changing.

It may not seem like it because of the segregation, but there is a growing Latino population and [Día] celebrates all Latin American countries...especially Central America and northern South America” (DBG Staff Interview 3, lower to mid-level management).

“[Día de Los Muertos at DBG and CA exhibit] all started as a community engagement opportunity and audience building...to authentically celebrate a really cool and important holiday in the Hispanic world...Latin America and Mexico in particular with Mexican Americans. Engagement was key...celebrating culture was a big element of why we [first] did this” (DBG Staff Interview 2, upper to executive level management).

Here, there are several layers of representation occurring. There is the representation of specific Latin American communities in Denver and recognizing their cultural heritage. Additionally, there is a representation of DBG’s broader interests of ensuring organizational sustainability by capturing community interest, support, and relevancy.

There is also a desire to represent DBG as a botanic garden, and to advocate for its own educational goals of making the public more aware of and informed about the natural world.

“We are trying to do more to link [CA exhibit and Día] with botanic traditions...with floral and natural elements...[and] it is worth noting this holiday [Día] is celebrated around the world” (DBG Staff Interview 2, upper to executive level management).

Additionally, there is a representation of the entire *Día* tradition standing in for universal themes:

“There is something universal about [Día de Los Muertos]...there are so many universal themes all cultures can relate to” (DBG Staff Interview 2, upper to executive level management).

Some DBG staff members specifically mentioned that DBG is trying to reach a more blanket notion of “everyone” through the CA exhibit. This may have functioned as a way of using the exhibit to leverage interest in the organization and its mission:

“Regardless of your background, you have connections to the natural world...our mission is to connect people to plants...it’s about finding important connections to get people to come to DBG” (DBG Staff Interview 4, upper to executive level management).

However, there is at the same time, there is a more open attitude to representation expressed by other staff:

“I never really know until people reach out to me...in terms of who is going to show up [to do an ofrenda]...[it’s] just being open and accepting who comes” (DBG Staff Interview 1, lower to mid-level management).

DBG is aiming to provide a platform from which community members can give multivoiced expressions of what it means to practice *Día* manifested through a visual exhibition. This is representative because it is “leverage” (White, 1996, p. 8) in that it helps DBG

maintain their project, and also interests wider, more diverse audiences in their institution, mission, and what they do as a botanic garden. It is audience-building for them. Perhaps it is the start of initiating authority in that it shares its curatorial voice, adding the voices of community members as one among many (Ashley, 2007). But to what extent does this empower participants? This was not specifically or successfully covered in this thesis.

Regardless, CA exhibit participants did discuss the value—through what it meant to them—to be able to display their *ofrenda* in a public space. The exhibit also functioned as a mechanism through which to express personal or group interests. For some, this had a powerful impact that extended beyond the idea of simply participating for the sake of it or for voicing community concerns, but to also focus on individual experiences. One perspective was from the lens of the CA exhibit being a way to represent cultural traditions and heritage to a wider community:

“[The CA exhibit] was a great opportunity...we hope to have parent engagement from our school to see the altar as well as visitors from around the city...therefore our altar added to help show...traditions of El Día de Los Muertos in our culture and heritage” (CA exhibit participant 3, local community member and teacher).

From another perspective, the CA exhibit was a way to be a voice for larger groups and other organizations outside of DBG:

“The Altar represents our school. In the public, it is representation of a majority Latin American demographic school...I want this to be an experience where our ways, our traditions, our beliefs, go beyond our school walls and our neighborhood parameters...it’s not just for one small portion of Denver...but the entire state to see” (CA exhibit participant 1, local teacher and master’s student).

Others emphasized the visual element of the *ofrenda* and its connection to DBG as a place of culture. This could be a way for the CA participants to provide what they see as a more official or legitimizing platform through which to display something cultural or an element of cultural heritage.

“Anyone can come and see the altar...it’s a significant public space...because the Gardens represents culture” (CA exhibit participant 5, friend group).

