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Nicola Cloete (2021) Digestible Memories in South Africa's Recent Past: processing the Slave Lodge Museum and the Memorial to the Enslaved, International Journal of Heritage Studies, 27:12, 1230-1244, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2021.1950030

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International Journal of Heritage Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjhs20

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To cite this article: Nicola Cloete (2021) Digestible Memories in South Africa's Recent Past: processing the Slave Lodge Museum and the Memorial to the Enslaved, International Journal of Heritage Studies, 27:12, 1230-1244, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2021.1950030

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2021.1950030

Published online: 08 Jul 2021.

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HERITAGE STUDIES
2021, VOL. 27, NO. 12, 1230–1244
https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2021.1950030

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Digestible Memories in South Africa's Recent Past: processing the Slave Lodge Museum and the Memorial to the Enslaved

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ABSTRACT

Given the recent oppressive histories of apartheid and colonialism, the legacies of slavery in South Africa are often overlooked in thinking about aspects of post-apartheid democracy's discursive formulation of race, nation, and reconciliation. This paper analyses how two examples in Cape Town – the permanent exhibition *Representing Slavery* at the Slave Lodge Museum and the Memorial to the Enslaved in Church Square – represent the historic event of slavery in South Africa. The paper argues that the museum exhibition and the memorial site are instances of memorialisation and simultaneously function as political processes that offer insight into discourses of race and reconciliation in South Africa during the early stages of democracy.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 April 2021
Accepted 22 June 2021

KEYWORDS
Slavery; post-apartheid; south africa; memory; representation; race; reconciliation; memory making

Introduction

Cape Town is not unlike other cities built by the labour of enslaved people. Colonial historiography of the region tended to highlight the Dutch Colonial Settlement which began in 1652 (although evidence of Khoe and San settlements and Portuguese traders exists from as early as 1300[1]) more recent historical scholarship has acknowledged the brutality of the displacement of the indigenous Khoe and San inhabitants and the various claims by European travellers passing the Cape en route to India from as early as 1620 (Worden 1998, 12–83; Field, Meyer, and Swanson 2007, 4). The Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, also referred to as the VOC) imported enslaved peoples from the Indonesian archipelago, Bengal, South India and Sri Lanka, Madagascar and the East African coast to the Cape which was a trading post and halfway station for the company during this time. In 1795 the Cape Colony was under British control and again in 1806, officially becoming a British colony in 1814. The British introduced amelioration laws in 1806 aimed at improving the welfare of the enslaved population; the Cape Colony remained a slave society until 1834 when slavery was abolished by the British in its colonies. It would be another four years until the 'apprenticeship' period ended in which 'free' slaves were forced to serve time as apprentices to those who had formally enslaved them.[2]

Cape Town's architecture, languages, cultures, and geography evidence these histories and make the study of the city a complex one. What has been less eagerly acknowledged is the fundamental role slavery played in more than just the physical construction of the city. The institution of slavery in the Cape Colony laid the foundations for many of the early social and economic relations of South Africa, which informed the later apartheid history of the country (Worden 1985, 4–5). Baderoon argues that because the Cape was colonised two centuries before the northern part of South Africa, at a time in which slavery 'shaped all social and economic relations, it is hard to

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overstate the importance of the institution of slavery' (Baderoon 2014, 7; Eldredge and Morton 1994). This paper proposes that the regional focus of slavery and slave history in South Africa may have contributed to rendering slave society in the rest of the country less noticeable. The recent visibility of slave history and memory at the regional level may thus lead to a greater national discernibility of this part of South Africa's past.

Recent developments in the heritage industry and the ongoing rich historical research about the Cape has meant that the ways in which slavery is thought about, represented and acknowledged in the everyday and the public sphere are changing. These attempts to excavate the past and make them visible in the present provide vital opportunities to include slavery in the narratives of the city and the country at large. It is essential to recognise that slavery has a long and critically influential history in South Africa, even if it has not been acknowledged enough in historical and political terms. The specific examples analysed (drawn from the city of Cape Town South Africa) reveal that slavery is significant for more than just regional race, identity and memory politics and has a bearing on an understanding and reformulation of broader race relations in post-apartheid South Africa. The examples considered further illustrate that slavery is pertinent to more than just specific museum and memorial practices and raises questions about the inclusion of seemingly marginal pasts into broader cultural and heritage museological practices. It further contends that there is a historical and moral importance to engaging with representations of slavery in post-apartheid South Africa.

In relation to slavery and its memorialisation in South Africa, the article suggests that the public memorials and museums offer little as sites for grief, mourning and reflection about these atrocities. Unlike how Young (1994) suggests Holocaust memorials (in the absence of the tombstone) may function as a substitute site for mourning and remembrance, there is a strong suggestion from communities who self-identify as 'descendants of slavery' that different emotions and elements should be evoked by the memorials – ones that acknowledge a living heritage and a constructive contribution to society.[3] Competing with the amnesia surrounding slavery in South Africa, these memorials must address the suppression of a slave past for political and economic advantage by descendants of slaves and the political systems in power (Ward & Worden 1998). The developing field of slavery studies has further grown with contributions from authors such as Yvette Abrahams (1996, 2000), Pumla Dineo Gqola (2001, 2005, 2007, 2010) Gabeba Baderoon (2009, 2014) Heléne Strauss (2009) and Jessica Murray (2010). Their work has shifted the contemporary focus on the place of slave pasts in current South African society. Gqola (2010), Baderoon (2014) and Nuttall and Coetzee (1998) have argued that slave memory is evident in various sites in post-apartheid South Africa; Gqola's full length study traces the processes through which 'South Africa's slave past moves from the obscured to the well-recognised' (2010, 5) arguing that there is significance in understanding 'the specific manifestations of such a consciousness of the past and the uses to which collective memory is put' (2010, 5). The attempts to excavate the past and make them visible in the present provide vital opportunities to include slavery in the narratives of Cape Town and South Africa at large. Further afield, the subject of representing enslavement and abolition in museums has been the subject of multiple publications. Volumes such as *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums Ambiguous Engagements* (Smith et al. 2011) and *Politics of Memory Making Slavery Visible in Public Space* (Araujo 2012), attest to the increased attention in the British context to the legacies of enslavement globally, particularly in response to the bicentenary celebrations that took place in Britain in 2007 – commemorating the end of slavery (1807/8). Oldfield (2007) alludes to the awkward and politically sensitive questions of representing the tensions of Britain's involvement in the slave trade and subsequently the role the nation played in abolition movements (2007, 240). The debates in much of the scholarly work in this area reveal the levels of dispute and interpretation the memory of slavery involves, and continually investigates what are adequate or decent tools for memorialising slavery (Wood 2000, 8).

