CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Teaching Black Diaspora Stories with Digital Archives in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

One of the prime difficulties in the current teaching environment is educating students to make use of research skills that teach them not only how to be good historians but also how to be critical thinkers who can engage and evaluate sources. This piece focuses on the use of well-managed digital archives, which provide students with a focused set of research materials that help build a foundational point of historical inquiry. In addition to discussing the pedagogical benefits of such research, emphasis is also placed on specific assignments centered on several online databases, including “The Land Act Legacy Project Collection” of the South African History Archive (SAHA), the African Activist Archive of Michigan State University, and the “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1938” of the Library of Congress. If these current times have taught anything, it is that digital literacy and proper research methods are essential components in understanding information during times of political and cultural change. By engaging with the stories in these digital archives, students learn about the diversity of opinions and opportunities that defined these stories of the Black diaspora throughout the twentieth century and beyond.
Teaching Black Diaspora Stories with Digital Archives in the Classroom

Jacob Ivey

For so many of us, it is difficult to remember what it was like to be a student staring at the directions for our first research paper, topic in hand, but unsure where to go from there. Feeling lost, uncertain, and unprepared for how to proceed was a hurdle many of us had to overcome at the beginning of our careers as historians. Yet these difficulties have not changed, as the prime complication in our current teaching environment is educating students to make use of research skills that teach them how to be not only good historians but also critical thinkers who can engage and evaluate sources. While this acknowledgment might seem incredibly elementary to veteran teachers who have experienced this complication for years, the recent shortcoming of students’ ability to think critically has driven me to the point where I am seeking out the bare minimum in my teaching accomplishments.¹ Fundamentally, students often have little ability to begin some of the most basic tasks of historical research, much less compile a meaningful piece of historical inquiry fueled by such research. They stare at the directions feeling lost and unsure how to move forward. Like most teachers of history, I make every attempt in the very first week of each class to provide the necessary basics, including what it means to think historically, drawing heavily on the idea of the “five Cs of historical thinking” (change over time, causality, context, complexity, and contingency).² Nevertheless, these basic methods of understanding are often not enough to prepare students for the craft of research.

One difficulty in teaching students how to do research is to help them overcome being overwhelmed by the massive number of resources available to them in our digital age. To combat these difficulties, I have found that well-managed digital archives provide students with a focused set of research materials that help build a foundational point of historical inquiry. These online archives act as a means of not only facilitating research skills for students but also illustrating where “good sources” can be found in the massive sea of the internet. In this article, I discuss the pedagogical benefits of such research, specifically the details of assignments centered on several online databases, including “The Land Act Legacy Project Collection” of the South African History Archive (SAHA), the “Forward to Freedom” web archive of the organization Anti-Apartheid Movement in the United Kingdom, and the African Activist Archive of Michigan State University, along with the projects these archives have helped to inform. I also discuss further projects that were informed by this process in my American and African American history courses, notably the Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narrative project, “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1938,” and The Green Book travel guide. Through the use of these digital archives, students learn about the diversity of opinions and opportunities that defined eras of global protest, making transnational connections between Black intellectual life and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century politics and revolutions. Such digital literacy and the proper research methods necessary to engage with these archives are essential components in understanding information, especially during our recent uncertain times of political and cultural change in higher education and beyond.

Such aspirations to teach proper research methods have been at the center of my pedagogy for years. I have always envisioned my upper division or non-intro history courses to be a chance to revel in the research and writing method I had come of age with: papers, papers, and more

¹. This conversation is continuous within history and higher education, including two recent examples from the Chronicle: Priya Satia, “Why Do We Think Learning about History Can Make Us Better? How the Study of the Past Became the Conscience of the Present,” Chronicle of Higher Education, October 23, 2020; and Elizabeth Oljar and D. R. Koukal, “How to Make Students Better Thinkers,” Chronicle of Higher Education, February 8, 2019.

². For one of the best comprehensive summaries of this concept that I still rely on in the classroom, see Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?” Perspectives on History, January 2007.
papers. But, when the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the very nature of teaching, I reevaluated my assignments and overall pedagogy. When my spring 2020 undergraduate course on the history of South Africa shifted online, I quickly realized that, in this new classroom environment, research papers failed to have the desired impact of reinforcing historical techniques and research skills. Instead of continuing to assign paper projects, I turned students’ attention to online archival analysis and used a series of assignments in which students presented findings on researching the archives and online databases themselves.3

In previous semesters, like many young teachers right out of grad school, I had been assigning fifteen-to-eighteen-page research papers in order for students to learn how to participate in historical research and archival analysis; this was a foundational part, I believed, of the historian’s craft. This assignment was never perfect, but I continued to believe it was a necessary, if potentially arduous, component of any history course. But after the move online due to COVID-19, students (and often teachers) were left precariously on their own, without the resources they would need—archival and instructional—to write a successful research paper. Instead of meeting with me in person or with the university library reference staff to help guide their research, most students waded into the internet virtually unfiltered, despite my best efforts to facilitate an understanding of credible and reliable sources. While Zoom meetings and online discussions helped keep students on task, the pressures of our online transition led me to several new assignment options.

