

The Black Liberation Mosaic:¹ South Africa and Mississippi

Jeremy Ball and Amy Lynn Wlodarski

Correspondence to be sent to: E-mail: wlodarsa@dickinson.edu and ballj@dickinson.edu.

Abstract: In 2008, students from Dickinson College conducted dozens of interviews in South Africa and Mississippi as part of a semester-long comparative oral history project studying the movements that challenged white supremacist governments in South Africa and Mississippi. Interviewees included educators, political activists, historians, archivists, musicians, politicians, and business leaders. Students completed supplementary coursework in the fields of oral history, African and American history, and ethnomusicology in order to provide an interdisciplinary foundation for the fieldwork components. In 2010, the Oral History Association recognized The Black Liberation Mosaic with the Postsecondary Teaching Award for “incorporating the practice of oral history in the classroom in an exemplary way.”

Keywords: apartheid, Black Consciousness Movement, civil rights movement, memorials, music, oral history

The Black Liberation Mosaic grew out of the research interests of three Dickinson College faculty, all of whom regularly utilize oral history methods and sources in their scholarship. Drawing from their expertise in South African history, African American history, and ethnomusicology, the faculty designed a comparative mosaic that examined two of the most internationally significant Black Liberation Movements of the twentieth century: the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa from the 1950s through the 1990s and the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s to 1980s. The mosaic instruction and fieldwork spanned three locations—King Williams Town (KWT), South Africa, Coahoma County, Mississippi, and Carlisle, Pennsylvania—with the research team collectively comprised of thirteen students, eight from Dickinson College and—for the

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South Africa research—five affiliated with the Steve Biko Foundation based in KWT. Their research, not only primarily conducted through the collection of oral histories but also including on-site archival and bibliographic research, explored how African and African American people in small communities responded to and eventually defeated white supremacy in two of its most infamous manifestations: apartheid South Africa and Jim Crow Mississippi.

Recognizing the interdisciplinary nature of the two movements, both of which expressed their humanitarian goals through political, educational, philosophical, and cultural channels, the mosaic was divided into four small research groups: Black Consciousness Philosophy, Lived Experiences, Protest Music, and Memorial Culture. Two students were assigned as project leaders for each group, providing them with opportunities of academic autonomy, leadership, and responsibility. In support of the goals of fieldwork, students enrolled in four academic courses at Dickinson designed to expose them to the history and culture of both movements as well as the ethics and methods of oral history. This included two history courses (South African History, Civil Rights Movement), one music course (Black Liberation Musics), and an oral history method course (see Appendix). The multidisciplinary nature of the mosaic drew interested students from the following majors: Africana studies, American studies, education, environmental studies, history, Middle East studies, and music.

In the summer, students completed a required reading list and met for an intensive oral history workshop at Dickinson prior to departure for South Africa. Readings included: Nelson Mandela's autobiographical *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995), ethical essays from the ethnomusicological reader *Shadows in the Field* (1997), and selections from Valerie Yow's *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd edn (2005). During this time, the students also acquired the necessary technological training (video cameras, digital voice recorders, cinemagraphic techniques) and exposure to various interview strategies: the documentation and trajectory of life histories, how to design effective questions, respecting interviewer-subject boundaries, collaborative strategies for team interviews, the importance of field notes, and ethical concerns (fig. 1).

Students then traveled to South Africa, where their historical engagement of the anti-apartheid movement spanned two arenas. During an initial stay in Cape Town, students visited with local residents, completed short reflective assignments, and visited several museums associated with the anti-apartheid movement and the life of Nelson Mandela. These early engagements with South African memory provided the basis for several small discussion sessions, which set the tone for later field investigations and interviews. The mosaic then



Fig. 1. Learning to use video equipment. King William's Town, South Africa. From left to right: Professor Jeremy Ball, Corinthia Jacobs, Tiffany Mané, Ryan Koons, and Flosa Tejada. Photo courtesy of authors.

transferred to KWT, one of the centers of the Black Consciousness Movement, where they lived with host families for the duration of their stay. While in KWT, students worked in collaboration with five local students from the neighboring townships, the Steve Biko Foundation (<http://www.sbf.org.za/>), and various area schools, clinics, and universities. They conducted interviews with well-known figures from the movement, including the widow of Steve Biko, and also collected the life histories of South Africans who worked in hospital clinics, schools, and the African National Congress military branch during apartheid. In addition to their field interviews, students also completed two days of archival research at Fort Hare University, Mandela's alma mater, and holder of the Liberation Archive. There, they realized the importance of supplementing their oral research with various forms of media, ranging from publications and private correspondence to recordings of various freedom songs.

One emphasis of the mosaic was exploration of the broader movement within a local community, an element that students emphasized in their research. For example, in an effort to trace the legacy of the movement, one team focused on current efforts to develop an anti-apartheid memorial culture in KWT, including interviews with local historians, museum curators, and the provincial director for heritage and tourism. In some cases, these interactions posed practical challenges

for the American students, who conducted interviews in a foreign language (Xhosa), with many of them relying on their South African collaborators. The transcription and translation process that ensued was also challenging—students lacked access to computers for transcription and had to do most of the work by hand—but ultimately rewarding, requiring South African and American colleagues to discuss collectively how certain Xhosa phrases should be translated into English. For those students working with protest music, questions arose as to how to transcribe and notate performance, with students resolving to describe movements in the transcripts, notate songs, and produce illustrations and sketches of certain scenes.