This paper examines the representational strategies employed in the Slave Lodge's permanent exhibition *Remembering Slavery* and the Monument to the Enslaved to scrutinise the insights they

offer on the political processes of figuring race and reconciliation in the early phase of South Africa's democracy. The first section of the paper considers the conceptual processes underscoring how nations revisit historical sites of shame via the idea of 'palatable' narratives. The second and third sections focus on close readings of the exhibition and the monument and signal the development of both sites in relation to broader discursive constructions of the post-apartheid nation. This is then used to provide some reflections on why 'indigestible narratives' surrounding histories of enslavement at the Cape has consistently been absent in the representations of these histories and their legacies in official sites.

There are different modes of memory-making that focus on slavery in South Africa which are considered in this paper. The first is the form of the museum that foregrounds, in more traditional ways, the history of slavery at the site of the Slave Lodge. The second form of memory engaged with is that of the memorial. Both these sites (although not formerly members of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, ICSC) seem to fit into the goals of the organisation and may benefit from an association with it. The ICSC's focus on the ways in which new generations gain critical lessons from exposure to the past, a prevention of the erasure of these histories and the opportunity for visitors to make valuable connections between traumatic memories and contemporary human rights issues aligns with many of the impulses of memory-work of these two sites. As a form of public art, the Memorial to the Enslaved articulates another mode of memory-making about slavery in the city.

Both the Slave Lodge and the Memorial to the Enslaved in Church Square are supported by the City of Cape Town and heritage agencies in promoting histories of slavery. This is an important aspect in considering the larger questions of how slavery features in broader productions of national discourses of race and reconciliation. Both are centrally located within the city of Cape Town and are very close to the Houses of Parliament and the central business district. This results in high volumes of local passers-by along with high volumes of tourist-related traffic to the area. The examples of representational activity are also located at sites pertinent to slave history in the city and have a relational element that is significant: their physical proximity to each other affords an opportunity to consider the way their representational strategies impact on one another and how they jointly add to the production of memorial practices of slavery in the city of Cape Town. This active positioning of representations of the histories of enslavement in South Africa signals a willingness to foreground this past in the post-apartheid period, but critically does so in specific ways that do not trouble or dislodge existing politically sensitive tensions.

Both examples are recent additions to the representational landscape of the memories of enslavement in the city, with the Slave Lodge's recent renaming[4] and the conceptualisation and installation of their permanent exhibition along with the commission of the memorial on Church Square. The timing of these additions of slave memory is linked to the post-apartheid 'moment'[5] and the possibilities it offers for alternative voices and positions to be added to the memorial topography. As a form of memory-making, the museum and the permanent exhibition that focuses on the history of slavery in South Africa offer one form of representing slavery.

The museum and the memorial thus serve as mnemonic devices for how slavery is evoked and should arguably be recalled – in this case in limited, palatable ways.

Despite this growing visibility there remains a need to reflect on the qualities of these representations of slavery (Oostindie 2009; Wood 2000, 2010; Oldfield 2012). Memorialising atrocities and contested histories such as slavery is what Horton and Horton term the tough stuff of [American] history, both in that they remain contested in culture, and in the ways in which people's memories of the past and the lessons they draw from them influence American politics and culture today (Horton and Horton 2006). The paper demonstrates the similarity that exists when thinking about the relative muteness surrounding certain representations of slavery in South Africa[6]; and Linenthal's concept of 'fishbone stories' or indigestible narratives (2006) is a useful tool for thinking about the collective memory experience invoked in the memorialisation practices that take place in

the Slave Lodge's permanent exhibition, *Representing Slavery*, and in the Memorial to the Enslaved on Church Square.

Palatable Narratives of Slavery

In the epilogue to the book *Slavery and Public History* (Horton and Horton 2006) Edward T. Linenthal offers his reflections on both the history of slavery within the context of the United States and this society's efforts and need to memorialise their slave past. He raises the question about how nations deal with their historical sites of shame (2006, xiii) and suggests that the responses reveal something about the sites or subjects in question as well as something about the 'nature, values, and culture of a nation and its people' (2006, xiii). Linenthal argues that every nation has its own set of indigestible narratives – its 'fishbone stories' (2006, 213) and suggests that there is an ongoing historical and moral importance to engaging with America's indigestible narratives, of slavery (2006, 214). This active engagement is necessary considering the ongoing strategic stances that are adapted to these fishbone stories that have become 'stuck' in our collective consciousness. He details the strategies employed including denying the difficult stories through processes of erasure and transforming the indigestible narrative into something benign (2006, 214).

