Title: Liberatory v. Decolonized Digital Library Collections

Authors: Brian W. Keith (Associate Dean for Administration and Faculty Affairs, University of Florida, bwkeith@ufl.edu) and Laurie N. Taylor (Senior Director for Library Technology & Digital Strategies, University of Florida, Laurien@ufl.edu)

Introduction

Libraries have been instruments of the political and legal dominance of one culture over others. Alternative or mitigative models to this colonization include: decolonizing, postcolonial, postcustodial, and slow archives. This presentation discusses an alternative model based on the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC), which incorporates tenants of shared governance, mutual aid, generous thinking, community building, polycentrism, collaborative pluralism, and mutual dependency. dLOC is an open access digital library of Caribbean and circum-Caribbean resources, providing access, preservation and discovery as part of a socio-technical community platform. Partner institutions are dLOC's heart, connecting core communities of scholars, teachers, students and other stakeholder groups, and serving diverse populations and under-represented voices, and promoting bridge building, intersectionality, and inclusion. This session examines dLOC's robust governance model, which created a digital library that uplifts diversity, equity, and inclusion as it relates to dLOC's work and for our collective communities in solidarity together. We share dLOC as a model of a *liberatory* digital library. A big component of this presentation is focused on terminology and words – on names and nomenclature. For this, we are inspired by Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance lecture. In it, she talks to us about language: "Sexist language, racist language, theistic language – all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas." As an alternative, Morrison puts forward, "Word-work is sublime… because it is generative; it makes meaning."[1] We seek to generate and make meaning in defining library practices using the term liberatory.

1. About dLOC

The Digital Library of the Caribbean, or dLOC, is an open access digital library of Caribbean and circum-Caribbean resources.[2] It provides access and preservation for materials from archives, libraries, museums, and private collections. In our talk, we present dLOC as a model transnational digital collaborative community serving diverse populations and under-represented voices, and promoting bridge building, intersectionality, and inclusion. As such, we feel it serves as an important case study and clearly aligns with the purpose of the ACRL conference.

This presentation examines dLOC's robust governance model, which follows principles of mutual aid to create a digital library that fosters diversity, equity, and inclusion. Partners support each other and their international community of scholars, students, and other peoples. dLOC surpasses many commercial collections in size and scope. It includes oral histories, newspapers, official documents, ecological and economic data, maps, histories, literature, poetry, musical expressions, videos, and artifacts, with over 3.6 million pages.

A significant resource for teaching, research, and cultural and community life, dLOC developed as a socio-technical—people, policies, communities, technologies—platform,

developing and enhancing communities of practice. In dLOC, partner institutions define shared goals to support joint directed action and procedural justice. This is achieved through inclusive and distributed collection development with:

- Rights retention
- Local collection development decision-making
- Non-exploitative hosting of content
- Decentralized digitization and metadata creation.

The result is a community of practice with increased capacity through collaboration.

This is a case study in the positive disruptive capacity of technology at a time of need and an awareness of the colonization of library collections.

What is dLOC's origin story, and what are we talking about today?

dLOC was born of ACURIL. ACURIL is the Association of Caribbean University, Research, and Institutional Libraries. ACURIL was founded in 1969, amidst fights and wins for independence by Caribbean peoples. Libraries created ACURIL, recognizing that people need access to the people's shared experience and past through media, and that creating, disseminating, and preserving culture and information should be done by the people—not the former colonizers.

ACURIL is important because experts in the Caribbean created ACURIL for their needs. ACURIL identifies the Caribbean as any area washed by the Caribbean Sea, and including the diaspora. For one example, Jamaica has an estimated population of nearly 3 million people. Jamaica's diaspora includes an estimate of over an additional 2 million people.[3] Similarly, Puerto Rico's population within Puerto Rico is estimated to be over 3 million people, with millions more in the diaspora.[4]

In 2004, ACURIL members founded dLOC. Early partners included, Archives Nationale d'Haïti; Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM); National Library of Jamaica; La Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo (FUNGLODE); Universidad de Oriente, Venezuela; University of Puerto Rico; University of the Virgin Islands; Florida International University; University of Central Florida; and University of Florida. Very different institutions whose representatives were drawn to a collective purpose and by the opportunity to contribute.

The then director of the University of the Virgin Islands Libraries, Judith Rogers, led the drive to create dLOC. She was responsible for supporting her students, with campus locations on three islands (St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John) where transport is by commuter or sea plane, or ferry for St. Thomas and St. John.

