

Extending Convergence and Divergence in Cultural Memory Institutions: The Old Slave Lodge in the New South Africa

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Abstract: *This paper discusses collaborative knowledge creation by means of a digital cultural heritage project. Using the concepts of production and consumption, the paper proposes their usefulness to extend convergence and divergence in cultural memory institutions.*

Keywords: *Production, Consumption, Knowledge creation, Cultural memory institutions, South Africa*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with collaborative knowledge creation using digital tools and documents. For my purposes, 'extending convergence' is about improving cross-sectoral (libraries, archives, museums) collaboration and cross-disciplinary knowledge creation. In brief, it deals with *production* in cultural memory institutions. And 'extending divergence' is about expanding the uses and users of cultural heritage in the new South Africa. In other words, it is about *consumption* in cultural memory institutions. I will demonstrate these processes using the digital cultural heritage project *From Diaspora to Diorama: the Old Slave Lodge in Cape Town*, which focuses on the neglected memory and heritage of slavery in South Africa.

II. ARGUMENT

A. Professional constraints

Digitization is not universally accepted by librarians, archivists, museum workers, and scholars in South Africa. There is a view held by some that digitization of documents is a wonderful aid to retrieval, but that it is not a preservation medium (except in so far as it reduces the handling of printed records). This view emphasizes the need to balance the requirements for access to information with the need for appropriate preservation techniques to prevent future gaps in knowledge (Forde 2006: 180). The 'I want it all and I want now' 24/7 demands of a virtual access generation of users put pressure on fragile records, and compromises the obligation to preserve access for future generations.

Also, electronic records in the hands of technical people can be destroyed easily. The advantage of paper records over digital records from a preservation point of view is the different ways that they survive 'benign neglect'. Paper-based records placed on a shelf somewhere behind a locked door will still be there fifty years later. But digital records, if not migrated at least every five years, could be in danger of becoming irretrievable (Coates, 2011).

Peter Coates, a former deputy-national librarian and archivist in South Africa, believes that 'IT practitioners and data preservationists are irreconcilable breeds' (Coates, 2011). He argues that the digital records of today including the 'native digital' records compiled by government departments will almost without exception be purged as a result of negligence, misguidance, or willfulness, and not be migrated to whatever succeeds the personal computer.

He gives an example of a prolific scholar-librarian and former colleague who honourably left all his research behind as library property when he retired. When he later contacted the library for copies of these writings for personal use the IT manager said he needed to reassign that computer to someone else, and so he purged the hard drive. It was only because the retired colleague had also made paper copies of his articles and projects that he was able to retrieve them.

The preservation of digital and printed records, according to Coates, is at greatest risk when they just begin to obsolesce and are not yet demonstrably 'old' or 'valuable' – like last week's or last month's emails or the previous version of a database or web site which get obliterated or simply disappear. On the other hand, there is the débris of Web sites which have been abandoned in cyberspace without being refreshed since they were created a decade or two ago (Coates, 2011).

B. Political constraints

This kind of debate may however be irrelevant in cases when digitization can actually help memory institutions and scholars in collaborative knowledge creation to heal a nation. This, I believe, is the case in South Africa today. Remembering apartheid and the liberation struggle understandably grabbed resources and headlines in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, obscuring a longer history of oppression in South Africa.

After 1994, remembering its slavery past became a more significant element of heritage in the Western Cape region of South Africa (Worden 2009: 24). Slave heritage had been played down during the anti-apartheid period in order to stress the wider common struggle for liberation. However, movements in the new South Africa lobbying for access to social resources based on slave ancestry were viewed as divisive, and not compatible with the nation-building project of the ANC government.

The official attitude to the Unesco 'Slave Route' project in 1997, which would have promoted South Africa's slave past in museums, archives, education, and

research was therefore ambiguous and unenthusiastic (Worden 2009: 28). This attitude persists today. More worrying was that campaigners in popular movements viewed academic research on slavery with skepticism, arguing that popular memory is as valid as scientific research (Worden 2009: 38).

C. Diaspora to Diorama

Attempting to overcome these digitization and political constraints, a digital cultural heritage project *From Diaspora to Diorama: the Old Slave Lodge in Cape Town* (Shell, 2011), focuses on the neglected memory and heritage of slavery in South Africa and on the building that is a cultural history museum today. It started as a Unesco-sponsored feasibility study on how to memorialize Cape slavery. The third edition contains over 12 000 pages of unearthed eye-witness accounts and secondary material such as sketches, maps, videos, and research articles on this building and its occupants.

There are also appendices and indexes of 6 000 entries of slaves, slave voyages, political exiles, lodge censuses, slave lodge deaths and manumissions, and cargo lists.

It is, in brief, the most extensive single work on any one building and one community in South Africa. It is navigable, making it very easy to move around the thousands of pages, images, and sounds.

D. Extending convergence (production)

There are more than thirty collaborators working on this project, and they include:

- Scholars: slave historians, maritime historians, historical archaeologists, literary and language scholars, genealogists, and statisticians;
- Professionals: active and retired librarians, archivists, museologists, architects, publishers, translators, designers, consultants, jurists, and artists; and
- Public: free-lance and independent writers, community workers, and pastors.

E. Extending divergence (consumption)

The uses and users, both actual and envisaged, include the following:

Uses:

- To prepare the way to make the Slave lodge a world heritage site;
- To create a virtual lodge since the Iziko Museum in South Africa does not seem keen on progress; and
- To enable the descendants of the slave system an affordable means to examine basic documents without having to go to a library or the archives.

Users:

- Learners who can write essays and biographical essays from primary sources and indexes;
- Family historians; and
- Librarians who can load the system onto their computers.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The concepts of production and consumption are useful to understand convergence and divergence in collaborative knowledge creation using digital tools and documents.

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