We see aspects of this strategy evident in the post-apartheid national discourse of race and reconciliation, which, when it does recognise a slave past and slave memory, does so almost entirely in relation to producing narratives of racial reconciliation among all South Africa's citizens. Linenthal's suggestion that the enduring hunger for redemptive narratives smooths any rough edges in these indigestible stories, insisting that other, more positive stories about slavery be told in the service of 'balance' is valuable here. He further notes that it requires effort and a willingness to trouble our stories and to make these lives and pasts count in their complexities. The analysis undertaken in this paper reveals that the rough edges are missing from the memorialisation practices in both the Slave Lodge's permanent exhibition and the Memorial to the Enslaved in Church Square. The paper suggests that these rough edges are necessary to understand the ongoing legacies of labour that are connected to the processes and period of enslavement, and the memorialisation and social identities prevalent in the Western Cape. These examples of memorialisation of slavery at the Slave Lodge and the Memorial to the Enslaved function to promote a palatable narrative of race and reconciliation in the post-apartheid nation – one that minimises the atrocities and centrality of slavery in South African history. The reading of the representational strategies utilised at the Slave Lodge and the Memorial to the Enslaved suggest that the story of slavery in South Africa cannot be heard without it being recast into the reconciliation narrative of post-apartheid – an act that does little to shift the misconceptions about the centrality of slavery to the nation. The two sites provide a form of state-sanctioned discourse about the importance and visibility of slave history while simultaneously providing quite a circumscribed discursive narrative about what *kinds* of importance or visibility slave memory can have. The sites narrate aspects of collective memory about slavery to which people are meant to respond, presumably in a similar vein – all of which adds to the production of a palatable narrative of slavery. As such the paper suggests that the practices of memorialisation also function as political processes in that they entail imperatives that see representation as reflective of and producing significant discourses about race and reconciliation and position certain histories as more relevant for those formulations in the early post-apartheid period in South Africa. For these reasons, the paper considers the language of memory available and choices pertaining to memorialisation in the two examples and suggests that it largely reinscribes limited instances of national discourse of race and reconciliation.

The Slave Lodge Museum

The centre of town bustles with people – pursuing business and tourist interests alike at different times of the day. The approach to the Slave Lodge Museum along either the busy Adderley or Wale streets is marked by a sense of being immersed and surrounded by urban Cape Town along with the

stature of the parliamentary precinct, which lies just beyond the museum. A few metres behind the Slave Lodge Museum lie the start of the Company Gardens, the presidential residence Genadendal at Tuynhuys and the houses of Parliament. This vibrant and picturesque approach to a building that is connected in complex ways to South Africa's past often makes it difficult to adequately imagine the history that this area entails and visitors to the museum are given few clues by the exterior of the building to the history and significance of slavery. In this way, the Slave Lodge is like many other buildings with connections to slavery in the city – visible to the public and yet masking an explicit slave past. The Slave Lodge itself no longer resembles the original building and its purposes. Instead, the building is now a more accurate reflection of its state function as government buildings and as the Old Supreme Court and as such conceals the violence of its slave past and the atrocity of the living conditions for those who were enslaved there. Slaves owned by the VOC were housed in the lodge from 1679 to 1810. They worked as general labourers in all the Company's facilities (Worden 1998, 60). Some estimates have the population of slaves, convicts, and the mentally ill numbering up to 9000 during the period between 1679 and 1811.[7]

The building was restored in 1960 and was used as the site of the South African Cultural History Museum 'which was an "Own affairs (meaning White) museum" displaying mainly objects and artefacts associated with ("white") culture' (Eichmann 2006, 1). The Slave Lodge Museum was renamed in 1998 to reflect its original use and acknowledge the slave past that had been buried for almost 300 years. In 2000 the museum and its affiliated sites were amalgamated into the Iziko Museums of Cape Town. The first permanent exhibition on slavery in South Africa would only open in 2006, almost 327 years after the building was first erected to serve as a slave lodge of the Dutch East India Company. Some of the upper galleries of the Iziko Slave Lodge still house many of these artefacts from the Cultural History Museum and remain open to the public. Much of the exhibition in these galleries is made up of objects from ceramics, silverware and Egyptology collections and the museum is clear to note in its various promotional materials that these exhibitions are *not* related to the history of slavery in South Africa.[8] The combination of artefacts from the museum's different pasts makes the visitor experience a complicated one in terms of reading and locating the narrative and affective experience. The major exhibition focus is firmly on the history of slavery. The other exhibitions in the museum contain several other emphases that arguably distil the significance of slavery and its history for the visitor.

Goodnow (2006) suggests that there are several ways in which museums can be studied, and that a particular choice of method will obviously yield a particular outcome. The following discussion entails a consideration of the museum as scripted space in which the political and social contexts in which museums function, along with issues of representation and access are important (Goodnow 2006, 30). Methods employed include content analysis of various visual displays and signage at the Slave Lodge, interviews with museum professionals associated with both sites and participant observation in gallery spaces at the museum and the memorial site.

Remembering Slavery

Two permanent exhibitions at the Slave Lodge are dedicated to the history of slavery in South Africa. The first is entitled *Remembering Slavery*. Eichmann (2006) has eloquently elaborated on the ways in which slavery came to be represented at the Slave Lodge, tracing the processes that shaped and contributed to the construction of this meaning. She shows how the context of popular discourses around the memory of slavery and associated controversies impacted on the making of the exhibition and demonstrates the ways in which they were incorporated into the 'final product', the permanent exhibition *Remembering Slavery*. The nature of this exhibition, however, operates to promote 'preferred narratives' about slavery that contain no 'rough edges' about the atrocities of enslavement and this ultimately confines the work that visitors are encouraged to do in understanding how slavery is remembered. Slavery is thus only able to function within the redemptive narrative paradigm of a nation saved by human rights.

