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Mirage of us: A reflection on the role of the Web in widening access to references on Southern African arts, culture and heritage

Mirage of us: A reflection on the role of the Web

This article outlines the broad aims of the Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage (ESAACH) Project then goes on to consider the ESAACH Website as a networked resource that speaks to the project's vision of accessibility and participation. The wiki architecture is highly accessible to users and contributors alike. In addition to its robust structure as a reference work, a wiki encyclopaedia facilitates networked social collaboration uniquely suited to the co-operative principles of the project. Subject area specialists will exercise editorial control over the content of the wiki, and work with the Editor-in-Chief, Associate Editors and peer reviewers to assess contributions, recommend editorial corrections, and select articles, essays and entries for inclusion in the printed volumes of the encyclopaedia. The paper surveys existing Web-based reference sources on Southern African literature, arts and culture; provides an account of the evolution of the Verbal Arts section of the ESAACH wiki; and discusses the prototype ESAACH wiki. **Key words:** encyclopaedia, hypertext, online repository, South African literary history.

Between you, Shozi, and the promised land
wavers the mirage of us.
From: Douglas Livingstone, "The Waste Land
at Station 14".

Introduction

The Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage (ESAACH), is the most recent and ambitious attempt to develop a comprehensive reference to Southern African literary and creative output. While remaining true to the classical notion of an encyclopaedia as a universal knowledge source, the 21st Century ESAACH is able to sidestep the shortcomings of a grand narrative or canonical orthodoxy, by weaving a new postmodern web of narratives that are rich, participatory and suited to the reclamation scholarship so necessary in a recently liberated society like South Africa. ESAACH is both traditional encyclopaedia, and hypertext web. Published volumes will emerge from the rich collaborative writing space provided within a wiki database, and will encompass verbal, performing and visual arts as well as cultural heritage.

In this article we reflect on the role played by the Web in widening access to references on South African arts, culture and heritage and present a rationale and an

account of the early stages of ESAACH, as a new Web-based reference work. ESAACH is the brainchild of the celebrated South African literary figure, Mbulelo Mzamane, and is a response to the “serious dearth of reference material in cultural studies” lamented by South Africa’s previous Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan (2009). There was a major need, he suggested, for work of “encyclopaedic scope” in arts, culture and heritage to match the success of reclamation scholarship in South African history, which had begun to produce abundant reference material for learners and educators.

By tapping into the collaborative spirit of social networking, the ESAACH wiki aims to build a communal knowledge base with a value that will be far more than the sum of its parts.

ESAACH as mirage

The nature of the online medium of which the encyclopaedia is an integral part, is best evoked through analogy or metaphor. We already have “the Net” and “the Web”, but ubiquitous usage has robbed them of their original evocativeness. More recently, “Web 2.0” craftily yoked the now clichéd spider’s web image (the Web) to the anonymous mechanical numbering used to identify software upgrades (two point zero) and by so doing, cut straight to the startlingly significant transformation that had taken place in the medium – a metamorphosis ironically underscored by the use of the apparently sterile upgrade decimal (point zero). Another beguiling image of the interconnectedness of hypertext – the medium of the Web – is Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome, or the dispersed root system typical of grasses. “Many people have a tree growing in their heads, but the brain itself is much more a grass than a tree.” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 17). Rhizomic structures satisfy the seemingly contradictory elements in hypertext that on the one hand point towards chaotic randomness but on the other hand, to nodes of significance and meaning.

A metaphor for ESAACH beckoned from Douglas Livingstone’s (pre-Web) poem “The Waste Land at Station 14”. While exploring the kinship between himself – a white poet, and the black protest poet Shoji Bhengu – Livingstone contrasts the physical and creative strictures of an apartheid existence – “a Karoo of the mind” – with a mythical strand “Under Africa’s moon” where both of them could draw on their roots in Africa to produce a transcendent verse with metaphysical reach:

[...] such poems we have not yet begun
to sing: the love which Africa has fanned,
to hymn the earth perhaps, something as grand.