However, this brings up a problematic point in that DBG trying to be and provide a platform—and even though participants are providing their content and their creation—may still be wrapped up in what Smith (2006) discusses as an Authorized Heritage Discourse. The *ofrendas* and traditions surrounding them should have value regardless of where presented. So it should be further examined or asked why some participants felt that practicing this tradition at DBG was a sense of legitimation, or as a way to make their culture more visible. The visibility—ultimately—should be coming from a sense of empowerment and action surrounding decisions made by the exhibit participants. This would lead to a more transformative level of participation, as will be discussed in the following section.

However, several participants iterated that creating an altar was not just about where it was created, but because of the importance of the process of creation. Some participants mentioned an increased sense of visibility for something valuable, traditional, and linked with a sense of identity. Some CA exhibit participants' quotes show a level of representative participation that is not necessarily caught up in the idea that what they consider to be their cultural heritage is not necessarily best or most fully expressed at a cultural institution like DBG:

"[Creating] an altar means respecting heritage and acknowledging where you come from, how your family has been involved in history. It's part of our...history..." (CA exhibit participant 4, family group).

"This is not just a project to me. It is my cultural heritage and my traditions" (CA exhibit participant 3, local community member and teacher).

Similarly, the power of the meaning of the exhibit shows that even though it is still representative, the motivations of the CA project participants are still based on meaning-making. The participants also feel they can share an art form, as well as use it to voice their own experiences with grief and death:

"This is my first time [making an ofrenda at DBG]. I've never displayed anything in my whole life. I would like everybody to see it...whoever wants to come...making this altar makes me feel good...like my mom is watching over me. I think she's here...when I'm doing this, it makes me feel easy" (CA exhibit participant 2, local Denver community member).

"[The altar] shows that her life mattered...I thought it would help the kids' process death...it's a way to celebrate her life" (CA exhibit participant 4, family group).

But how can these ideas of representation and interest be better coordinated so that it becomes more than about visibility? By primarily being focused on representation and growing audiences, DBG may be using the CA exhibit participants in a tokenistic way—particularly when we look at Arnstein's definition—participants *feel* that they have a voice, but do not to partake in crucial decision-making around how the CA exhibit would be formulated, why, and what elements it would work to express. Yet it is still meant that the participants gain something from being involved.

It could be argued that some of these quotes better fit in the context of instrumental participation, as there is an exchange of providing materials in return for something meaningful for the participants—rather than simply giving participants a voice through representative participation without opportunity for more active roles. This illustrates as White indicates, "any project will involve a mix of interests which change over time. Rarely will any of these types appear in 'pure' form" (White 1996, p. 8). Pure in this sense means strictly one thing or another. It will always be a combination of motivations, interests, and a range of types.

6.5 Transformative Participation

White (1996) refers to transformative participation as empowerment that is facilitated—not controlled—from the top-down. In this case, DBG as the exhibit implementer would be actively choosing participatory exhibit management tactics that create space for CA participants to make a range of decisions within the exhibit. It also sees participant empowerment as “an end in itself,” and empowerment would be the goal of the exhibit, yet not as an end-point (White 1996, p. 9). Empowerment in the scope of the exhibit could include participants outlining their purposes and goals for the exhibit—a sort of manifesto—through a community advisory panel (Lynch and Alberti, 2011). Additionally, empowerment would include decisions on overall messaging, interpretations, and meanings, participant roles, and responsibilities in managing it as a larger community-based project, etc. This level of participation may bring up tension and conflict—as White mentions, it may feel like it is against the interests of project implementers or in this case, DBG’s interests—but it would also be a space for discussion and coming to consensus as a means for furthering social responsibility of DBG, or the museum as an institution (Kreps, 2015). White further emphasizes that empowerment means that the exhibit would be purposed for “transforming” participants’ sense of reality, but a level of transformation motivated from within or by particip themselves. Transformative participation may not be happening entirely in practice at DBG through the CA exhibit, but it is an ideal that is being worked towards. This is evidenced by several staff quotes, particularly from higher levels of DBG management.