The second permanent exhibition is entitled *Slave Origins – Cultural Echoes*. This exhibition focuses on cultural objects and artefacts that relate to but are not from the colonial period of slavery at the Cape. The objects include puppets, furniture, weapons and fashion objects and are, according to the Slave Lodge website, ostensibly meant to 'reveal in a general sense the rich diversity of cultural backgrounds of the slaves transported to the Cape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'. The content of this exhibition offers an additional construct to the ways in which we understand the significance of slavery – that is that the enslaved peoples contributed 'culturally' to the landscape of the country. Here the exhibition focus is on the everyday cultural contributions made by various enslaved people to the city's landscape. The anchoring quote by Patric Tariq Mellet (a former liberation movement cadre and cultural and history analyst) suggests that the emphasis is on countering the weight of colonial narratives, 'All around us every day, we experience the echoes of cultures from Asia and Africa – and the fruits of the labour of the enslaved people. This great contribution of so many men and women, our ancestors, has for too long been blotted out by over-amplified colonial narratives' (2005). The exhibition wall panels include information about the geographical links and cultural affinities of those enslaved at the Cape – implying that those contributions need acknowledgement,

> Slaves brought little with them, other than their bodies, knowledge and memories. The African and Asian objects displayed here are directly and indirectly associated with the areas of origins of the slaves who were incorporated into the colonial population of the Cape. The objects reveal in a general sense the rich diversity of cultural backgrounds of the slaves. Cultural affinities with some of these areas of origin can today still be detected in the spheres of language, fashion, craftsmanship and architecture of the people of the Cape and South Africa

We encounter several enlarged photographic images on wall panels of different geographic areas where the enslaved people came from. These include Angola, Bali, Madagascar, Mozambique, and India. Here, these cultural affinities contribute to the softening of the 'rough edges' of the narrative of slavery in that their representation implies an overtly positive construction. In this single room filled with artefacts and limited opportunities for interpretation – the visitor is given little indication of the costs of these cultural contributions or whether they were voluntarily shared or forcibly extracted from the enslaved peoples at the Cape.

Reading this exhibition in relation to the remaining artefacts from the South African Cultural History museum suggests that there remains an unarticulated narrative that may see one set of artefacts as related to culture and the other set as related to civilisation – a troubling narrative to still see amidst the post-apartheid nation's concern for inclusive museum practices that challenge some of the problematic ideological assumptions that plagued museums during the colonial period (Abrahams 1996, 2000; Coombes 2003; Grunebaum 2011). Here again is an example of the smooth edges Linenthal refers to – in this case, one of the narratives of slavery is reduced to a series of cultural objects that are still positioned in relation to colonial ideologies and artefacts.

History of exhibition development

Eichmann's (2006) study on the Slave Lodge Museum offers a comprehensive analysis of the conceptual debates surrounding the establishment of a permanent exhibition that focused on slavery. She argues that museum staff had to grapple with various questions about *how* to represent slavery. Oldfield (2007) has similarly noted the how's and why's of commemorating the bicentenary campaign to celebrate the end of slavery raised a series of awkward and politically sensitive questions. Marcus Wood's *Blind Memory* warns readers that there can be no 'archaeology of the memory of slavery that corresponds to an emotional identification with a lost reality' (2000, 7). The work then of representational practices remains essential in rethinking our understanding of and connection to aspects of the past, through considered and meaningful interventions.

The description offered by Eichmann shows the development of events and exhibitions between 1994 and 2005 that led up to the eventual opening of the permanent exhibition

Remembering Slavery. She recounts how various forums and debates held at the then South African Cultural History Museum were meant to generate content for the conceptual development of the museum's transformation into a space dedicated to remembering and representing slave history at the site, specifically, and at the Cape more broadly. These included some temporary exhibitions about Khoisan culture, the production of a booklet on the early history of the Slave Lodge and several problematic interventions such as the display of the Old Slave Tree, where it is presumed slaves were sold, (with the emphasis curiously placed on the tree itself instead of its association with slavery) and a display of pictures of slaves accompanied by their registration certificates and two artefacts attributed to slaves. The caption for this display was largely bureaucratic and from the perspective of British authorities (Eichmann 2006). These initial limited and problematic interventions were followed by the official renaming of the building to the Slave Lodge Museum, a few public celebrations associated with slave heritage and the prominent excavations at the Slave Lodge led by Iziko historical archaeologist Gabeba Abrahams. These events coincided with the establishment of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, which promotes research on the slave trade and slavery across the globe and which shaped modern global society. The Slave Route project identified the Slave Lodge 'as the focal point of the South African chapter of the Slave Route' (Eichmann 2006, 44). The exhibition consists of nine galleries that each offers a narrative of slavery at the Cape. Overall, these narratives of slavery construct this history of enslavement and the slave trade as acceptable and visible in the present moment only in relation to certain sanitised versions which see slavery as operating in the role of human rights atrocity for it to be legible and valuable in broader post-apartheid discourses of race and reconciliation.