By using the image “the mirage of us”, Livingstone expresses a sense of loss at the personae imposed on them by apartheid – especially Shoji’s self-imposed suppression

of his lyrical side – that denies both artists access to the “promised land” idyll. But the poet’s regret is tempered by an ambivalence hinted at by the delicacy of the wavering illusion which fuels his later celebration at being able to tap into a shared African collective unconscious: “we could wake those old ones from their sleep”.

It is in this latter sense that the “mirage of us” suggests an image for ESAACH – as an endeavour to conjure the mirage of poets, novelists, playwrights, musicians, artists and shamans on the Internet, and by so doing, assist us towards the promised land of a shared and representative cultural reference source.

By the inclusion of even the briefest reference to an artist forgotten or suppressed by prejudice or neglect, the encyclopaedia project holds the promise of catching the attention of the casual reader, or the earnest researcher, or a young artist looking for inspiration. The mirage image is apt here because it suggests an apparently flimsy, virtual construct – an illusion floating in air – the entries in the ESAACH wiki qualify here – but the illusion is also *of us*. Like Livingstone’s mirage, ESAACH could be a collective voice to underpin and nourish the creative future:

[...] we could wake those old ones from their sleep
with such poems we have not yet begun
to sing [...]

Survey of existing web-based reference sources

As an online phenomenon, ESAACH owes its existence to earlier virtual reference source experiments, many of which have now completely vanished, like evanescent mirages. The early 1990s were significant for South Africans not only because they were experiencing the start of a new democracy; these were also the years of the first wide-scale rollout of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee 1990). It was the happy coincidence of the development of the powerful archiving and access capacity of the Internet and the need for a new, inclusive literary reference work for South African literature that inspired the development of a hypertext database of South African Literature (the SALIT Database – discussed more fully below) by the present author and Johan van Wyk (Van Wyk 2000: 63). Propelled by similar forces, websites and archiving projects featuring South African literature and culture increased in number and range over the years covered by the brief survey presented here.

While there are major established online databases that give access to references and full text critical articles relating to African and South African literature (usually grouped within specific journal or periodical titles), and while bookseller sites like Kalahari.com and Amazon.com may be trawled for primary works still in print, none of these provides the research springboard typical of entries to be found in a subject directory, or a companion to literature or an encyclopaedia. Web-based reference sources designed to assist new researchers or guide learners are similar in some ways

to what librarians call pathfinders, “[...] a checklist of references to those basic sources representing the variety of forms in which information on a specific topic can be found.” (Canfield in Vileno 2007: 435). Whereas library pathfinders usually restrict themselves to the collection of a particular library, a web-based version can point to a variety of sources across the Internet, and ideally include annotations that often amount to the equivalent of a typical encyclopaedia entry: for an author this would include birth and death dates, a brief biographical account and a synopsis of the writer’s works, including links to other sources.

Although discussion and academic communication has flourished along with the rest of the Web, and the sharing of resources and information (legitimately or otherwise) has never been more ubiquitous, systematic and authoritative directories and listings of creative and artistic work, especially in the South African context, are still sorely lacking.

Encyclopaedias have played the role of providing a launch pad or departure point for further research or learning since Mesopotamian times. A number of tablets with “lists of objects and names linked by theme, similarity, word root or assonance” were discovered amongst the remnants of the library of Assurbanipal (668 to 627 BCE) (Blom 2004: xvi). More recently, print editions of South African and African literary companions have continued to provide literary and cultural references, but with limited distribution, especially for the youth audience and their educators, who would most benefit from having web-based navigation resources at their fingertips.

Further early evidence of the fluid distinction between listings, pathfinders or encyclopaedias that an online compendium like a wiki can both embrace and exploit may be found in the Pinakes, the first catalogue of the library at Alexandria, and a significant development in the history of scholarship. Attributed to Callimachus of Cyrenae (Bragg 2009) the Pinakes is not a mere listing of works, but a meta-text that by organising and commenting on texts represents the beginning of critical scholarship.