In this new online environment, I created an assignment titled “Land Act Legacy: 1913 to 2013.” Students researched and prepared short papers and presentations on the 1913 Land Act’s legacy of economic and political disenfranchisement in South Africa. A focus on this piece of legislation in the course was critical, as this act laid the groundwork for the disproportionate land allocation that eventually defined South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century and is seen by many historians as the beginning of the racialized legislation that eventually became what we know as “apartheid.” More than just a piece of legislation allocating land across South Africa, the law provided the pretext for the forced removal and settlement of Black people into the homelands (Bantustans) of “Grand Apartheid,” which defined many Black South Africans’ experiences throughout the twentieth century.4

To reveal the legacy and diversity of Africans affected by this unjust law, I walked students through the personal narratives from the SAHA’s “The Land Act Legacy Project Collection,” an online depository of oral history materials and photographs collected for the centennial of the 1913 Land Act.5 This archive of interviews, collected by the SAHA from March to September 2013, illustrates a contemporary foundation for the legacy of the acts and the people affected by this monumental piece of legislation. Though focused on the three small villages of Driefontein, Mogopa, and Braklaagte in rural South Africa, it provides a visual snapshot of life in South Africa in 2013 with a slew of quotidian photographs by Gille de Vlieg. But critically, it also gives voice to the people living in these communities whose families confronted the legacy of the 1913 legislation. Instead of just lists of government documents or vague maps about the movement of people and limited access to land, these interviews explore “issues including the role of women as agents for resistance (including the Women’s Rural Movement), modes of divisions within communities, as well as an exploration of both state and community tactics for resistance.”6

3. I should acknowledge that the period of many of these early assignments was before I arrived at my current position at Florida Memorial University, but, in many of these cases, the majority of my students were either non-majors or students with limited experience in the research process, either in person or online.


5. Debora Matthews, “The Land Act Legacy Project Collection,” South African History Archive. (This archive was established on March 30, 2016.)

6. Ibid.
the end, these interviews provided students with a snapshot of not only life under the apartheid system but also the impact of racist policies on a community, which have endured a century after the initial pieces of legislation that gave these policies birth.

Taking the research skills and practical knowledge acquired up to that point during the semester, students began scouring the SAHA for oral interviews from those affected by the land removal in 1913 and its aftermath. From there, students focused on one individual and the geographic areas they or their families moved to, investigating how the removal influenced individual lives and the landscape of South Africa. And while these interviews were conducted with people born after 1913, they provide insight into the underlying impact of apartheid on everyday South Africans. Moreover, what made this project so fruitful was the chance for students to delve into a single, well-managed archive that provided them with a focused set of research materials that helped to build a foundational point of historical inquiry. Instead of just learning how to write like a historian in a research paper, they learned to engage with the tools and mechanics of historical research. Students “thought like historians” by looking at causality, context, complexity, and more. But with the entire class focusing on one event and its legacy, the 1913 Land Act, students could concentrate on this law’s impact on the lives of everyday South Africans and its resonance in present day South Africa.

Students responded well to this guided research project. Notably, with a select set of resources, including interviews and photographs digitized by the SAHA, students were able to overcome the initial hurdles of research, including identifying a topic early in the semester, finding and accessing the validity of certain archives, and writing without hands-on support during our transition to online teaching. The framework of the assignment was already laid out, giving time to focus more on the detail-oriented analysis of researching archival material. With the SAHA’s resources in hand, students had the time to deconstruct sources and material while developing deeper insight into the people and places affected by the racist apartheid policies in twentieth-century South Africa. While some students expressed reservations about a project on “land,” they soon realized that land policy remains a heated issue within South Africa and one of the clearest avenues to understanding the legacy of imperial influence in the postcolonial world.