The first part of the exhibition is installed in the foyer of the Slave Lodge and provides an overview of the exhibition detailing the history of slavery in South Africa in nine panels with the theme of human rights abuses underpinning the narrative. The panels contain enlarged reproductions of images depicting aspects of colonial Cape society and the lives of the enslaved. The text offers an overview of the history of slavery and makes overt connections with the issue of human rights abuses. As such, slavery is figured prominently as an issue for the twenty first century and not simply a historic event. The inclusion of figures of children who are trafficked worldwide and the numbers of children who are child soldiers sees the specifics of historic slavery in South Africa reframed as a contemporary issue and as something that takes various forms. Visitors are presented with examples of debt bondage, serfdom, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and extreme forms of child labour. The specific history of slavery at the Cape is thus read against this backdrop and eventually the particularity of the site of Slave Lodge is re-introduced. Sheperd (2013) identifies the ways in which the discourses of memory and heritage can act to discipline and sequester the energies of the past in the present, limiting their transformative potential which I suggest is similar in this site and its narrative representations. The relative agency of slaves in rebellions and runaway slaves is also foregrounded in this part of the exhibition as an important element of the history of slavery both in the Americas and at the Cape – again insisting that the visitor remain cognisant of the global connections of reading slavery. This narrative trajectory is extended in the next galleries that move between the global and the local focus and weave through the specificities of the Slave Lodge in the story of slavery at the Cape. The layout of the museum directs the visitor to experience the narrative constructed predominantly in one direction, although it also encourages the visitor experience to engage across a range of experiences, including emotional, factual, visual, and textual responses.

As visitors proceed from the foyer, they enter the auditorium space that contains a video playing on a loop in a darkened room. Two video screens are fixed to the wall and there are nine wooden benches for visitors to sit on – encouraging the visitor to linger and watch the video, hopefully in its entirety. The video, entitled 'From Human Wrongs to Human Rights', is a re-enactment of a slave sale, and contains emotional scenes of black bodies as slaves and white bodies representing authority. The history of the building is also presented as 'a living heritage site' about memory

and reflection. The video directs visitors to consider that the current building resembles its government functions and not its use as a slave lodge – and alerts them to the fact that in 2000, archaeological excavations began on site and with this, according to the narrative, the transformation of the building into place of 'healing and justice' took place.

The re-enactments staged of life for those enslaved at the Lodge offer the first key to the preferred emotional register and response of the visitor to the exhibition. The video is clearly marked by an attempt to visualise the past and to communicate something of the horrors of slavery for the visitor. As the museum has little material objects to display in relation to South Africa's slave past, this form of re-enactment is a viable strategy of display. Once visitors have experienced the video narrative, they emerge from the darkened room and move into another relatively darkened space of gallery one. The four walls of this room serve as the exhibition panels for the narrative of the first gallery, 'Slavery and the Slave Lodge'. The exhibition also contains a mixed media installation, and the representation here relates to the Slave Lodge in terms of its past, present and future. Several panels present information about the architecture and layout of the building, with some photographs and copies of etchings from the archive, as well as examples of artefacts – slave shackles and artefacts from the archaeological dig – used to support the narrative of the life of the site.

The story of slavery established focuses on providing the visitor with an introduction to slavery in general terms with little reference to the particulars of slavery at the Cape except in the form of visuals and text pertaining to the architecture of the Slave Lodge meant to visualise the past, present and possible future of the site in architectural terms. Four paragraphs provide detail about those enslaved at the Cape in relation to the VOC and the labour requirements it needed to establish the refreshment station. The language used steers away from depicting the ferocity of slave systems with one single reference to the nature of the labour done as 'back breaking'. The text does however include the acknowledgement that the legacies of slavery and the effects of the slave system are still present in post-apartheid South African society. The narrative also incorporates the vision for the museum as a space that will ultimately be transformed into a museum of slavery with the 'aim to increase awareness of contemporary issues around human rights, equality, peace and justice' (Gallery One). Although commendable in its approach and alignment with the goals of the ICSC for instance, this is one of many examples throughout the permanent exhibition that situates the narrative of slavery as overly instructive in respect of peace, equality, justice *without* sufficient acknowledgement of the narratives of violence, inhumanity and colonial oppression that are also fundamental to the history of enslavement.

The second gallery, 'Slave voyages: Memorial', comprises the reconstruction of the interior of the bowels of the ship. The installation is based on the plans of the slave ship, *Meermin*.[9] The panels in this gallery include information about how slaves came to the Cape as well as information provided about various slave ships and places where slaves came from. There is also detail about mutinies on ships, for example the mutiny on the Minerva. In this gallery is a panel that shows a plan of an unnamed slave ship showing how tightly ships were packed on infamous slave voyages.[10]

Here the information presented includes a mix of personal accounts; of presumably white residents of Cape Town at the time describing their encounters with slaves; archival material in the form of a copy of a register noting the number of slave deaths from a single voyage; and creative material in the form of a sound installation; an evocative poem entitled 'Meermin Slave Dream' by Malika Ndlovu and the soundscape by Garth Erasmus.[11] This part of the exhibition offers one of the few moments in which the visitor is confronted with some of the reconstructed realities of slavery. The confines of the bowels of a ship recreate some of the claustrophobia, which must have been part of the experience. Absent are the smells and sounds and temperatures and fear and panic that must have been overwhelming parts of any slave voyage. The plan of the unnamed ship provides a powerful visual reminder of the volume of people who would have been captured and shipped in barbaric circumstances. Having passed through the ships bowels the visitor moves to an enclave between Galleries Two and Three where they encounter the 'Column of Memory/On being

renamed', a cylindrical physical structure made of stacked sections of Perspex glass, on which text appears illuminated from inside. This symbolic intervention differs from the overly archival, historical tone of the previous gallery space. Much of the information provided about the column of memory foregrounds the symbolic and interpretative function it is meant to play:

> The rings of the column of light are inspired by tree rings, symbolising rings of life, passing of centuries and 'holding' of memories. The names of slaves from the Slave Lodge, embedded in each ring, have been extracted from among 8000 names of men, women and children, whose fate it was to live and die in the Slave Lodge.

