Building a Digital Platform for Community Museums

Introduction

The Legacies of Enslavement project in collaboration with the Elim and Pniël museums of South Africa, our community partners, aims to help small museums which showcase the heritage of South African mission stations display their legacies of enslavement to wider audiences and through more accessible means. The museums we collaborated with had little online presence or digital media created that could help bring their work to light. We approached this project as a community-based research project because we wanted to prioritize community partnership throughout the process and give a voice to curators and communities that are often overshadowed by larger museums that receive more funding.

The principles of community-based research drove this project as we worked against the usual views on accessibility, ownership, value, accountability, and authorship. We wanted to forefront the history and voice of the local communities in Elim and Pniël rather than create research for the benefit of academic institutions. Our project aimed to redress the lack of recognition these communities get in South Africa despite their rich histories influencing many aspects of life today. We created StoryMaps as online tools that include a history of the towns as mission stations, insight into the community now, a gallery showcasing the museums’ contents, and samples from interviews we conducted with the curators. This project sought to enrich a
preceding larger effort, the Museum of South African Museums, which is a tool that includes access points and information on museums all across South Africa. We hope this StoryMap platform will continue to expand and can be used by other community museums in South Africa and beyond.

**Research Questions**

Our research questions evolved as follows:

- In what ways do museums curate South African pasts, especially identities, that are part of widespread change since 1990?
- What are the most effective ways of working with community partners to create a meaningful representation of South African history through online educational tools?
- How can museums best curate the stories of their surrounding communities?
- What are the heritage professionals seeking to achieve in working with us, and how can our efforts promote their aims?

**Literature Review**

**Introduction**

This project aims to help our community partners who are small, South African museums that display legacies of enslavement but often do not have enough resources to promote their work and history. These museums have little online presence and our project aims to help bring the work of the museums and their curators to light. These museums are important to us because they show an important history that other large museums often overshadow, and our work hopes to partner with these one-man show museums to help them access more of these resources. Our
working research question is: How can we work with community partners to create a representation of South African history that reflects the racial formation of the landscape? I begin addressing this question in this review by analyzing a combination of sources that discuss South African history and how it has shaped the current landscape, sources that discuss museums which display the legacies of enslavement and apartheid in the country, and also other online sources already created to show the artifacts and work in these museums. Many of these sources were suggested by my faculty advisor, Grant Parker, and relate to the content and methodology of our project.

Sources

To first analyze and understand the current South African landscape, we must analyze the history that has shaped it. The first important guide for this project is *The Making of Modern South Africa* by Nigel Worden. This source provides a comprehensive introduction to key historical events and systems of South Africa, it is a good introduction to help me develop a crucial foundation of the history of the community and setting we are working with. This source addresses many different aspects of South African history including its colonial legacies and the conquest of the land by European powers that created a capitalist nation entrenched with settler interests. The book also analyzes how racial discrimination became so deeply entrenched in South African society which is an integral part of the museums’ missions as they work to reflect this landscape of discrimination. This book also offers unique insight into how South Africa’s white supremacy developed into systemic and legalized discrimination which is interesting to contrast as we attempt to work outside of the systems and with people instead in our project.
Following this analysis of South African history, Ndhlovu and Rassool’s paper titled “Rethinking the national and the museum at Iziko Museums of South Africa” is another relevant source for our project which discusses the history and positionality of the Iziko Museums of South Africa navigating the creation of the new nation out of its old, colonial history. This paper is useful in its examination of how the museums plan to reconcile with this issue of creating a non-racial notion while also addressing the racial legacies and challenges. The paper argues that although the Iziko museums are serving institutions of the state, they can continue to foster debates and questions regarding the “culture of the nation, art and citizenship, as well as the history of slavery and the meaning of freedom.” These points can help us with our research when creating online systems that the people and the curators of the museums can then use to promote their works rather than the national systems.