The ESAACH wiki, and its predecessor the SALIT Database are predicated on transgressing the conventional distinctions applied to reference works: “[...] the conventional divisions between bibliograph[ies], books themselves and learning environments are dissolving [...] during the course of the development of the SALIT Web, the electronic medium has transformed our original intentions by crossing the boundaries of reference work, library and classroom (Stewart 2000: 7). Encyclopaedic works have never generally displayed an absolute division between categories of ideas, bibliographies, anthologies and encyclopaedias, and have often been amalgams of these elements, seldom limiting themselves to dispassionate listings, but lapsing into extended references following their authors’ or editors’ preferences, and sometimes including whole works, diagrams and procedures. The ESAACH wiki is no exception.

Amongst the most influential shapers of modern encyclopaedias have been Francis Bacon, and a little later, Diderot and D’Alembert. In the early seventeenth century,

Francis Bacon broke with the medieval practice of mapping knowledge according to a God-centred hierarchy of heaven and earth in his work the *Great Instauration*, using a tree of knowledge model that included “Chemistry, Vision and Visual Arts, Hearing, Sound and Music, Smell and Smells, Taste and Tastes, Touch and the Objects of Touch (including Physical Love), Pleasure and Pain ...” (Blom 2004: xx). But towering above all subsequent endeavours is Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* (1751–2), a defining accomplishment of the Enlightenment that in one stroke relegated religion to a sub-branch of knowledge, elevated empirical enquiry and brought the hitherto secret knowledge and skills of the Guilds into the public domain.

In his *Discours Préliminaire*, introducing the first volume of the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot set out the systematic division of human knowledge into a taxonomy that in turn translated into the thousands of entries that make up the twenty-eight volumes.

Diderot proposed his classification of the *Encyclopédie* as a “Map of the system of human knowledge”, where understanding was seen to be have three major divisions: Memory (History), Reason (Philosophy) and Imagination (Poetry). While History was sub-divided into Sacred and Natural History, Philosophy was sub-divided into the Science of Nature and the Science of Man. Most pertinent to the design of an Encyclopaedia of Arts, Culture and Heritage is Diderot’s classification of the Imagination (Poetry) into Sacred and Profane, with further sub-divisions into Narrative, Dramatic and Parable.

But even though Diderot’s new taxonomy was daringly subversive for its time, challenging the primacy of a God-centred universe by, for example, placing Black Magic in the same branch of knowledge as Theology, it was still a taxonomy. As an Enlightenment construct, the *Encyclopédie* merely replaces one hierarchical order with another, as Diderot’s branching tree-diagram of the “Map of the system of human knowledge” so clearly attests.

By the end of the twentieth century, when notions of an immutable taxonomy of human knowledge had long been in contention, the World Wide Web ushered in a new environment for knowledge representation that could accommodate instability and flux more comfortably. The flexible hyperlinking of documents on the Web allows multiple associations to exist between various nodes of information, and thus provides a perfect space for contending classifications to co-exist. Fortuitously, the 1990s also turned out to be the ideal time to challenge entrenched apartheid narratives of South Africa’s literary heritage.

Distrust of master narratives and inflexible taxonomies, is well illustrated by literary theorist, Michel Foucault. According to his own account, Foucault laughed out loud on reading Borges’ account of a “certain Chinese Encyclopaedia” (the *Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*) which presents a taxonomy of animals which shatters (as Foucault puts it) “all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought” (Foucault 1994: xv). It is worth quoting the categories here: “[...] animals are divided

into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." (Foucault 1994: xv).

By parodying the ideal of a comprehensive classification system, Borges opens the way to contingent or relative classifications – shifting sets of constructed associations that closely match the “associative links” that characterise Hypertext. The links between ideas and documents made possible by Berners-Lee’s Web technology are deliberately conjectural, tentative and exploratory – designed to pursue different lines of thought (Berners-Lee 1990). Hypertext accommodates co-existing taxonomies quite happily. Instability is perfectly acceptable here. It comes as no surprise, then, that Borges’ short story “Garden of Forking Paths”, although pre-dating computers, inspired a hypertext programme for exploring multiple-plot fiction-writing in the 1990s (Moulthrop 1991). Storyspace, the hypertext programme used by Moulthrop, was also a key element in the development of Landow’s Victorian Web (see below).

The extent to which the Web, and in particular, the collaborative authoring made possible by wiki technology, can underpin the construction of a new reference work of South African culture, is discussed later.