Judith Rogers and the team within ACURIL recognized that any of our core communities span vast geographic areas, and that the internet, if wielded by community stakeholders for our needs with a platform designed by us, had the potential to better support immediate local needs and important needs for broader communities.

At the same time, partners throughout the region recognized that accessing each other's collections was and would continue to be difficult. We all faced problems with preserving our materials because of our tropical climate. We also all recognized that we needed to work together to identify, share, and preserve materials.

Judith Rogers and the other founding partner representatives recognized that a technological system using the internet had to have and be part of a community, and that we had to develop this so that we could all support each other and grow together.

dLOC was launched because the community recognized the point where technology had evolved to the stage at which it was prevalent, and was predicted to become affordable. Technology could now support our needs, as defined by our communities. It should not be lost that librarians were at the fore of recognizing these opportunities. The technology was at the point of what E. F. Schumacher termed "appropriate technology" where it could support "local production from local resources for local use."[5] Today, we also use the term minimal computing for appropriate technology, to define the minimum required to do the work, with the computing power tied to local needs and actual use, versus driving behavior. As implemented by the dLOC community, the frame also includes what Murray Bookchin termed "liberatory technology" or technology in service to liberation.[6]

2. Colonization

In framing dLOC, we need to consider what we mean by colonialized libraries and library practices, post colonialism, and post-custodial collections and practices.

One short definition of colonialism from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is "control by one power over a dependent area or people."[7] This short definition belies the vast complexity of oppression and abuse inherent with colonialism, which extends to mindsets and worldviews.

Our colleague Margarita Vargas-Betancourt describes the processes of colonialism in archives:

- empires used extensive recordkeeping to control their colonies,
- they used classificatory systems to ensure the hegemony of a small group of European colonists over indigenous, African, and Asian people, and
- the U.S. also became an intellectual hegemonic power in part by collecting ("removing') Latin American & Caribbean cultural heritage.[8]

Implicit in this is the application of disparate power to determine what is known, recorded and preserved about a society.

The dynamics of colonialism apply to the treatment of less powerful groups within one country and examples of heritage and information colonialism are prevalent. This aligns with how the 2016 National Diversity in Libraries Conference keynote speaker, Lakota Harden, describes the destructive relationship between native peoples and the cultural heritage institutions in the US.[9] The power inequities have allowed, even well intended, museums and libraries to disrupt these people's knowledge of and access to the cultural heritage.

Libraries and museums were allies in the political and legal dominance of one culture over others. In recognition of this legacy, many in libraries have sought to decolonize collections. In *Pulling Together: A guide for Indigenization of post-secondary institutions*, the authors describe decolonization as

"the process of deconstructing colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches. On the one hand, decolonization involves dismantling structures that perpetuate the status quo and addressing unbalanced power dynamics. On the other hand, decolonization involves valuing and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge and approaches and weeding out settler biases or assumptions that have impacted Indigenous ways of being."[10]

Adeline Koh explains that, "A postcolonial archive is one that examines and questions the impact and creation of imperialist ideology within the structure of the archive itself. It works toward assembling a collection of artifacts that have previously been unrepresented."[11]

Collection development represents control over materials or resources from people, and the organization of those materials according to the controlling entities' awareness, processes, goals and biases. This is a form of colonialism in libraries and other cultural heritage institutions. In recognition, the Society of American Archivists has added a definition for the "postcustodial theory of archives" to the *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology,* which is:

> "The idea that archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but that they will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators. […] The postcustodial theory shifts the role of the archivists from a custodian of inactive records in a centralized repository to the role of a manager of records that are distributed in the offices where the records are created and used."[12]

3. Inclusive and intersectional practices

In creating dLOC, the founding partners put forward a model for a digital library that was polycentric and based on principles of shared governance, mutual aid, and generous thinking. In defining dLOC's model, the founders affirmed several principles including shared governance for collective action for the common good. Partners would determine materials to digitize and work together to digitize materials for Open Access and long-term digital preservation, with all materials shared openly online. Partners affirmed that all partners would be the ones to select materials from their own collections, with no top-down mandates. Partners also affirmed that the partners retain rights to their materials, and grant permissions for the sharing of these materials for access and preservation.