The reference to fate removes from view any acknowledgement that slavery as a system was the fault of various individuals, states, and ideological practices. It was not a matter of fate and articulating it as such makes it unnecessary that anyone or any system be held accountable. The column contains a selection of names of slaves, reminiscent of the slave memorial in Church Square. Symbolising the memory of slave existence, it includes excerpts from the poem *Slave Dream*, which is wrapped around the pillar of light. Some of the names of those who were enslaved appear in black font on a white background with the light reflecting inside the pillar as sections are rotated. Text accompanying the column describes the practice of how those enslaved were often renamed on their arrival at the Cape and the impact of this practice as humiliating, arbitrary and responsible for stripping slaves of their personal identity, and family and community connections.

Once the visitor enters Gallery Three, 'Map of Origins', they are greeted by information about the origins of slaves and their arrival at the Cape, which is visually illustrated by maps. The focus in this gallery is a large multimedia map, which includes information about slave trade routes. The narrative presented in this gallery largely sees slavery as contributing to South Africa's cultural diversity. The extract from Michael Weeder[12] (2005) which is one of the first texts the visitor encounters in this section of the exhibition directs a particular reading:

> In our being we mirror the geographies of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Today the cultural diversity associated with slavery provides a rich paradigm for the ongoing renewal of our country [South Africa] . . .

This quote is followed by the text below:

Slaves brought with them a range of cultural traditions and skills, which contributed to the emerging society at the Cape. Slaves and their descendants played a major role in the formation of cosmopolitan Cape Town and had a profound influence on the language, religion, architecture, crafts, cuisine, and other cultural traditions that evolved at the Cape. Slave labour on the wine farms also informed the basis of early wealth in the south-western Cape

Both extracts reveal an overwhelming attempt to locate the history of slavery and its legacies as solely in the realm of cultural diversity – once again limiting the story of slavery in palatable terms that removes or underplays any ongoing negative impact of the institution of enslavement. This part of the exhibition also includes information panels that describe the lack of documented evidence pertaining to the individual life of those enslaved – often because slaves were considered property so documentation that does exist largely pertains to their purchase or sale – like that of actual property records. Still the panels in this section refer to slave runaways, hierarchies of slave societies and how slaves were sold, along with languages and traditions of slavery.

Having understood something about the arrival and origins of the enslaved at the Cape, visitors proceed to Gallery Four, 'Inside the Slave Lodge'. This gallery contains an installation that is meant to create a sense of what the Slave Lodge was once like.[13] According to the information panel about the gallery, 'the audio accompaniment and projected images evoke the presences of slaves by giving vivid descriptions of the trauma of everyday life in the Slave Lodge'. A model of the Slave Lodge (c.1800) is on display in the centre of the gallery and dominates the visitor's experience in many ways. It is here finally that the visitor is forced to reassess their original perceptions of the site in material form – no longer faced with the picturesque exterior or the semblance of colonial order, the visitor is encouraged to look and hear and extensively imagine life at the Slave Lodge, largely from the perspective of those enslaved. The picture created by the model and the multimedia installation

paints quite a grim and dire set of circumstances. Gone are the neat, spacious gallery rooms and in its place is the extended interior court and barracks-like structure that surrounds it. The visitor's eye is drawn to a few entrances and exits and even fewer windows on the building model, which evokes a rather different quality of the site. It is in this gallery environment with its range of spoken archival extracts, animal, and human sounds to depict the sounds of daily life at the Lodge and multiple imagery that I think a less palatable narrative of slavery is foregrounded. It is in this space, should the visitor linger, that the brutality of slavery is explicitly communicated on several levels – visual, aural, and emotional/affective.

However, the *Cultural Echoes* exhibition follows immediately in the visitor's pathway and as indicated earlier, it is the 'cultural diversity' emphasis of the exhibition that severely undercuts the potential of the exhibition narrative promoted in gallery four.

The museum floor plans identify seven more galleries on the ground floor which are meant to be organised as follows: Gallery Five: 'Archaeological artefacts', Gallery Six: 'Excavation', Galleries Seven and Eight: 'Life in bondage', Galleries Nine and Ten: 'Social lives, new relationships' and Gallery Eleven: 'Abolition, emancipation and beyond'. They also identify that the future permanent exhibition will be 'on Slavery, Family, Roots and the Peopling of South Africa. It will also aim to increase the awareness of human rights, equality, peace and justice' (Slave Lodge floor plan).

Not all these planned galleries have been realised, and at the time of writing the two remaining gallery spaces on the ground floor contained the *Cultural Echoes* permanent exhibition and a gallery that contains information about abolition and William Wilberforce which appears to be a semi-permanent feature. This last gallery space also has other temporary exhibition information alongside the details of abolition. What is, however, clearly presented is the narrative of overcoming slavery setting this in the broader narrative about overcoming human rights abuses and, as such, presenting slavery as like other forms of oppression that South Africa as a nation has been able to overcome – it has been made to fit neatly into a trajectory that ends with a nation reconciled. The narratives contained in the permanent exhibition *Remembering Slavery* then offer an account that locates slavery as part of the story of the South African nation and does not foreground slavery as a portrayal of violent and brutal labour, oppression, and sexual and other forms of exploitation. The barbed edges that Linenthal reminds us of about slavery – its atrocities, violence, gross sexual exploitation, psychic trauma – are evacuated in the positioning of slavery within the discourse of nation. Instead, the visitor sees the co-option of a range of experiences related to the oppression and enslavement of people into the narrative of liberation that has dominated the post-apartheid landscape in terms of race and reconciliation.