The history of 1990s online reference sources in South Africa is reminiscent of the turbulent development of the *Encyclopédie*, dogged by near-disastrous setbacks that threatened its continuation and eventual publication. Here follows a short survey of some of the online reference sources that provide (or in some cases, no longer provide) a starting point for those wishing to gain an overview of South African literature and culture.

Landow’s Webs

George Landow’s Postcolonial and Postimperial Web is a useful starting point for a survey such as this, as it represents a cautionary tale for all who undertake the development of extensive online literary reference works. Landow’s web grew out of a very successful experiment in hypertext publishing, the The Victorian Web, aimed at history of literature, or literature survey courses. Originally “The Dickens Web”, it linked texts relating to Dickens himself and specifically to *Great Expectations*. The project provided a context for the literary work, in an attempt to reduce the didactic relationship between lecturer and student and to encourage students to explore the subject. The web provided a flexible learning experience for students by linking the work to its contextual surroundings in historical and biographical data. (Landow and Delany 1991).

Although similar in structure and intent, the Postcolonial and Postimperial Web lacks the critical mass to propel a student into a meaningful engagement with the

field. Constraints such as copyright restrictions and the sheer enormity of the task for a small authoring team of adding and maintaining entries for a comprehensive web-based reference can leave the serious gaps in what on the surface appears to be a rich resource. In the Postcolonial and Postimperial Web, the links lead mainly to bibliographic details and very general historical and literary background. A jarring note was struck from the start in the 1997 version of the Postcolonial Web that referred to the country as the "Union of South Africa" and further exploration revealed below the surface of the overview page, there was information on only a single South African author – Nadine Gordimer – and only one of her works - *July's People*. Other anchors on the "South Africa" page, for example "Bibliography" and "Literary relations", were not currently linked to any information at all. Other nodes contained information gathered from public domain information sites: "Communication" (from the CIA) and "Music" (from Christian music in South Africa). Some of the available African authors were shown as hyperlinks but were not operative (e.g. the Jean Marquand [sic] link). Both webs are still available, but while the Victorian Web has continued to develop and has become an authoritative learning resource, the South African segment of the Postcolonial and Postimperial Web has not expanded significantly in ten years.

The SALIT Database (see below) that has been incorporated into the Verbal Arts section of ESAACH was greatly influenced by Landow's work and by the potential it revealed for using a hypertext web as a learner-centred teaching device.

University of the Free State (UOFS) database

The *Bibliography of Criticism of South African Literature in English* (Richter and Muller 1996) located on a server at the University of the Free State (UOFS) – last updated in 1996 – is a prime example of a lost resource, or casualty of the impermanence of resources in the digital realm. Later that same year, the online Bibliography was used as one of the contributory sources of entries for the SALIT Database (Stewart and Van Wyk 2000). Richter and Muller's *Bibliography* has very specific parameters, limiting its listings only to those authors whose works were written in English (or translated into English by the authors themselves) and for which the editors were able to locate critical material. The database was meticulously compiled, easy to navigate and as comprehensive as the delimitations allowed. In the Introduction, Muller (1996) alludes to the extraordinary demands on both editors to ensure its continuing compilation and maintenance. Unavailable from its original server location at the University of the Free State since 2001, the bibliography is now available once again via the Internet Archive (Wayback Machine).

A representative example drawn from the Bibliography is that for author Es'kia Mphahlele, where the entry for *Chirundu* (1979) contains references to five reviews. Other entries list critical articles and interviews. The editors provide a word count

for the referenced articles and a little more information for interview references. The *Bibliography's* termination date in the late 1990s as a developing resource is attested to by entries like the one for Sindiwe Magona who is represented by only one reference, as her publishing career was beginning just as the *Bibliography's* ended.

South African Literature Online (SALO)

A postgraduate project at the Durban University of Technology during the years 2001 and 2002 resulted in a short-lived prototype that in some ways modelled the wiki now adopted by the ESAACH project. Designed along lines dictated by research into best practice amongst online subject directories of the time, South African Literature Online (SALO) included an interactive submission facility that invited users to add their own items to the subject directory within certain prescribed criteria – principally those that characterise an annotated bibliography – title, a short descriptive sentence about the content and most appropriate target audience for the site, and a hyperlink to the site itself (including a text version of the full URL for user reference should the information be printed in hard copy), a practice endorsed by library pathfinder developers (Vileno 2007: 439). Print-outs including full references catered for user groups (such as South African students) who may not have easy access to their own computers.