Staff introduced the idea that transformative participation is an aspiration for DBG in its goal of being a cultural facilitator, mediator, and convener:

“Sometimes I think [DBG is] a support system, a venue, a facilitator...a convener...but we are not a singular controller...” (DBG staff interview 5, upper to executive level management)

“...Our biggest contribution is being a sounding board...and a place for communities to gather. And initiating on-going community conversations on really powerful topics like race, ethnicity, and racism” (DBG staff interview 5, upper to executive level management).

However, it is not truly transformative participation if DBG is initiating the dialogue, rather than co-producing it. In order for it to be empowerment from the bottom-up, DBG also needs to provide space so that CA exhibit participants could enter themselves into the conversation from within a dynamic process of dialogue that is ongoing and changing, and not necessarily entirely guided by DBG. This is inconclusively transformative participation because it appears the desire to be transformative is there, but the evidence of whether or not it is occurring is not necessarily conclusive based on these findings.

In another sense, the process of giving space for commemoration, honor, and remembrance can be seen as DBG and CA participants working towards transformative participation together. DBG does not implement any sort of decisions on *who* can remember,

honor, and celebrate loved ones or not or in *what context* other than within the context of *Día*. In this sense, participants can create their narrative and emphasize for themselves what matters and why the tradition of *Día* and creating an *ofrenda* is a relevant practice from their standpoints. As staff reflect on the process of setting up the CA exhibit,

“...also I thought, where do you give people space within the Gardens to create an altar...an area for somebody to come in and create...that could allow them to commemorate, to honor, and to celebrate loved ones” (DBG Staff Interview 1, lower to mid-level management).

The idea of having space in which participants can create their interpretations and experiences is emphasized. It is reinforced by some participants, particularly when reflecting upon why they chose to join the CA exhibit:

“Being involved is like being involved in something bigger than myself...and I feel like this project is my own even though I’m doing it here [at DBG]” (CA exhibit participant 5, friend group).

Staff seems to echo this idea of allowing space for participants to create something relevant to them:

“What we hear from people who do the Community Altar is that it is an emotionally, religiously, spiritually significant activity...[it] is very personal. You don’t want to manufacture that so that everyone has the same experience. Everyone deals with death and celebrates life differently...you want to create something that can be tailored” (DBG staff interview 2, upper to executive level management).

However, if the process of doing the CA exhibit was truly transformation, would it make sense for more CA participants to have provided quotes reflecting on new connections surrounding the *ofrenda* construction, cultural heritage, and connecting it to broader concerns around cultural heritage in the Denver community, or possibly on larger levels? (i.e. national, or global concerns).

As White mentions, transformative participation is a giving up of power—or the institution determining that it will not make or enact all decisions around a project. To this end, DBG’s community partnerships with other local cultural organizations are interesting. On one hand, they help spread awareness of and produce the overall *Día de Los Muertos* celebration nominally and instrumentally:

“Partnerships are essential to the CA exhibit. We get the word out to our partners...any community engagement initiative needs connection through a trusted intermediary” (DBG staff interview 2, upper to executive level management).

Yet, on the other hand, DBG does provide partners with artistic and creative freedom in how partners decide what to do with materials supplied by DBG. For example, DBG gave three large, *niche*-like structures to the Westwood Creative Arts District, as mentioned in

the chapter outlining the analysis case. It may be inferred that by seeking out active partnerships, DBG is seeking a way to share decision-making responsibilities and not being the lone voice or narrator around *Día* or the *Community Altars* exhibit. Similarly, several CA exhibit participants mentioned being involved to sustain and build community partnerships—whether with DBG or in other contexts:

“As part of [my master’s program] I have a family engagement project...that is to develop a special asset of the relationship between the student and family...with questions on their culture and traditions and it also ties back to what we’re doing in our classroom...to engage families, ultimately. I knew [DBG] had this program, so I looked online and...filled out an application” (CA exhibit participant 1, local teacher and master’s student).

Motivation for another CA exhibit participant was also based on developing partnership that would serve their interests as well in terms of their own “community engagement” projects with residents that utilized their nonprofit services:

“[We worked with DBG] for a community celebration of our elders who had passed on...[DBG] gave us six altars...Without community partnerships we would not be where we are at today...you need community partners...we partner with organizations like DBG or nothing would happen with our creative projects around Día” (CA exhibit participant 6, local nonprofit administrator).