Another source that can help us help the museums create a more organized and accessible access to history is Tamara Meents’ work on “Deconstructing Museums and Memorials in Pre- and Post-Apartheid South Africa.” This work combines both elements of our project which include how museums and memorials within South African society commemorate events but also how they do so while embodying postmodern or modern thought. It includes introductions with general information on commemoration in South Africa as well as a study that analyzes museums that “attempt a closure of the past” and also museums that “allow for differing interpretations of the past.” This source is extremely useful because it allows us to see how other museums in the area are operating and what our community partners can take away from them. The source also combines history and modern thought in a way that we are also hoping to do by memorializing history on online platforms.
To understand the significant role of museums in preserving historical aspects and the power of movements, I want to look at Patricia Davidson’s work on “Museums and the reshaping of memory.” Her work comments on the importance of museums in South Africa in “mediating the past, present, and future.” In a project like ours that works to combine history with more modern forms of representation, her work is relevant in identifying how museums in South Africa are rethinking the history of the country they are in and how it is reflected in their exhibitions. Her work also discusses that while museums may be agents of official memory, “individuals and groups continually intervene to contest and reshape orthodox views.” This is a practice that we want to take when working with our partners in order to make the community-based research a two way street that prioritizes their input.

A researcher that specializes in the topic of this researcher and whose work must be included for the full picture is Samuel North. His research explores Cape Town’s remembering and memorialisation of its slave past, another specific paper that closely aligns with our project. I want to focus on North’s work because it recognizes the problematic relationship that Cape Town has with its slave past and assess how this violent history is being “grappled with in contemporary South African society.” His work highlights the unique history that systems of enslavement in South Africa have compared to other places in the world which I think is extremely valuable to understand when shifting our frames from the American history that I usually am exposed to. As his work suggests, I want to incorporate the extent to which the formerly enslaved are remembered in a city with a history of “exploitation and subjugation” but also develop ways that they can be empowered in those places.
To include more contemporary sources that our project could even use for inspiration or to show our partners, I explored an online collection of “Legacies on Display: Slavery in Museums” created by Antislavery Usable Past. This source I think adds a unique perspective for our project because it houses a collection of showcases around the world that are related to slavery and abolition. This source is especially helpful because our project aims to create online sources and educational tools that help small museums show their work to more people. This source shows examples of ways to do that in order to provide interpretation and facilitate discussions on this specific topic. It also includes a range of museums from large national ones, to small local community museums which is exactly what we are hoping to do.

Another source I thought was relevant to help contextualize our research and build a foundation of the history of the people is “South African History Online.” This website includes a variety of sources that relate to society and politics, art and culture, biographies of important figures, as well as archives and timelines. This website is a great source for community-based research because it focuses on creating and centering the South African people when representing their history. It’s useful in this research because it not only provides information that can be used to understand what information the museums are representing but also can be used as a framework for the online tools and websites that we plan on helping the museums create. The website is a not for profit organization that partners with universities as well as community based history projects which my advisor believes could be a great aid for our work.

The last source I read is by Richard Sandell titled “Museums, Society, Inequality,” I felt this source was relevant and important because it discussed the overarching role and potential for museums to alleviate social inequality. The chapters from the book I focused on discussed
museums’ responsibilities and resistance to social inequality around them which I thought was important to apply to how South African museums may combat challenging the historical narratives of enslavement and apartheid. Another important chapter was “Inclusion and the power of representation: South African museums and the cultural politics of social transformation.” This chapter not only discussed the South African experience with heritage transformation, but also how this can help stimulate thought in other countries also addressing their colonial legacies. This idea of how research in one place can help create change in other places as well was very powerful to me and helped show ways of sharing knowledge in a way that’s sustainable over time and space.

Conclusion

The literature available on this subject is often more difficult to find on such a specific topic, however my faculty advisor helped narrow down papers that would be useful and enhance our understanding of the topic. The sources I chose are especially helpful because they address multiple aspects of the story we are working on. I included sources that explore and analyze the history of South Africa, the museums’ roles and responsibilities in addressing the history, as well as online tools that can help us build the educational tools we are also hoping to create. Addressing all these elements can help us move closer to answering our question of how we can work with community partners to create a representation of South African history, but the question cannot be fully answered without our partners’ insights as well.

Methodology

Our methodological approach is mostly qualitative including Zoom meetings with museum curators and research on the history and current South African landscape. The purpose
of our meetings and interviews with the museum curators is to gain a sense of the museum and community’s history and their goals moving forward. We are interested in seeing how the museums came to be in terms of timeline, who the founders are, and what their goals and purposes are in order to better understand their circumstances in today’s context. We can then ask and learn what challenges and opportunities the curators face in their jobs and what role they see us filling in their museum’s mission. Once we have this knowledge, we can then follow with plans to add to their infrastructure and displays as well as other online tools they are interested in having. To record their stories, we plan on using Zoom and Audacity as software to harvest material for podcasts that can then be integrated to the website of the museums(s) and/or used locally. We also plan on using external sources on South African museums like ones shown in the literature review as useful guides on how to approach the museums. After collecting our information we plan on continuing to Audacity for transcription of the content the museums provide and transform podcasts into shorter pieces for easier and wider accessibility on theStoryMap final product. By doing this, we will better understand the role of community museums and how we can help them more in the future while also sharing their stories to more potential visitors and the local community.