SALO categories were chosen by refining a combination of subject headings, the Internet Library sub-headings, the Stanford Library listings for South African literature, and the Yahoo directory – the best example at the time of an online subject directory that owed its design to traditional library science principles – later superseded by the smart algorithm approach perfected by Google. Because the SALO project (Stewart and Rakoma 2001) was conducted only as one component of a Masters project, with a broader general scope, more attention was paid to its design and technical efficacy than to its eventual roll-out, testing, evaluation and re-design that would have established the directory as a viable resource. SALO is also now available online – frozen in its incomplete form – via the Wayback machine.

Other web-based reference sources

Another abandoned vehicle littering the road to a comprehensive South African cultural reference work online, is the former “Author” section of the still vibrant and functioning LitNet portal. LitNet, aimed primarily at Afrikaans language literature includes references to literature in some other South African languages. The KZN Literary Tourism website (now a partner of the ESAACH project) lists authors with a link to the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The manuscript holdings of the Killie Campbell library, the Alan Paton and Struggle Archive, and the National English

Literary Museum (NELM) are variously available through university library online catalogues or subscription databases of South African periodicals.

Evolution of the verbal arts section of the ESAACH wiki

Two unrelated circumstances led to the choice of a wiki as the online basis for ESAACH. Firstly, the present author recognised, while researching the social networking aspects of e-learning that the new collaborative writing format – wikis in particular – held the promise of the possible resuscitation of the South African Literary Database – (SALIT Database) (Stewart and Van Wyk 2000) as an interactive online resource. Secondly, and most significantly, the opportunity arose to integrate the old database into the new Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage (ESAACH) project led by Mbulelo Mzamane. Online accessibility is a central principle of the ESAACH project.

To return to the SALIT Database project: this proto-encyclopaedia was conceived in the mid-1990s as a set of research tools that would resist the legacy of colonialism and its apartheid variant, and begin to address the absence of a unifying narrative of South African literary and cultural output. Accounts of South African literary history were firmly polarised into racial and language silos, and effectively separated within the familiar academic gated communities of departments of African Languages, Afrikaans, and English. However, the promise of release from these confines after the advent of democracy in 1994 coincided with a growing suspicion in postcolonial studies of grand narratives. Johan van Wyk's *Re-Thinking South African Literary History*, (1996) attempted "to create coherence in an ultimately incoherent landscape" (De Kock 2005). The development of the SALIT Database was founded on two equally important premises: that an electronic repository of literary data – a hypertext web of bibliographic entries, full-text articles and audio visuals - was the most suitable medium for the creation of an encyclopaedia in the late twentieth century; and a new South African encyclopaedia of literature had to be inclusive and comprehensive, assuming a structure that deliberately subverted the racial divisions that had hitherto bedevilled local studies. It also had a reclamation role – actively seeking and republishing the banned, the marginalised and the ignored.

De Kock (2005: 8) has commented on the suitability of the hypertext SALIT Database as a medium for a South African literary history: "[...] hypertext as a metaphor for transcultural literary history remains one of the best I have come across. It is certainly a breakthrough. One might argue that the hypertext project, rather than having failed, is simply incomplete; that being incomplete is a constitutive part of its nature." Accepting the paradox of striving for a comprehensive, "finished product" while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of the task, is eased by online collaborative writing technologies (see the "Read-Write" society, below). While the

old SALIT Database was primarily a backward-looking resource – with an archival focus – ESAACH envisages a dynamic collaborative online space, with the website providing a focal point: “Ideally, as the project develops, this website will become an online cultural node providing regular, fresh content about South Africa’s cultural and heritage events, people and publications as well as becoming a valuable resource tool for scholars, researchers and the general public.” (McNulty 2008: 1).

But the overwhelming benefit of the wiki is its powerful organisational functionality along with a user-friendly collaborative writing capacity. Users of the wiki can submit entries, edit existing entries and add images, audio and video content.