Another way that DBG could be showing more transformative levels of participation is through bilingual interpretation for the larger *Día* festival and CA exhibit. It may be empowering in that it allows Spanish-speaking participants to transform the space of DBG into a multi-lingual place. This may transform the conception of who DBG is for:

“Five years ago you wouldn’t have seen any of these [Día] celebrations...Knowing [Día was at DBG] was a huge game-changer. Being able to come on a free day and attract through those programs has been good...DBG is, in general, being more connected to the wider Denver community...and I’m hearing more Spanish here...this is something much larger coming together” (DBG staff interview 3, lower to mid-level management).

Is sharing authority an arrival point or a mechanism through which DBG could do deeper work and self-investigation? If so, has transformative participation helped DBG reach this point for deeper reflection? Can this possibly influence how future policies are made at DBG? The results of this thesis are largely inconclusive in that it cannot answer these larger questions surrounding participation and sharing authority. However, it may launch a discussion of strategies for taking participatory projects at DBG to a higher level, to make them more transformative and empowering for the participants.

6.6 Summary of Data Analysis

As evidenced by the interview results, DBG and CA exhibit participants are in a continuous process that negotiates actively between White’s forms of participation (i.e. nominal, instrumental, representative, and transformative), and it is never one thing at any

given time. This confirms that there were various opportunities to move participation forward and establish strategies that directly address DBG sharing authority more fully with the local communities involved in the CA exhibit. DBG did share a sense of its authority with CA exhibit participants—and modeled transformative participation—most notably through how the CA exhibit provided participants with the freedom to write their dedication, select objects for their *ofrenda*, and to partner with as many individuals in the construction of their altar as they chose. For example, some participants came as family, friend groups, work colleagues, etc. This was the most obvious display of full participation that granted decision-making authority. Yet it was interesting to note that participants and DBG staff did not specifically name “decision-making” or “sharing decisions.” In the context of making choices around the exhibit, interviewees referred more to having the ability for expression and expression of culture, rather than making decisions. Overall, the CA exhibit functioned as a voice for the communities involved, in addition to just DBG’s voice for the overall *Día de Los Muertos* celebration. This is significant and warrants recognition.

Reaching transformative participation is critical to initiate a sharing authority, and DBG staff could further explore and expand upon the sharing the narrative around *Día* as a way to further initiate this process. But this should not just be storytelling, but the verbal evidence of a relationship in which participants feel safe, heard, and supported in sharing lived experiences, and where their lived experience is their curatorial authority. The CA exhibit participants were able to share stories with the wider DBG audience at the *Día de Los Muertos* celebration that was intensely meaningful and had immense value to the participants — whether because of the content of the messaging, the act of sharing it through a cultural heritage tradition, or both. The establishment of multivocal narrative, sharing stories, and participants being able to openly express deep-seated values for the exhibit-making process was the most obvious way that a shared authority between DBG and CA exhibit participants was being initiated.

7. Conclusion

This research began by asking the question, how can the participatory process involved in the *Community Altars* (CA) exhibit at Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG) initiate sharing authority between the communities involved in CA and DBG? It employed White’s theory of participation as a theoretical framework to help answer this question. It did not necessarily seek to analyze exhibit narratives and interpretation, but to reveal how the participation process—by analyzing conversations with staff and participants—influenced a sharing of authority or not. In this research context, sharing authority can be initiated most successfully by applying White’s model of transformative participation.

Transformative participation did occur in some ways during the CA exhibit. CA exhibit participants were able to craft a narrative on a significantly personal level representative of lived experience as a curatorial authority. In other words, CA participants indicated that they felt they were able to share their stories in a space that mattered in a way that

gave their stories weight, or a sense of curatorial authority through being the expert of their own lived experience(s). There were higher levels of decision-making evidenced by the CA exhibit participants' freedom to tell their personal stories of life, love, and loss through a level of artistic freedom within creating their *ofrenda*. This was not always reflected by DBG staff members' view of the CA exhibit or their actions that supported it. In general, more DBG staff could be invested in the empowerment of exhibit participants as a means to initiate transformation—that means being ready to accept that change is inevitable. This could manifest as policy changes around exhibit curation. With “transformation” being a core value of DBG, this could be a concept that staff could engage with and would be consistent with strategic planning goals.