In some instances, students discovered interviewees’ family members who are active in the “Land Expropriation without Compensation” campaign of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party in contemporary South Africa. Not only did this give students a clear illustration of the continued importance of land in post-apartheid South Africa, but it also provided a wonderful opportunity in the classroom to discuss strikingly current issues. This issue of land is still at the center of South African politics, as a bill was introduced to amend the South African constitution shortly before this course was taught in 2018. But the bill was eventually rejected by EFF leader Julius Malema in 2021 after he claimed that the final version agreed upon by the African National Congress (ANC) was insufficient for his goals, stating that “the bill that this house is asked to approve today will take black people’s struggle for land repossession many steps back.”

Students discovered that the issue of land was alive and well in twenty-first-century South Africa.

In addition to these successes, the process revealed multiple hurdles that significantly affected the outcome of students’ projects that spring. For one, some interviews were sadly contemporary in the collection, making the requirement to connect these issues all the way
back to 1913 somewhat challenging. Further, with students’ limited knowledge of South African geography (despite weeks of attempts on my part to teach them), students often became confused by names and locations, especially when some of these places have been renamed in the post-apartheid era. The grandness of the scope and breadth of the project was an issue for many as well. To help confused students overcome some of these hurdles, I directed them to other databases, including Michigan State’s “South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy” collection. But, as is usually the case for the first versions of such projects, the scope and expectations for this assignment were perhaps too ambitious.

With these difficulties in mind, I created a similar project, called “Protest and Promise: An Anti-apartheid Activism Archive Project,” for a course on the global Black diaspora that I taught in spring 2021. For this assignment, students dug into one “focus” of activism in the United States or across the globe that supported the struggles of South African peoples against colonialism, apartheid, and social injustice from the 1950s through the 1990s. This focus could be in the form of a city’s actions against apartheid, a smaller campaign within the wider anti-apartheid movement, or a group or organization that was part of the larger anti-apartheid struggle. Critically, these foci could not be a specific leader or politician or organizer, as the purpose of this project was partially to highlight that citizen activism was a group endeavor and not precipitated by a single individual. I wanted students to see themselves in these groups and organizations, highlighting the fundamental importance of everyday people in the eventual destruction of one of the greatest human rights abusers of the twentieth century.

Once again, to give students a database to act as the foundation for their research, I pointed them to the African Activist Archive of Michigan State University. This is a fantastic database of posters, pamphlets, photos, campaign buttons, and speeches that provided a research foundation for their focus. Learning from my SAHA experience, I also encouraged students to use several other archives to help provide a further foundation and global connection to their focus, including the “Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa” archive, formerly through Aluka, now through JSTOR, filled with thousands of documents and primary sources, and the “Forward to Freedom” archive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement based out of the United Kingdom.

I also explained to the class that the archival collection they were using wasn’t just a random online archive but, instead, a tool used by historians, including me, across the United States and the globe. I underscored that, as part of my scholarly work, I had used these sources in my writing on the anti-apartheid movements in Florida. Students learned, as I highlighted the usefulness of this particular set of digital tools, that our work in the classroom was part of broader research on the history of the African diaspora and the anti-apartheid movement. I also shared my work with students to reinforce their understanding of the relationship between research in the field and their professor in the classroom.

Using these databases of documents and ephemera, students dug into their selected element of activism, critically engaging with the underlying motivations and organizations for their groups. Students quickly attached their interests to particular groups and organizations, whether a legal civil rights committee based out of Washington, DC, or the attempts to boycott Coca-Cola for its role in “sweetening apartheid.” What was most satisfying was when students made personal
connections to their focus, including tracing the movement back to their homes. This included one student who talked about protests of South African Outspan oranges in their native Holland and another about the Delaware Pacem in Terris anti-apartheid organization in their hometown of Wilmington, Delaware. In all of these cases, students were exposed to the everyday nature of these protests and the participation of individuals from all walks of life in these movements. It showed that no matter where one was, even thousands of miles away from South Africa, they could have a meaningful impact on history and the global struggle for human rights.

This revelation was even more important in light of the year 2020 teaching us that protest movements are essential components in understanding the importance of civil disobedience during times of political and cultural change. By engaging with the stories in these digital archives, students learned about the diversity of opinions and opportunities that defined eras of global protest, making transnational connections between Black intellectual life and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century politics and revolutions. Students learned that the anti-apartheid movement matters because it taught individuals to sympathize and act on the suffering of others, whether in their neighborhood, in their state, in their nation, or on the other side of the globe. Our current cultural climate highlights a similar level of uncertainty about the intentions of our governments, the state of international peace, health and security, and the importance of human rights at home and abroad. Through this project, I believe my students were able to view the anti-apartheid movement as a model for future action and change.