Further, partners emphasized that digitization and digital library work would be part of a larger mission for building the community and developing capacity for libraries, archives, museums, scholarly work, teaching, and other needs, with shared governance to ensure equity alongside engagement on immediate and long-term goals. In establishing this model, partners effectively created dLOC as a polycentric system based on mutual aid and generous thinking.

As described by Elinor Ostrom and Charlotte Hess, "polycentric" refers to systems and processes designed so that "there will be decentralized, alternative areas of authority and rule and decision making."[13] As explained by Margaret Heffernan:

> "Ostrom's work proved to her that what works best is collaborative pluralism: lots of different solutions, applied and devised locally by those with an immediate and personal investment. Left to their own devices, individuals can create solutions together that are superior to those imposed by external authorities or managing agents. […] Ostrom called this opportunity 'polycentrism,' by which she meant that the hard problem of managing limited resources creatively was best organized from the ground up in ways that fitted with, and articulated, social norms." [14]

Heffernan explains Ostrom's articulation of "the absolute requirement of trust, the sharing of resources and denial of dominance […] we thrive when we acknowledge our mutual dependency."[15] Ostrom's articulation of polycentric with the acknowledgement of mutual dependency connects with the concept of mutual aid, and dLOC.

Writing in part about digital libraries, Bethany Nowviskie explains mutual aid as "based on collaborative principles for social and material support."[16] In viewing societal-scale needs, Peter Kropotkin defined mutual aid as the fundamental factor in evolution.[17] Where Darwin's writing emphasized competition and advantage, Kropotkin counters that collaboration and aid— aid without hierarchy and in solidarity, in recognition that what helps one helps all—is how species survive and evolve. For humanity specifically, Kroptkin rightly argues that the basis for

society is human solidarity which derives from: "mutual aid; of the close dependency of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own."[18] Writing of the role of academic institutions in serving the public good, Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues that we must embrace generous thinking,[19] which follows from mutual aid where aiding another is to each individual and our collective benefit. Similarly, Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman explain mutual aid and generous practices in their articulation of "shine theory" which "is a practice of mutual investment in each other" which they summarize as "I don't shine if you don't shine."[20]

Mutual aid, generous thinking, and polycentrism are all necessary for recognizing and supporting needs related to inclusivity and intersectionality by seeking to connect to the specificity of the local and individual as they connect to greater wholes for us and our work for a better world collectively. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, in coining the term intersectionality, brought attention to the multiple systems of power and oppression.[21] Inclusive and intersectional practices are necessary to confront and counter settler colonialism, which enacts violent assimilation and destruction that seeks to erase and reduce people.

Intersectionality, inclusivity, polycentrism, mutual aid, generous thinking: all of these inform how we recognize ways of working and viewing the world that are counter to colonialism which is predicated on competition, control, and oppression. These concepts are at the center of the model we are presenting today and critical to inclusive, equitable and diverse collections fostering the greatest awareness.

4. Liberatory v. Decolonized Digital Libraries

We love being part of and sharing dLOC. Indeed, thanks to dLOC, we have an expanded vision and understanding of what and how libraries can be. In this presentation we have shared a variety of relevant terms and now want to focus on the term liberatory. We feel concepts are more relatable and if named. Decolonizing – many of us know what this means in terms of collections. Our presentation title positions "liberatory" in contrast to "decolonized" because dLOC offers a model for library practices that are not predicated on colonialism and so are also not based on a process of decolonizing. However, to be clear, dLOC partners do have colonial collections, are involved in decolonizing work, and there are not clear or separate lines where colonialism is not present—it is. We are using the term liberatory because we feel there needs to be a term for fair, equitable and inclusive models like dLOC. We think dLOC is in fact liberatory - disassociating it somewhat from colonialism focuses on something markedly different and beyond historic models. dLOC is a different model and we want to tell what we feel is an important story with the most appropriate, generous, and generative, functional, and descriptive language possible.

We have presented versions of this talk over the past several years, and asked for help to make real by naming what dLOC is. For this call, we originally responded using the term mutuality. We had also considered Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson's articulation of slow archives.[22] They explain the concept of slow archives:

> "It is in the slowing down that we can start to see modes of ethical archives that reflect *accountability, engagement, relationality, and reciprocity* that work alongside, within, and in opposition to settler structures and archival logics of displacement and dispossession. These are the principles underpinning our call for *slow archives*— frameworks that untangle and reposition archival practices as part of Indigenous temporalities and territorialities disrupting, disordering, and refuting standard archival

practices and techniques. Slow archives call attention to the multiplicity and plurality of knowledge, storying, placedness, and relational events without reducing practices or systems to binary logics of control or submission, past or present, authority or victim. At the same time, an ethical view of slow archives calls attention to ongoing relations of respect and reciprocity—in practice and in the processes that allow for alternative distributions of control."