However, the process of sharing authority is more nuanced than shared narratives. If it stops at sharing a narrative, it may invite a tendency or invite the danger of using participants in a way that is tokenizing, consultative, and unintentionally manipulative. This exhibit, therefore, needs to be accompanied by a sharing of higher levels of decision-making surrounding the CA exhibit's purpose, goals, meaning, and other essential planning elements. Additionally, DBG—as a cultural organization and museum—needs to fully demonstrate that it can understand and appreciate the celebration in a way that situates the CA exhibit and *Día* tradition within broader socio-economic contexts. This includes a more direct acknowledgment of how Latin American cultural heritage has been misrecognized in the community of Denver, more support of Latin American communities' concerns over cultural heritage and beyond, and a fuller appreciation of *Día*'s history as a performance of resistance. This may initiate questions surrounding ownership and appropriation, but this should not be shied away from and further engaged. This may allow the CA exhibit as a participatory process to explore new ways of reaching a cultural understanding between different communities, particularly when it places the discussion of empowerment of marginalized, misrecognized as a first measure.

Ideally, participation initiates sharing authority in that it allows for community groups the ability to form new meta-narratives around their cultural heritage—moving beyond representing their cultural heritage to actively writing it out in an authorized sense. It allows the community groups to do their work around memory and identity, and to establish a stronger sense of citizen power around decision-making that prioritizes the intangible values of cultural heritage. Yet participants still take away something from this process in the form of tangible skills like advocating for wider recognition of sub-alternative heritage.

The research also revealed some motivations for producing the CA exhibit, both of CA exhibit participants and staff. DBG staff was interested in making new connections to local communities and giving them a platform to process something deep and personal like grief. Some staff was interested in building networks that would enhance what was already happening culturally in the Latin American community. Other staff members reflected on using DBG as a resource for audiences to access educational elements. And

other staff also mentioned extending a variety of cultural offers to get more people interested, ultimately, in the Gardens' mission and the importance of the natural world.

CA exhibit participants' motivations for participating were much more personal. Some were directly connected to the idea of practicing a family tradition or expressing elements of heritage. Others discussed its importance in larger projects connected to other organizations—in this case, an elementary school—to give public space and emphasize the importance of Latin American culture. Others still discussed the CA exhibit as an opportunity to mourn, process death, and loss. The revelation and discussion of motivations and values for starting or being involved in the CA exhibit did not necessarily provide argumentation surrounding the level or effectiveness of participation, or how it could establish a shared authority. Nevertheless, motivations were significant, because they establish a common ground to start shared goal setting, which will better implement shared decision-making.

Sharing authority is also about sharing responsibility for the museum as a community organization. The CA exhibit participants felt responsible for the exhibit in so far as they felt responsible for their *ofrenda*, but they did not indicate a sense of shared responsibility through shared ownership. DBG could foment a greater sense of radical trust that allows the participants to be key decision-makers from beginning to the end of the exhibit-making process. Some things will complicate this—money, time, and staff relationships. But they should not get in the way of defining how participation will be done.

This research may also indicate a wider discussion that needs to be further encouraged in the wider museum sector. As the introduction indicated with reminding us about ICOM's proposed definition of the museum, it is trying to be redefined as a democratic, inclusive space that prioritizes equity. Sharing authority, however, is not just about being aware and employing the correct language. It also requires a correction of policy and behavior on behalf of the sector. This case study is therefore representative of a wider struggle ensuing within the museum sector to move from participation that generates shared content production, to participation that empowers individuals and transforms communities.