Such successes have also moved their way into my introductory courses at my current position at Florida Memorial University, South Florida’s only HBCU. Just as a level of adaptability was required during COVID-19, this new position has caused its own frustrations with our ability as teachers to engage with the past. But despite recent legislation limiting the teaching of Black diaspora history in university classrooms, I’ve continued to use curated archival collections as a foundation for student research and engagement with online digital sources. One of these is a WPA slave narrative project. This assignment lets students access one of the most extensive and informative collections of oral interviews regarding the history of American slavery: the WPA’s seventeen-volume Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves (1941) and its digitally preserved database, “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1938,” of the Library of Congress.

An archive of some 2,300 recollections from formerly enslaved Americans that have been transcribed and preserved as typescripts, the collection offers a treasure trove of primary sources.

Just like in the SAHA 1913 Land Act project, students were confronted with the faces and words of people who lived through periods of immense change, while also engaging with critical questions about the nature of memory, narrative, and the advantages and limitations of oral history. Students encountered not only the horrors of the institution of slavery but also the unnerving “positive” memories that some African Americans had of their experiences. Wrestling with these contradictions, students came face to face with how this archive is, according to American historian Lawrence W. Levine, “a mélange of accuracy and fantasy, of sensitivity and stereotype, of empathy and racism.” The very fact that these interviews occurred in the 1930s and in the living memory of some of their oldest relatives resonated significantly with the students, who reveled in the ability to literally hear the voices of their ancestors who lived through
the time of enslavement.

And finally, I would be remiss to not mention the material culture assignment that really got the ball rolling in my mind for many of these projects: a group project looking at a resource used by African Americans to travel across the country during the Jim Crow era, The Negro Motorist Green Book or simply The Green Book.\(^{18}\) First created for my introductory US history courses before the pandemic, this group project was a means to facilitate basic research skills for my intro classes, all linked to a common collection of historical material. Like thousands of African Americans throughout the twentieth century, each group traced a trip across the United States and the Jim Crow South using the Green Book. Beginning with the near full list of Green Books available at the New York Public Library, the group selected a city bordering the demarcation line between “the North” and “the South” and mapped a journey from their starting city to a city in Florida.\(^{19}\) Then, they presented their findings, including the history of the locations they would have stopped at, to the class or in a recorded presentation, depending on the timing of the class. I’ll note the intention of this presentation was not to have students “role-play” as travelers but instead to help highlight the possible paths individuals may have taken during this era and the difficulties they could potentially have encountered during their travels.

The success of this project has been illustrated in the generally positive feedback from students, as it allows them a chance to use their research skills from previous projects in an organized, focused digital environment. During the research process for this assignment, the most surprising element for students was finding that many of the locations no longer exist, highlighting not only the changing nature of Black entrepreneurship in this country but also the changing landscape of the nation. This produced both enlightening and interesting conversations all around in the post-project discussion in class.

Because I have had such valuable experiences with these online projects, I encourage educators to think about their approaches to pedagogy and to consider using such digital archives in the classroom. To be sure, my pedagogy can and will continue to evolve and improve because of the types of tools and resources that online collections hold and the historical scholarship that is being produced because of them. From these sources, students’ learning and researching can continue to engage with the unique and compelling story of the Black diaspora as revealed by vital archival collections.

There is an isiZulu phrase, “Akulanga lashona lingenazindab,” which roughly translates to “No day goes without its stories.” Stories of individual experience are central to how and why we teach, as well as the connections we make in the classroom and our own research. These stories found in the archives push our students to take part in articulating, creating, and using stories regardless of whether they are engaging with them in person or online. The stories have not changed, but the way we teach them has.

\(^{18}\) I should note that I first implemented this project a year before the 2018 film of that same title, though students often admit the film was the first time they were aware of this piece of Black history.

Appendix A

Guidelines “Protest and Promise” African Activist Archive Project

(15% of Total Grade)

This project will build on the material we will cover in Week 13: Global Protests on Race and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. The anti-apartheid movement was one of the last great human rights campaigns of the twentieth century and perhaps one of the most important and wide-ranging human rights struggles of that century. The overthrow of the racist South African regime that initially came to power in 1948 has been considered one of the most enduring legacies of the postcolonial era. But this struggle was not isolated exclusively to the nation of South Africa or even the African continent. Instead, it was a global struggle that involved citizen activists, community organizations, and grassroots campaigns that helped topple the apartheid state.