The Memorial to the Enslaved

The Memorial to the Enslaved is located on Church Square. Between the Square and Spin Street on a narrow island in the road is the plaque commemorating the Old Slave Tree – which marks the site of a tree under which slaves were sold in central Cape Town.[14] Diagonally across from the Square is the back entrance to the Slave Lodge. In front of Church Square is the old *Groote Kerk* church. Slaves would wait on the square, while their masters attended various church services. On Church Square towering over the memorial to the Enslaved is a statue of Jan Hendrick Hofmeyr, which was erected in Church Square 'in recognition of his efforts to have Dutch recognised as a language equivalent to English in the constitution of 1910[15]'. The juxtaposition of these two histories reveals the complicated approaches to memorialisation of slavery in South Africa; one celebrating the domineering relics of Afrikaans histories positioned as white and male in the statue itself and one underwhelming in its comparative location and scale focused on the contributions of the enslaved.

It is clear from various vantage points that colonial and slave history are embedded in Church Square and as such the elements of the memorial landscape are potentially able to bring many intersections together. On 24 September, 2008, the Mayor of Cape Town, Helen Zille, unveiled a memorial on Church Square that had been commissioned by the City of Cape Town to 'finally

acknowledge the contribution made by slaves to the culture and heritage of our city and to remember their[16]'.

The memorial was a collaborative work made by artists Gavin Young and Wilma Cruise and comprises 11 granite blocks of varying height (between 30 and 80-cm high) that are distributed as a grid on Church Square.

Two of the blocks are placed on a raised plinth in the southwest corner of the square and are engraved with some of the names of hundreds of slaves who were brought to the Cape from 1658 onwards. According to the artists responsible for the work, the 'forgotten names' are meant to aid in our remembering of slaves and their suffering and 'their contribution to the building of the South African nation' (Cruise 2021). The nine remaining blocks are gathered in a closer configuration nearer the Slave Lodge and the old Slave Tree plaque across the street, where it is presumed slaves were sold. These blocks are engraved with words that are meant to evoke the slave period in South Africa between 1652 and 1834–8: 'resistance and rebellion, suffering on the slave ships during the "middle passage", provenance of slaves, religion, slave life, manumission, punishment, and the slave lodge' (Cruise 2021). These words run up the sides and over the top of the blocks and are presumably meant to draw attention to the historical significance of the site and the locations/buildings/markers that occupy it:

> The memorial is characterised by silence - silence in the face of the abomination that was slavery. This is evoked by the reflective surface of the stones and their solemn arrangement on Church Square. Their weighty presence elicits the memory of the slaves that were sold, tortured, and suffered at Church Square. (Cruise 2021).

Ironically, these granite blocks are also made of the same material redolent of tombstones that occupy graveyards in South Africa and as such when similar sentiments were raised by critics of the memorial, who described the memorial as comprised of 'black boxes' – impenetrable and unyielding – it was not surprising that some saw the memorial as an unsatisfactory way to memorialise the history and memory of slavery in the city. The impact of the memorial is largely disappointing, not only because it is dominated by the statue of Hofmeyr and the surrounding buildings but also because of the lack of reflective engagement made possible by the location. Most of the people who pass through the square do so as a thoroughfare – the limited public seating in the area ensures that most of those who do stop at the memorial do so to sit on the plinths during their lunch breaks with little engagement with the site. James Young (1994) highlights the dialogic quality of the memorial space, citing the value of the public dimension of the memorial. Young elaborates on this relationship in identifying how in the absence of the tombstone (in the context of many Holocaust victims) the monument can function as a substitute site of mourning and remembrance (1994, 15). Criticism of the Memorial to the Enslaved suggests that the nature of the memorial limits its ability to function in these ways.

Linenthal suggests '[we maintain] the conviction that somehow places speak and places where extreme events were carried out (or began) speak even more importantly – more problematically that our memories of such events will be as powerful, as enduringly constructive, as the enduringly destructive event itself' (2006, 222). What then do we make of the locational relationship between the Slave Lodge and the Memorial to the Enslaved and the ways in which their representational strategies to memorialise slavery impact on one another and the idea of the indigestible narrative of the atrocity of slavery at the Cape? If we examine the nature of the words engraved on the granite plinths that comprise the Memorial to the Enslaved, it is striking that none of the words selected directly reference the violence, oppression, and brutality of the slave period. Instead, they recall what I term the 'softer' elements of slavery – the by-products which are often co-opted into discourses of 'multiculturalism', exchange and cultural diversity that elide the violent histories of the period and the region. In this way, the real violent and bloody nature and cost of slavery remains concealed from view – even as the memory of slavery is invoked in public and visible ways. The suppression of the murderous extent of violence of enslavement in the Cape reinforces Linenthal's position about the indigestibility of slavery.

In addition, these word choices deny the significance of slavery in the broader national narrative of the democratic nation that is largely founded on discourses of overcoming oppression and race and reconciliation. The selection of words implies that slavery in the Cape was largely productive in its contribution to the cultural and historical landscape of the city and the country – it denies the reality of the violence and brutality of enslavement.

The politics of forgetting

Given the urgency with which South Africans and the nation state have remembered more recent atrocities associated with apartheid history and experience, the ways in which slavery has been forgotten and recently brought back into collective memory warrants our consideration. A network of sites, processes and acts of memory exist throughout Cape Town and the roots of slavery, and its memory are widespread and are increasingly troubling the comfortable associations we have with the past and the discourses that constitute belonging to the post-apartheid nation.