Giving up power does not equate with a *loss* of anything, especially including a sense of control or expertise. Giving up power in how the CA exhibit is curated will result in gaining of respect and new relationships that are more important than curatorial authority. It can also represent a gain in interpretation possibilities by giving more decision-making power to partners to expand upon DBG's already-existing interest in bilingual, bi-cultural elements of holding *Día de Los Muertos* at the Gardens. In this way, DBG can initiate sharing authority in a continuation of expanding key partnerships through giving these partnerships even more trust and support. Perhaps the most exciting possibility for this is physically moving the CA exhibit from DBG. This could be the most empowering option, creating new, more personal, or meaningful spaces in which to commemorate, honor, celebrate life and loss, as well as create a platform for lived experience as a curatorial authority through a cultural heritage tradition that opens up possibilities for dialogue on various levels and different subjects.

7.1 Implications for Future Research

The interview data yielded some unexpected outcomes in terms of themes that were mentioned by CA exhibit participants and DBG staff members. Their frequency may warrant further investigation. This included statements or questions surrounding:

- DBG staff expressing fear of cultural appropriation—i.e., can involve local communities in the CA exhibit deter appropriation from happening? If so, how?
- The importance of having space that is culturally significant to give a sense of validation to exhibit participants—i.e., what does it mean that CA exhibit participants felt “validated” by practicing an element of a family and/or cultural heritage tradition in a public space like a museum?
- The integral nature of partnerships in deterring gatekeeping, or in creating an environment in which authority can be effectively shared.
- The vital importance of the performance of cultural heritage traditions, and how exhibits make these traditions static.

Can these sorts of projects involve *everyone*, and if so how?

For the 2018 CA exhibit, parts of the exhibit also extended physically outside of DBG and into the Westwood Creative Arts District in the Morrison corridor and Westwood neighborhood of Denver. Following this portion of the CA exhibit was beyond the scope of this thesis research. But, what was the significance of this partnership with Westwood Creative Arts District to the overall exhibit? This is what Cornwall (2008) would define as an “invited space” in which opportunities to participate are created by the people themselves. These are oftentimes more powerful than an invitation from an institution or project implementer. Does this initiate sharing authority on a different, more powerful level? What is the significance of the CA exhibit physically leaving the Gardens to be initiated and grow into something new somewhere else?

Another question that can be posed is whether if the entire *Día de Los Muertos* celebration were to leave DBG and somehow be dispersed amongst other cultural organizations—like Westwood Creative Arts District or Museo de las Americas—does something significant happen as a result? Perhaps in applying a theoretical framework that would allow for a deeper analysis of the relationship between actors—like that of boundary objects as proposed by Star and Griesmer (1989)—a deeper discussion in sharing authority can be started, especially looking at the co-production/curation of cultural heritage traditions between museums, partners, and local community members. This may also address and re-frame solutions to issues such as gatekeeping, where cultural institutions (i.e. museums) distance local communities and other partners from resources and access to cultural production.

Similarly, does a performance in the museum—and specifically in the CA exhibit at DBG—result in a transformation of space, and is performance perhaps a better mechanism or tool for exploring interpretation around the exhibit? For example, Isaac, Borjorquez, and Nichols (2012) have already outlined the limitations of curating elements of *Día de Los Muertos* as a static exhibit. So how can the idea of performance—which already exists in DBG’s schedule of activities for the overall *Día de Los Muertos* festivities—be utilized to further explore sharing authority?

This research also brings up questions regarding how to balance responsibility and democratic participation. It is not possible for *everyone* to participate, and it may result in irresponsible project management. From the lens of civic engagement and participatory community development, there is a need to acknowledge that a third-party mediator is required to create and support a “safe space” for project development (SaferSpacesNYC, 2010). Community members involved in an exhibit will not be able to be involved in decision-making at all levels, nor all phases of the project. This is especially relevant for the creation of “awareness policies” that work to establish a code of conduct (Project Include, 2019). These policies work to redirect tensions and conflict that will inevitably occur between staff and participants, and help guide the process of cultural exchange to be an educational one situated within lifelong learning.

This reinforces what decision-making should be focused on within these types of projects. It should be focused on the implementation of strategies and tasks to implement a more sustainable level of community and social development. It should be about empowerment through cultural heritage. This is already being explored on a global scale for heritage, for example in the United Nations (UN) 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This could also be an area for further research, specifically focusing on how the museum sector can draw from frameworks established by intergovernmental programs like the UN’s SDG program.