For this assignment, you will dig into one “focus” of activism in the United States or across the globe that supported the struggles of South African peoples against colonialism, apartheid, and social injustice from the 1950s through the 1990s. This focus can be in the form of a city’s actions against apartheid, a smaller campaign within the wider anti-apartheid movement, or a group or organization that was part of the larger anti-apartheid struggle. Your focus cannot be a specific leader or politician or organizer, as the purpose of this project is partially to highlight that citizen activism was a group endeavor and not precipitated by a single individual. If you are interested in what a fully formed focus might look like, I have included in this assignment module a copy of an article I wrote on anti-apartheid protests in Orlando to give you an example.

Once you select your focus, you will investigate the history and composition of this piece of the movement. Why and when was this focus created? Did geographic context influence this focus? Who was involved with this focus, and how did it resonate with the local population? How did this focus fit within the larger struggle against apartheid? And, finally, was the focus a success or failure?

Answering these questions will require extensive research on your part, moving beyond a simple Google search. In fact, you will be making primary use of a series of online archives curated for just this kind of research. One of the best sources for this movement is the African Activist Archive of Michigan State University. This fantastic database of posters, pamphlets, photos, campaign buttons, and speeches will provide your research foundation for your focus. African Activist Archive

You are also encouraged to use several other archives that will help provide a further foundation and global connection to your focus.

- The “Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa” archive, formerly through Aluka, now through JSTOR, filled with thousands of documents and primary sources: Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa

- The “Forward to Freedom” archive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement based out of the UK:
Forward to Freedom

- The “South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy” collection hosted by Michigan State, a broader collection of material on the history of South Africa and the protest movements connected to it: South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy

You are encouraged to use all of these resources, but you must, at the very minimum, make use of the African Activist Archive.

This assignment will be graded in two ways:

1. You will present your project to the rest of the class, illustrating the composition and historical details of your particular focus for the anti-apartheid campaign. The presentation should have visual sources and will be no more than ten minutes. You are required to submit the visuals of your presentation (in PowerPoint or another presentation program) before class. Your presentations will be during the second half of our final class session.

2. Each student will write a short essay on what they found regarding their focus, including answering the questions listed above. This essay should be between 900 and 1,400 words and include citations, sources, and images. Sources should preferably be academic, public history, or archival sources and illustrate a level of intellectual rigor in your research. You will turn in your essay online before our final class session.
Appendix B

Guidelines for “WPA Slave Narrative Project” Project
(10% of Total Grade)

This project is designed to allow you to access one of the most extensive and informative collections of oral interviews regarding the history of American slavery: the Works Progress Administration’s seventeen-volume Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves (1941). The complete collection was digitally preserved by the Library of Congress in 2001 and will work as the foundation of your project.

First, you should familiarize yourself with the “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1938” of the Library of Congress.

I suggest that you read over the short history of the collection available [here](https://www.loc.gov/rr/oralhistory/ oral_history_of_slavery.html).

Once you have familiarized yourself with the collection, you will find two narratives from formerly enslaved individuals. You should find examples from two different individuals living in two different states. Read over these narratives and take note of what these narratives can tell us about the lives and tribulations of these individuals.

Once you have selected your figures, you will address these key questions:

- Who were these individuals and what was their experience as an enslaved person (this should be a brief summary of the interviews)?
- What do these interviews reveal about the nature of the enslaved experience in American history?
- How does this experience of enslavement differ between the two states discussed?
- What problems, difficulties, or contradictions do you find within these narratives? This can include discrepancies in facts, the position of the interviewer, inconsistencies in narrative, or general limitations of oral history.

You will write a short essay answering all the questions listed above. While you will use the “Born in Slavery” database as the central resource for your primary source information, the information related to the broader context of African American history will require some level of research on your part, moving beyond a simple Google search. These sources should be of an academic nature and illustrate a level of intellectual rigor in your research. You must have a minimum of three sources beyond the “Born in Slavery” database. I suggest starting with the library and databases available to you.

This essay should be between 600 and 800 words and include your sources, citations, and a works cited page/bibliography. (Your list of sources, citations, and a works cited page/bibliography do not apply to your word count.)
AUTHOR BIO

Jacob Ivey is an associate professor of history at Florida Memorial University, South Florida’s only HBCU. He is a historian of the British Empire in southern Africa and issues of race, conflict, and protest in South Africa and the Black diaspora across the globe. His first book, Policing, Race, and the Formation of Nineteenth-Century British Colonial Natal (2024), was published with Palgrave Macmillan’s Britain and the World series. His current project is on anti-apartheid movements in Florida and their links to the global anti-apartheid movements of the late twentieth century.

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