Upon returning to Dickinson, students embarked on intensive coursework designed to complement their experience in South Africa and prepare them for upcoming fieldwork in Mississippi. Within the Oral History course, students completed their South African interview transcripts for submission to the Oral History Archive at Dickinson (<http://www2.dickinson.edu/departments/commstud/archives.html>), learning about proper formatting and documentation requirements. In South African History, the taped interviews were used to design four podcasts that required students to incorporate their oral histories into analytical essays documenting one facet of the Black Consciousness Movement. In Civil Rights History, students began an intensive reading program in preparation for fieldwork in Mississippi, while in Ethnomusicology, students explored various anthropological approaches to South African and African American music in preparation for an assignment to capture field recordings of the Delta Blues.

For two and half weeks in October and November, the same Dickinson students lived with host families in and around Clarksdale, Mississippi, located in the Delta, an important center of the civil rights movement and home to some of its most significant leaders as well as to leading blues musicians of the twentieth century. Student teams focused on the same four themes they researched in South Africa: music, monuments and symbols, education, and the politics of the movements against white supremacy. This approach allowed students to draw comparative parallels between the two movements, a process that also helped shape their interview questions. In these teams, students interviewed local activists in the civil rights movement, educators, politicians, blues musicians, a leading local businessman, and the owner of a local cotton plantation. Students supplemented their interviews with daily archival research in the Clarksdale Public Library, which houses an important archive of local history, and in the archives of the University of Mississippi at Oxford. Hearing stories about segregation in Jim Crow Mississippi, often illustrated in blues music, brought home to students in a visceral way the courage, achievements, and limitations of

the civil rights movement. Being able to make explicit comparison to their research in South Africa allowed students to analyze larger social and political systems. Upon return to Dickinson, these materials were similarly transcribed and developed into educational podcasts and a detailed web archive of the project. Students further disseminated their work in an all-campus presentation for their peers, faculty, and local community members.

Overall, the mosaic reflected our educational philosophy that students learn best when they are fully engaged in intensive study of a subject and are able to apply classroom learning to real-world situations. Students were encouraged to integrate various modes of analysis and research (anthropological, archival, bibliographic, historical, fieldwork, musical) in their own work, allowing them to produce well-evinced and interdisciplinary studies of the communities in question. We also stressed the ethical responsibilities of working within a global setting, an aspect that the students took particularly seriously. Throughout the project, students worked collaboratively with local contributors to produce work that reflected the global perspectives and priorities of all involved, not just themselves. They also provided service work in each location, as a means of thanking the communities for their contributions to the study. The bonds formed between the students and their global partners were deep and meaningful, and when after our return to the U.S. we learned of the death of one of our South African collaborators, Phumza Williams, to illness, the students dedicated the Web site to her memory and vision (<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/blacklib/participants/>). One final aspect of our mosaic was the development of professional skills and dissemination of the research within a broader academic community. Six students presented their mosaic research (four at the Oral History Association Meetings in Pittsburgh and Louisville), two had their podcast on music in the anti-apartheid and civil rights movements accepted to the *Esu Review* (<http://www.esureview.org/>), the undergraduate research journal in Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania (publication forthcoming), and two worked beyond the semester to complete the Web site.

The student-created Web site includes a rich archive of transcripts, podcasts, community profiles, and photos. Students' analyses focus on the four topics students researched during their fieldwork: Black Liberation, Lived Experience (education and health care), Memorial, and Music. For example, to learn about the role of music listen to the podcasts created by Ryan Koons and Atandi Anyona, <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/blacklib/2008/11/07/music/>, or to understand how two local communities have approached memorials and commemoration since the end of sanctioned white supremacy listen to James Chapnick and Corinthia Jacobs's podcast: <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/blacklib/2008/11/07/memorials/>.

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One of the proudest achievements of our mosaic has been making verbatim transcripts of interviews available on the Web site. Sharing these transcripts with our host communities and indeed anyone interested in the subject gave everyone involved in the research a feeling of tremendous accomplishment and a sense of contributing to the proud histories of these two struggles.

Appendix

History 315: comparative oral histories

Mon./Thurs. 1:30–2:45, Community Studies Center

Instructors	Office	E-mail
Kim Rogers, Ph.D.	Community Studies Center	rogersk@dickinson.edu
Jeremy Ball, Ph.D.	Denny 019	ballj@dickinson.edu

Course overview

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the study and process of oral history interviewing, writing, and analysis in two related, but very different communities—the black South African community in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, and the African American communities around Clarksdale, Mississippi. Although oral history is perhaps the oldest form of historical documentation, it has only been considered as a legitimate form of historical inquiry in the U.S. in the last decades of the twentieth century. This course will focus on the following areas: the history of the in-depth interview, interview-based projects and analyses, the processing of interviews: transcribing interviews and creating archival collections, methodology, and theoretical considerations. Most of our work will focus on two forms of oral history inquiry: the individual biography and the community-based project. Each student will be expected to create question lists and topic lists for specific narrators, to record and videotape interviews, to transcribe several interviews, and to deal appropriately with issues of legality and ethics, including issues of informed consent in cross-cultural contexts. Students are also expected to create a website that details their work in South Africa and Mississippi.

Required books

Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2005).