7.2 Possible Solutions

If DBG is interested in pursuing the question, how can the CA exhibit possibly initiate a sharing of authority, this thesis research can suggest that following White’s model of transformative participation is one way to do so. Applying transformative participation to the CA exhibit may result in exhibit participants being supported in new ways by DBG staff through exploring possibilities of co-operative management. This is not an exhaustive or total list, but some strategies to incorporate co-operative management could include:

1. Initiating workshops or other sessions well before the CA exhibit so that participants can form a shared framework with DBG; or so that participants can outline reasons as to why the project is being implemented — what is the value of it? Two

possible strategies introduced by other authors in the Literature Review could include:

- 1.1 Conducting a stakeholder analysis audit with community focus groups to define values around the CA exhibit (Legget, 2018)
- 1.2. Establishing a community advisory panel one year out from the CA exhibit, including all levels of the organization and outside community members—and reviewing the application process and policies around logistical items like providing compensation for participants through skill-sharing, monetary value, etc. (Lynch and Alberti, 2010)
2. Participants working in tandem with DBG staff to define participant responsibilities and how that may connect and reflect an interest in wider community concerns (Alivizatou, 2012, see Chapter 5);
3. Discuss how the CA exhibit may inspire a new sense of professionalism (Pretty, 1995), or what that could mean for investigating how the professionalization of museum roles inhibits sharing authority.

If DBG is interested in following through on its commitments to transformation, being more relevant to the larger Denver community, and being a facilitator, DBG can use a project like the CA exhibit as a sort of laboratory to test ways of examining policies and practices to share its authority as an institution. DBG needs to be willing to give up enough power within the exhibit to make it almost feel counter-intuitive, even radical. While White's model can help be critical about the beginning phases and planning, it is hard to measure outcomes. However, applying this model can initiate lines of questioning around the exhibit so that staff can analyze and formulate future strategies on a deeper level of community involvement.

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Annex

List of Abbreviations

AHD - Authorized Heritage Discourse

CA - *Community Altars* exhibit

DBG - Denver Botanic Gardens

ICH - Intangible Cultural Heritage

ICOM - International Council of Museums

SCFD - Scientific and Cultural Facilities District

UNESCO - United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UN - United Nations

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Coding Log Example

Interview #	Themes	Code	Quotes/ Paraphrasing	Notes – Relating to Literature/TF	Questions
Staff #2	Exhibition as a sort of tool to communicate values	Communicating values	“...the CA exhibit is an emotionally, religious, spiritually significant activity... that is another element”.	Instrumental Participation; Exhibition as a tool of discourse (Bal, 1996).	How does this also connect to DBG having and expressing institutional values?
CA participant #1	DBG is a place that “validates” culture; “cultural validation”	Cultural validation	“The theme of questions for October are related to DDLM... We were going to do this at school but we brought it here instead”	Cultural validation is discussed in Rosaldo 1994, cited in Marchi; cultural citizenship.	This is significant but I’m not totally sure why yet. How does this reveal authority? Check out paper by M Varutti (2017).

Interview transcripts example

CA participant 4 — 1.11.2019

I: Is this your first DDLM at DBG? // How did you get involved with this?

P: Yes. // Earlier in the year I had seen information online and then the girls birth mom was sadly killed in a hit and run on Sept 30. So. We decided to do a little altar for her kind of as an...honoring her.

I: What do you mean by honoring?

P: Showing people that her life mattered. That she mattered.

(Husband) Well, we had a traditional Native American-style funeral and buried her but...having an altar here...acknowledges her ethnic heritage of Hispanic heritage...uh. (Beth) And the girls are obviously...(mumbles)

I: And so you mentioned acknowledging heritage...what does that mean for you exactly?

P: (B) It means respecting. It's a part of the girls' history and through adoption ours too. (Husband) We thought also to acknowledge () life....sadly enough, I once had a conversation with....(mumbles) she didn't realize...she didn't understand the history between European explorers/colonists and Native American populations in north and south America. She was unaware that many people with Hispanic descent can trace their ethnic heritage...their bloodline to Native American. And partly Spanish. She didn't understand that part of her heritage.