The ESAACH Website is a networked resource that speaks to the project’s vision of accessibility and participation. The on-line reference capabilities of a wiki encyclopaedia, and the social networking collaboration that it facilitates, are uniquely suited to the working environment within which the reference infrastructure of the project will be developed. The wiki architecture makes itself accessible to users and contributors alike. It becomes a tool for collaborative writing and content creation that also taps into collective expertise to generate a large and diverse editor base.

Apart from the now ubiquitous Wikipedia, wiki technology is being adopted as a solution in many online reference contexts. In the library sphere, subject directories and pathfinders – requiring highly skilled and labour-intensive development in the print era – are being replaced with online versions: “[...] many librarians are attempting to simplify the pathfinder building process with databases or more recently with wiki technology.” (Vileno 2007: 448). Vileno’s research provides examples the extensive use of wikis in academic libraries, including that of the University of South Carolina which uses a wiki for its whole web site, and all its subject guides. She quotes Farkas (2007), an authority in the field of information retrieval, as advocating the use of wiki technology in libraries: “Wikis are easy to use, do not require any knowledge of HTML and allow all members of a community to add to the web site.” (Vileno 2007: 448).

With its guiding principles of participation and accessibility, ESAACH found a most appropriate technology in the wiki. The process of transforming and transferring the over 6000 SALIT Database author and title entries to the wiki is described elsewhere (Stewart 2009). A selected group of literary academics was invited in late 2008 to explore the Beta test wiki to test the on-line editing features. Although only a limited number of responses had been received at the time of writing (corrections to certain publication dates, for example) these were sufficient to demonstrate the interactive capacity of the site, and contribute to drafting a policy for access levels for the contributors and editors. A further consequence of the invitation to access the Beta wiki was a decision to consider a broader range of possible ways for participants to make contributions in future.

Even with its beta status and with no attempt as yet to alert potential users to its existence, the ESAACH wiki has already started to attract users. Between February and

December 2008, the website had over 800 visits, primarily from South African users, but with a significant number from Germany and the United States. Niall McNulty (2008) reported that amongst the search terms that had led visitors to the site were “South African culture”, “heritage for nation building”, “isiSwati”, “1920s Afrikaans culture”, “19th century South African literature”, and “black protest 1910–1948”.

The ESAACH wiki is designed so that submissions are subject to moderation by a panel of subject specialist editors responsible for the major sub-divisions, and then within themes and specific authors and works within the themes. While it is acknowledged that the wiki will always be in a fluid state of construction, with possible disputes about the reliability and authority of some entries, the editors have adopted Snyder’s (2007: 6) criteria for measuring reliability:

- Accuracy of information provided within articles;
- Comprehensiveness, scope and coverage within articles and in the range of articles;
- Susceptibility to, and exclusion and removal of, false information;
- Susceptibility to editorial and systemic bias;
- Identification of reputable third-party sources as citations.

While superficially, the wiki editorial policy appears a manageable and practicable solution to collaborative authoring, if you scratch the surface, it may seem that ESAACH occupies a precarious niche in a vertiginous Web universe, perched between order and anarchy in the midst of unresolved disputes about authoritative reference sources raging around its older sibling, Wikipedia. The wiki technology which drives Wikipedia and ESAACH, invites all Web users to create and edit encyclopaedia entries. In Wikipedia, each article is linked to a discussion forum where controversial submissions may be challenged. A further link tracks all changes made to the entry, together with a facility for reverting to the original. Confronted with this potentially chaotic arrangement, Binkley (among others) has articulated the question that comes to mind for most users of traditional printed reference sources: “Can such a process produce an authoritative encyclopedia?” (Binkley 2006: 1).

Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia creator and chief editor, uses the defence that by sheer weight of their numbers, users and contributors, who have a vested interest in having accurate information at their fingertips, constantly check and correct instances of bad information, whether these have arisen from incompetence or malice. At the present stage of its development, ESAACH still has only a handful of contributors and only three editors, whereas Wikipedia has a community of 600 to 1000 “devoted people aspiring to professional standards” who perform an editorial function (Wales 2005). ESAACH has the advantage of being able to look to Wikipedia as an extensive testbed to inform its own emerging editorial policy. ESAACH is committed to maximum participation without losing credibility or seriously compromising the reliability of

its information. Like Wikipedia, the aim is to turn disagreements into discussions that lead to improvements in the entries. With its uniquely extensive set of references on South African literature and culture, ESAACH sees itself as a launch pad for further research and enquiry, not a repository for literary and cultural artefacts themselves.

