

## **Decolonising the contact zone; examining engagement theory in practice.**

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Community engagement in the 'contact zone' of the museum has become a popular activity for museums wishing to democratise and pluralise their displays. Community engagement and collaboration is presented as a way to empower communities to speak for themselves with the authority of museum backing. There is a naturalized assumption that engagement is good for both the museum and community. However, the term engagement has been applied to such a diversity of interactions that it can conceal more than it reveals. Engagement can be empowering and a force for change, but it can also be tokenistic and a means to maintain the status quo.

Drawing on original research from four Albertan museums and heritage sites that engaged with indigenous Blackfoot communities, this paper will discuss the challenges engagement creates for communities and museums. I believe people have a right to speak for themselves and not be spoken for, and strongly support community engagement. However I wish to challenge the naturalised assumptions that all community engagement is empowering. The assumption that community participants are beneficiaries is not always true, and the label limits their agency within the zone of engagement. Community participants are expected to contribute knowledge, time, energy and expertise often for very little in return. Participants become accountable for the representation of their community in museums regardless of their actual power to control the process. As such, they can be placed in difficult situations if the exhibits they co-create are not well received.

I argue that Blackfoot participants are not naive, but participate strategically, conscious of the limitations of the process and equally aware the importance of representation. I propose that museums need to be more transparent about how they share power and seek ways to make engagement more of an equal exchange. I argue that the 'contact zone' needs to be decolonised before it can empower colonised people, and this means interrogating of the pillars of traditional museology (collecting and exhibiting) and allowing innovation, change, and indigenisation of cultural heritage management. This may mean changing what it means to be a museum, or creating new forms and forums of cultural keeping and exchange.