We want to have our community partners involved in as much of the details as we can. Especially when curating the podcasts to include on their websites, the community partners are included and heard in all of the content we create and are asked to approve everything. The museums we are working with are small, and in some cases run by one person. Podcasts with short curator comments as we have discussed with the museums they feel are great sources for people to learn more about the museum before visiting, without giving away too much
information that the museums need them to visit in order to see. Audacity is a tool recommended by Stanford IT specialists for similar projects worked on before and we hope that this way we can integrate our content with the museum websites in a smooth way.

**Results**

Our project’s final products were StoryMaps as digital tools to showcase the history of the museum and its curator. Each StoryMap I created followed the same template that can then be used for other community museums or similar projects. Following a consistent theme was also useful because both of our museums were connected historically and could now have a common platform for their work. The template began with a brief introduction to the museum’s founding and their status now. We then had a section that told the museum’s history as a missionary station for former slaves and how it has shaped the community in each town now. My faculty mentor, Grant Parker, also visited each museum this summer since he had developed a relationship with the communities there. These visits were important because we were able to gather more information about the needs of the curators as well as material for our StoryMap. We collected photographs from each museum’s exterior and interior exhibits which we then included in our project as a gallery for any visitor or people interested in the community’s history.

We also wanted to give a voice to each curator by including recordings from interviews we conducted with them via Zoom. Each curator was asked the same questions and their answers were later edited to produce short recordings with their answer to each question. These recordings were then embedded into the StoryMap alongside a photo of the curator to show viewers who they are while also giving them a voice through an authentic platform to share their story. This process was used for both museums and allowed us to adjust each website to the
museum’s needs while also having consistent themes and layouts on StoryMaps. Using a consistent template was useful for me but it was also so that we could replicate it in the future and create a more sustainable project that others could follow as well. This would allow us to also embed these StoryMaps into a larger website using interactive geographic information system mapping to connect different museums and put them all in conversation on one accessible platform.

Discussion

The goal of our project is to bring more attention to how South African history continues to pervade the country’s landscape by focusing on local community museums in former mission station towns. Our project’s digital nature allows museum objects to be more accessible for visitors from all around the world and encourages a better collaborative relationship that emphasizes co-ownership of information since we cannot always be in South Africa with the curators. Throughout the process we emphasized sharing information about the process with the museums because findings should not be kept from those not traditionally in academic spaces and who are subjects of the research (Chicago Beyond). Another important principle of CBR that we are trying to bring more attention to through the work is Decolonial participatory action research. As discussed in the Collins reading, one way of doing this is ensuring the positionality of the researcher is not just to benefit or profit as an outsider (Collins). My mentor, other research leaders, and I all recognize that it is difficult for us to fully understand the history and needs of the museum and the community. To help address this we asked for approval for every step of the research and creation process and guidance along the way.
I think the educational tools we created are useful for our community partners because we are bringing together work that they have already chosen and worked on and promoting it in a collaborative, more accessible and shareable way. The idea of the short podcasts was also a unique way of adding our own work while centering the curator’s stories and experiences in an authentic way rather than polishing it for an academic article or other contexts. Our StoryMaps aim to put this all in dialogue together as well to create cross-museum interactions and uniform guides for everyone to use. Because this work is also online, it is more sustainable and could continue to be updated by the museum curators since we are giving them as much agency to control it themselves as they need. I see this as a way of seeing research as a tool for change rather than as change (Dyrness). Although it does not involve policy, we hope to see it as research for change in the larger South African historical systems and in creating a more equitable guide for sharing the heritage of the people.

While we did have deliverables created by the end of the summer, we could always benefit from more time dedicated to listening to the community’s needs and bettering the project through their feedback. We also had some setbacks due to unforeseen circumstances like power outages at the museums. So, more constant communication throughout the process would improve our timing and progress. However, now that we have a framework for what community museums are looking to improve and how we can support them, it will be much easier to work on smaller changes or replicate this for other similar museums who want to do the same. We hope this platform will serve as a template for other community museums in the future to facilitate further additions for other museums that have little or no government funding. This
way our work could also be used by future researchers or scholars who want to join the project efforts.
Works Cited