Acutely aware of the disputed nature of the territory, the ESAACH developers have nevertheless had to adopt a paradigm in which the project can operate and grow, founded on the conviction that the encyclopaedia will best thrive in a collaborative, social networking environment. Lessig (2007) has coined the term “Read-Write” society for this type of economy, in which an open sharing and “re-mixing” of information is preferred over traditional closed-copyright publication models. In its present form, ESAACH still restricts participation to a limited few, but ultimately aims to open access for contributors as widely as possible over time.

Conclusion: *terra incognita*

Reclamation scholarship recognises the gaps and omissions created by the suppression of one culture by another and uses the full resources of current critical perspectives, technology and where expedient, the language of the colonial power to restore the richness and nuances of a nation’s cultural heritage.

Uncovering the unmapped territory of much of South Africa’s writing, performance and cultural heritage is like colonial exploration in reverse. Whereas European expansion ultimately inhibited and diminished indigenous cultures through a combination of over-zealous religious conversion, economic exploitation and an Enlightenment prejudice towards non-European science and culture, in the case of this twenty-first century voyage of discovery, the *terra incognita* is to be decolonised – coaxed into revealing its true nature and form, and to supplant the explorers’ preconceptions by restoring an African warp and weft to the patterned fabric of Southern African culture.

Douglas Livingstone’s “The Waste Land at Station 14” alludes to South Africans’ lost cultural landscape:

Under Africa’s moon there dreams a strand
older than old the ancient poets keep.
We both walk it under Africa’s sun.

Just as there is an element of reverse colonial expansion in the ESAACH endeavour, there is also a reconfigured Enlightenment component. ESAACH constitutes an extensive and richly-layered resource for scholars and researchers and it is in this respect that it shares – in a broad sense – the ideals that drove Diderot and D’Alembert in their eighteenth century *Encyclopédie*, and, similarly Berners-Lee and Jimmy Wales with the World Wide Web and Wikipedia, respectively.

Contemplating the enormity of something like an encyclopaedia can be daunting to say the least. Under the leadership of Mbulelo Mzamane, the ESAACH project has identified four major sub-divisions (Verbal Arts, Performing Arts, Visual Arts and Heritage) and targeted the first two for individual volumes. Even this delimitation of the full scope of the encyclopaedia is challenging, given the disputed critical territory of literary history, and the sheer number of the authors and works we seek to reference. South African literary history in particular was appropriated so thoroughly by the grand narratives of apartheid and of western colonialism, that it de-centred the primacy of African cultural heritage and obliterated by design and by neglect its authors and achievements. Reflecting on the scale of the task, Michael Wessels, ESAACH project research co-ordinator, has wryly recalled Franz Kafka's "system of piecemeal construction" (1971: 67) to describe our approach as developers of something so monumental, and patently resistant to perfection or likely completion in a final form. Kafka's narrator reveals that the architects adopted a strategy to deflect despair that the thought of the overall project might engender in the workforce, by giving teams of workers the task of building individual five-hundred metre sections of the Great Wall that eventually met in the centre, so imbuing its constructors with a sense of achievement, which was, in turn, endorsed and celebrated by the authorities and by the public at large. So even though progress on the wall was actually quite patchy and had significant gaps, it nevertheless continued despite the constant threat that "the hopelessness of such hard toil" (Kafka 1971: 69) would dispirit the workers and bring the grand project to a halt. In the "Waste Land at Station 14", Douglas Livingstone gently deprecates metaphysical pretensions in "to hymn the earth perhaps, something as grand". Yet Livingstone convincingly demonstrates through the verse itself the capacity of creative work to conjure images that convey a deep sense of significance, while simultaneously framing the experience in an ironic recognition of its ultimate futility. Cunning project management may well help sustain the work on ESAACH, but the project also has an inspirational element in common with the Great Wall.

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