We recognize slow archives as a critically important and useful term, and we see the call to attention for "ongoing relations of respect and reciprocity" as core to both slow archives and to mutuality. We considered calling dLOC a slow archive, yet noted concerns on identification, with partners who do and do not identify as archives (or as libraries, museums, academic institutions, or publishers, with each having different shape to their identities). We also considered calling dLOC an intermutual digital library, with intermutual emphasizing connectedness, indivisibility, and fecund mutual support. We had come to mutuality, as our way of explaining what dLOC is—as a noun that relates a way of being that we enact together. We have been working through language and explanation on this since 2016. As we discussed the model with community members from dLOC in a session in February 2021, our colleagues suggested that we look to community archives for the best-fit terminology.

As we moved in this direction, we reviewed articles including T-Kay Sangwand on contributive justice,[23] Michelle Caswell on liberatory archival imaginaries,[24] and Jarret Drake on liberatory archives.[25] In reading these, we found parallels and clear articulations of the model we have sought to describe, framed as liberatory, and we delved further to refine our understanding. Contributive justice may be less familiar than the concept of distributive justice. Contributive justice emphasizes that justice is achieved not when benefits are received, but rather when there is both the duty and opportunity for stakeholders to contribute effort and decision-making.[26] This is at the heart of what we have been describing with dLOC, and along with distributive justice, one of the reasons why we felt it was an important case study for digital archives. Caswell describes community archives this way:

"Although notions of identity and community are constantly shifting, community archives are independent grassroots efforts for communities to document their own commonalities and differences outside the boundaries of formal mainstream institutions."

She notes that such community archives have often been formed around racial and ethnic identities."[27] Community archives as a model certainly relates to dLOC. The scale may be different but a core principle for community archives is central to dLOC.

Rapheal Randal describes "Liberatory Education" as, "rooted in self-determination, derived from an understanding that all human beings have the right to participate in shaping a world that is constantly shaping them. Collective participation in governance amongst a community or people with shared interests is a mainstay of this concept."[28] This captures the purpose for the creation of the creation of this digital library and the unique and profoundly important contributively just model ACURIL established for achieving (and sustaining) this outcome and a community.

Caswell has also written on liberatory archival imaginaries. She asserts: "In order to construct liberatory archival imaginaries, we must use traces of the past not just to recuperate marginalized histories, but to build more just and more equitable futures. Liberatory archival imaginaries place the work of uncovering what happened in the past in service of building socially just futures."[29] Now, when we share about dLOC, we will explain dLOC as a liberatory digital library.

Conclusion

We want to thank everyone who has helped us process through all of this, including those researchers sharing new ways to define and explain the world, sharing new ways for cultural heritage institutions to exist and contribute. For more than a decade, we (Brian Keith and Laurie Taylor) have collaborated with countless others to understand, define, and explain dLOC's model.[30] We have shared this process through publications, presentations, and conversations. We thank all who have been directly involved with dLOC's community and with our broader communities, who have moved us to our current level of understanding. We thank all who have taken part in conversations (in-person, phone, and electronically mediated), expanding our shared understanding and improving our ability to depict and convey the meaning and significance of a liberatory digital library as a way of being for libraries in our world. We also thank each other, for our direct collaboration, as our practices together enact the spirit of liberation, seeking to uplift each other, bring out the best in ourselves and the other, and to do so in a generous and generative manner that supports our communities and community practices in moving towards compassion and justice. We invite feedback and conversation on our use of the term liberatory, our ways of working, and how we can all best collectively strive for a better world through our actions and the worldviews we enable and embrace.

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[30] Our formal presentations on dLOC's model began with a poster at the 2016 National Diversity in Libraries Conference (UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, Aug. 12, 2016). Our work has continued to build with presentations at ACURIL, IDEAL, CNI, and other conferences, including with our work on the ARL Position Description Bank (ARL PD Bank) informed by dLOC's technical model, and many other related and connected projects.