I: What was it like to get involved with DBG?

P: It was pretty straight-forward and preparing a couple of emails. We decided to keep it small because it is just us doing it and I'll probably have to pick it up on my own.

I: The candy is a nice touch.

P: She loved candy too. We understand the value is to pull the spirits back.

I: Who do you hope will come and see your altar?

P: We'll let her extended family know so they can come and see the altar/ In general anyone who wants to realize that there are people out there...that birth parents are important to families as well.

I: How does your altar add in or fits in with what DBG is already doing? Or what it does as a museum do.

P: I think gardens include culture. Culture means traditions, lifestyles, traditions that you adopt.

I: At what point was this project meaningful? To you and your family?

P: It was one of the first things I thought of. When I heard that Crystal had passed away...I thought it would help their (kids') process.

I: At what point did you feel this project connected you with something?

P: It's...a way to...Idk at what point really. It's a way to celebrate her life, a connection to her life and her death.

I: When did you feel happy with the results and with being involved in creating it?

P: It was kind of just pulling things together. The girls helped me with some of the flowers today. So right now we are happy with it. Girls are you happy with the altar? // Yeah

H- I don't think we were looking for an overly elaborate symbol...

I: If you could would there be anything you'd want to change?

P: It would be nice if the Gardens could have provided a service so we wouldn't have to worry about bringing a table. Other than that, it's kind of a shame we can't bring perishable foods but I understand why. Girls - did you want to say anything about the altar?

G: No

I: Okay. Thanks.

Plain language consent form

Participatory Approaches to Museum Management: A Case Study of *Community Altars* at Denver Botanic Gardens | Consent to Participate in Research

I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. I understand that:

Even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw whenever or refuse to answer any question without consequence. I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

Participation involves an interview and opportunity for follow-up questions via email or phone call in case further information is needed in the next few months. I agree that my interview will be audio recorded. All information I give will be treated confidentially.

In any following research reports, my identity will remain anonymous. My name will be changed or omitted as well as any details that confirm my identity or anyone else I speak about.

This signed consent form and audio recordings will be saved to a password-locked device and then saved on a password-locked laptop that no one else will access to, besides the researcher, from November 2018 to September 2019.

A transcript of my interview, where all identifying information has been removed, will be saved until December 2019. I am entitled to access the information I have provided within the storage time shown above. I am free to contact the researcher, Nicole Vasconi, whenever to ask further clarification and information.

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Supervisor: Dr. Astrid Schwarz*

Signature of participant

Date, Place

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of researcher

Date, Place

Abstract

This Master's thesis research investigates how and if sharing authority is happening through a participatory exhibit, specifically by critically analyzing the *Community Altar (CA)* exhibit at Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG) from 2018. This case was selected partly due to the proliferation of *Día de los Muertos* exhibits and related celebrations occurring in museums steadily since the 1970s, particularly in a United States context (Cadaval, 1985; Marchi, 2009). The context of working with this intangible cultural heritage practice brings up interesting questions in light of intensifying discussions in museum management surrounding equity and sharing authority. Furthermore, methods for examining how to share authority—particularly through participatory exhibit design with local communities and cultural heritage—remain lightly explored from theoretical perspectives. Through a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014), this research assesses results from exhibit planning documents and in-person interviews with *CA* participants and DBG staff members. White's (1996) theory of participation is applied in this critical analysis to assess the participatory process and relational forms of power between DBG museum staff and *CA* exhibit participants. Ultimately, this research suggests that in order to initiate sharing authority between *CA* exhibit participants and DBG, empowerment through “transformative participation” needs to occur (White, 1996). The planning structure of the *CA* exhibit should empower involved community members and DBG staff to co-produce exhibit elements in a co-creative way. A discussion around what empowerment means is offered in the end of the study, including that DBG staff can further support *Community Altars* participants in utilizing lived experience(s) as curatorial authority.

Keywords: Museums, participation, participatory exhibit design, sharing authority, communities, community engagement, cultural heritage