In both sites, some of the more heinous elements of slavery are masked by the focus of the exhibition narrative and constitution of the monument. Whilst the reality of slavery as a brutal and violent economic and cultural system is less easily avoided in the exhibition, arguably this narrative is put to the service of the broader reconciliation account which sees slavery as a narrative device that does little to trouble the story that South Africa is a 'nation saved by human rights'. The indigestible narrative of slavery as a separate and earlier system with its own harsh and lasting impacts on the life of the nation remains impossible and is ultimately transformed into the more palatable narrative of how slavery produces 'cultural diversity'.

Both the Memorial to the Enslaved and the permanent exhibition at the Slave Lodge do attempt to support processes of restoration in relation to the memories of slavery. Both surface the historic fact of slavery at the Cape and in so doing endeavour to remap and reconstruct the place that history has in the city. In the discussion of the permanent exhibition, *Remembering Slavery*, at the Slave Lodge and the Memorial to the Enslaved[17] on Church Square, the memory of slavery allows people to revive discussions of atrocities in South Africa's history that preceded the apartheid period and consequently possibly demand adequate representations of that past in the public sphere. The discussion about these examples of representational activity also raises questions about the function and place of the memory of slavery and its 'official' discursive circulations.

In addition, the existence of both sites (recently established and reconfigured in the present form to represent slave history) does indeed indicate an 'expansion of what counts as worthy of inclusion in the South African historic/memory landscape' (Linenthal 2006, 216). However, the presentation of this 'indigestible' narrative of slavery in a 'palatable' form as part of a larger narrative of race and reconciliation suggests that the sanctioned forms that add to national discourses limit the place of slave memory to function in particular ways. Ultimately, the story of slavery in South African is only audible if it is recast into the reconciliatory narrative of race and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Notes

1. See http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/cape-town-timeline-1300-1997?page=1.
2. See https://slavery.iziko.org.za/slaveemancipation.
3. In 2009 delegates attending the conference *Bridging Two Oceans: Slavery in Indian and Atlantic Worlds* organised by the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation heard from community activists in response to the presentation made by Wilma Cruise and Gavin Younge. These representatives spoke of their disappointment at the choices made by the artists for the Slave Memorial on Church Square, which had recently been installed. Their comments critiqued the memorial for failing to capture a rich, diverse, and positive history in the memorial.
4. In 1998 'the South African Cultural Museum, close to Parliament and surrounded by monuments, would attract attention which led to its renaming as the Slave Lodge. The plaque in front of the building which marks the historic location of the slave tree would become more visible. This part of Cape Town would also be the

site of Gabeba Abrahams' archaeological dig in April 2000, a collaboration between academics and public institutions which welcomed, and at times, invited the participation of the public' (Gqola 2010, 5). On Heritage Day (September 24) 1998, the South African Cultural History Museum was formally renamed the Slave Lodge.

5. This study will attempt to resist the popular notion of 'writing in the moment' in relation to South African historical and political developments. It recognises that cultural production and products do not always align with political developments, and hence terminology such as 'post-Apartheid', 'Rainbow Nation', etc. must be used with careful consideration.
6. Araujo (2012) has suggested that in societies marked by traumatic events (such as the Atlantic Slave trade), which interrupts the transmission of past experiences, historical memory replaces collective memory. This is in part because the former can be 'crystalized' in processes that have been defined as memorialisation and heritagization. In the case of South Africa, this historical memory privileged colonial and later apartheid history and overshadowed histories of enslavement with histories of settler colonialism.
7. The building served a variety of purposes in its history after its closure as a slave lodge, with modifications in 1810 when it started to serve as government offices. The site functioned as government offices for the British, including the Governor's Advisory Council and the Upper House of the first parliament. South Africa's first library and first post office were also housed at the site. Between 1815 and 1914 it also served as the Cape Supreme Court. More information can be found at the following web address: www.iziko.org.za/static/page/the-history-of-the-building.
8. In their description of the permanent exhibitions in the Slave Lodge details are provided about the ceramics and silverware collections with one brief statement about plans for the upper galleries and their artefacts – that they will be transformed to draw links to national heritage and history. Recent additions, in 2014, have been made to the upper galley and include temporary exhibitions more resonant with the post-apartheid context, the Singing Freedom Exhibition being the most recent addition (www.iziko.org.za/static/landing/exhibitions).
9. The Meermin was a Dutch slaving vessel. In 1776 there was a rebellion of the enslaved onboard see Alexander's thesis 'The mutiny on the Meermin' (2003).
10. Cheryl Findley's *Committed to Memory The Art of the Slave Ship Icon* (2018) details how the iconic image of the *Brooks*, which depicts the human cargo hold of the ship, has circulated in the abolition of slavery, and has come to be a symbol of black resistance and memory politics.
11. The sound installation is available at https://soundcloud.com/asai-audio/meermin-slave-dream-malika-ndlovu-garth-erasmus.
12. Rev Michael Weeder is a prominent heritage activist who has written on the need to expose Cape Town's slave history. See his 2006 dissertation 'Palaces of Memory' http://etd.uwc.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11394/1691/Weeder_MA_2006.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
13. In 2019 this room was replaced by the temporary exhibition 'Unshackled History the Wreck of the Slave Ship, São José, 1794′ which focuses on the story of the first known shipwreck of enslaved Africans to have been identified, excavated and studied. The temporary exhibition runs until March 2021.
14. The Old Slave Tree Memorial was erected in 2014 and located on Spin Street Cape Town. https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/old-slave-tree-memorial.
15. www.iziko.org.za/calendar/event/slave-orgins-cultural-echoes.
16. Eichmann n.d.: http://www.family-history.co.za/commemorating_slavery.php.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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