

# Multicultural and Globalized Digital Libraries: Digitizing and Empowering the “Other”

## (Extended Abstract)

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**Abstract.** Our multicultural societies in a globalized context offer the opportunity to forge new frontiers in digital libraries. Focusing on the cultural diversity of the Asian region, this paper examines what should be digitized, who should be involved in the digitization efforts, and what access issues need to be considered. More specifically, documenting the experiences of the Asian diaspora and ethnic minorities will be discussed, engaging critical theories and multicultural scholarship. By problematizing the cultural production of digital libraries as an act of nostalgia, of inclusion and exclusion, and of racial, social and sexual differentiation, we can unpack the role that digital libraries play in the creation of communities in our imaginary and in the perception of space and place from those objects we select to digitize. The paper concludes with a call for decentering digital libraries and digitizing the “Other” as an act of empowerment and representation.

**Keywords:** Multicultural digital library, Asian diaspora, minority communities, empowerment.

## 1 Extended Abstract

Information professionals and policy makers who recognize the multicultural make-up of our societies in a globalized context understand the opportunity to open up and advance new frontiers/spaces in digital libraries. Here, the term digital library is used broadly to not only refer to local, national, regional, or world digital collections of its diverse cultural and scientific heritage (books, films, maps, photographs, music, etc.), but to also include original materials that traditionally would make up digital archives (i.e., both works and documents). The reason for this breadth of scope is that a critical multicultural audit of digital libraries, or most information institutions/services for that matter, would likely reveal that underrepresented communities, such as cultural minorities and diaspora communities, have been overlooked and still require to engage in basic activities, such as documenting their cultural practices, recording oral accounts or digitizing original documents.

Asia is a region with extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity. It is the most linguistically diverse area of the world, and its religious diversity is largely a result of

contact with traders, missionaries or colonial settlers [1]. According to the Embassy of Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Canada, in Vietnam alone, there are “fifty-four ethnic groups, each with their own traditions, festivals, clothing, songs and dances” [2]. Adding to the complexity of an evolving multicultural or cultural diverse society is that cultures are dynamic and they interact with each other. Thus, cultures have been erased, fused, re-emerged or stayed static as a result of movements of peoples through migration, colonialism, assimilation, war and intermarriage, for example. These events have created creolized, transnational, diaspora, minority (e.g., linguistic, ethnic, racial, religious, etc.), and ethnically- or racially-mixed peoples and communities. Depending on the complexity of the situation we may encounter individuals who are twice minority, that is, they belong to two minority sub-cultures (e.g., Muslim Indian in Singapore, Japanese Brazilian woman in Japan). In their work on Multiculturalism in Asia, He and Kymlicka [3] note that “managing diversity is therefore key to political stability in the region. The centralized, unitary ‘nation-state’ model adopted by postcolonial states appears increasingly unable to meet this challenge....Whatever the explanation, Asia is witnessing the rise of ‘identity politics’. People are mobilizing along ethnic, religious, racial, and cultural lines, and demanding recognition of their identity, acknowledgement of their legal rights and historic claims, and a commitment to the sharing of power.”

In defining “cultural diversity” UNESCO [4] declares that “culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature; lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” Such a view of cultural diversity emphasizes an aesthetics/arts/humanities perspective, which does not reveal the adversity faced by minority and diaspora communities. The discourse on cultural diversity needs to shift to recognize racism, geopolitical and economic interests, and that oppressed cultures are likely to be marginalized, tokenized, erased, overlooked or made invisible. By going beyond celebratory multiculturalism, an Information Society by creating multicultural and globalized digital libraries can enter into a new frontier in defending human identity, dignity and expression.

Documenting the heritage and experiences of Asian diasporas and ethnic minorities will be discussed using multiple critical lenses. These include the work of the following scholars or scholarship:

- Paulo Freire - through literacy that individuals find their own voice and can eradicate cultures of silence that keep them oppressed or aim to assimilate them
- Juan Pérez de la Riva - “*historia de la gente sin historia*” > giving voice, memory and existence
- Peggy McIntosh - White Privilege
- Critical Race Theory - counter-narratives
- James A. Banks - cross-cultural perspectives (insider/outsider), multicultural citizenship

The role of the digital library, like many information institutions/services, is an essentializing one that celebrates and reproduces the ‘grand narratives’ of the nation-state. By problematizing the cultural production of digital libraries as an act of nostalgia, of inclusion and exclusion, and of racial, social and sexual differentiation, we can unpack the role that digital libraries play in the creation of communities in our

imaginary and in the perception of space and place from those objects we select to digitize. In recognizing that digital libraries are socially constructed, as information professionals and policy makers, we have the responsibility and power to re-envision a more diverse and representative digital library. Thus, multicultural and globalized digital libraries would guarantee the right for all cultural voices to be included, would acquire the necessary funding to pursue multicultural projects, and would enable underrepresented voices to speak for themselves, to determine what cultural heritage and community (including individual) experiences are to be digitized, and how the information will be accessed (limited or full access, language, interface, etc.). Taiwanese writer and cultural critic Ying-tai Lung [5] also recognizes that culture has to be done bottom up and notes the need and value of not just the grand narratives but also counter narratives in learning about one’s national culture.

The more you know about your own culture, the more you realize that any great culture is made up of multiplicities. Chinese culture itself is made up of multiculturalism. For instance, Confucianism is only one of many elite traditions against a huge domain of folk traditions. So, to understand Chinese culture fully, you need to know its complexity.

This complexity is not contained within a nation-state’s geographic borders, but is further complicated by the existence of diaspora communities. “What diaspora implies is not only a movement across the borders of a country, but also the experience of traversing boundaries and barriers of space, time, race, culture, language and history” [6]. Diaspora communities are challenged as being neither as well as both an insider and outsider at the same time.

The paper concludes with a call for decentering digital libraries and digitizing the “Other” as an act of empowerment and representation. The decentering of digital libraries enables underrepresented groups to be at the table, to be heard and to take center-stage in digitizing and accessing their cultural heritage and experiences [7]. This democratic process ensures that there is the undoing of the Other which is considered essential by historian, social critic and activist Howard Zinn who found that the story of ethnic minorities in the United States was invisible in history books, thus “the consequence of these omissions has been not simply to give a distorted view of the past but, more importantly, to mislead us all about the present” [8]. In conclusion, digital libraries are not neutral but privilege selected knowledge and information systems because their development is influenced by human and economic interests. Because recorded knowledge and information systems reflect the power and social relationships within society, we need to further the purpose of cultural diversity, which is to preserve diverse forms of cultural expression, enrich society and have people engage with each other. Actions plans to develop multicultural and globalized digital libraries should require all information professionals to design cultural delivery systems that are oppositional to racist, sexist, homophobic, and neoliberal practices which are institutionalized in the cultural practices and systems in our Information Society.

One has to begin to lose memory, even small fragments of it, to realize that memory is what our entire life is made of. A life without memory wouldn't be life, just as an intelligence without means of expression wouldn't be

intelligence. Our memory [cultural record, digital library] is our coherence, our reason, our action, our feeling. Without it we aren't anything.

Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sight*

Source: <http://www.webdelsol.com/istavans/is-1.htm>

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