

The Collaborative Archive from the African Diaspora: Access and Outreach

Béatrice Skokan, Yolanda Cooper, and Jameatris Rimkus
University of Miami Libraries

Abstract

In 2009 the University of Miami (UM) Libraries' Special Collections established a partnership with seven area agencies and institutions to create the Collaborative Archive from the African Diaspora (CAAD). The implementation of the CAAD enables a shared access and delivery platform that provides organization, management, and discovery tools for all archival materials in all formats across all collections. CAAD partners work together, share expertise and training, and use archival processing methodology to provide infrastructure to enable and expedite comprehensive discovery across partner collections. The partners include the Black Archive History and Research Foundation of South Florida, the African American Research Library and Cultural Center, the Hampton House, the Virginia Key Beach Trust, History Miami, Florida International University, and Florida Memorial University. Management efforts for archival materials at each of these agencies and institutions is sometimes severely challenged by inadequate and inconsistent funding and limited capital and human resources to sustainably preserve and provide access to these collected materials. The CAAD is an alliance to leverage resources and create opportunities for research and development for scholars and the community at large. Within the past five years developments and activities within the Collaborative have allowed for the expansion of the Libraries' civic engagement within South Florida's Black community and provided service learning opportunities and internships for students.



“Miss Carver High and Attendants” on a float in a parade, c. 1953-1964. The photograph was part of the “Glory in the Grove” exhibit.

Photo: Bob Simms

Courtesy of University of Miami, Special Collections

Introduction

At the crossroads of the Caribbean and Latin America, South Florida’s inhabitants reflect a multicultural richness that intersects with an extensive, undocumented history of the Black experience in South Florida. Within Miami-Dade and Broward Counties of Florida a number of individuals, agencies, and institutions have worked diligently to collect and preserve this history and culture for the community. However, at times inadequate and inconsistent funding and limited capital and human resources have severely challenged the sustainability, preservation and access to these collected materials. Most work independently managing their own holdings, unaware of other content found across the region, which makes it difficult to point researchers to the appropriate resource. To address these challenges, in 2009 the University of Miami (UM) Libraries worked together with regional partners to create the Collaborative Archive from the Af-

frican Diaspora (CAAD).¹ The collaboration crosses geographical, cultural and institutional boundaries and focuses not on ownership of materials, but on collaboration, access, and discovery. While the CAAD nomenclature encompasses all African Diaspora groups that are marginalized vis à vis a Western dominant culture, the collections reflect the multiplicity of historical encounters of African Americans, Bahamians, Jamaicans, Haitians, Afro-Brazilians, and Afro-Cubans and their distinctive contributions to the southern historical landscape of the United States. The implementation of the Collaborative created an understanding across all partner institutions and agencies to leverage infrastructure, resources, and expertise in order to provide access to these hidden cultural treasures to the broader community.

Overview

The CAAD project was originally developed to address a disparity of archival collections within the UM Libraries regarding the peoples of African descent and the black experience in South Florida. While the Libraries' Special Collections contained a wealth of resources from Latin America, the Caribbean, as well as Floridiana, very little was available to document the history of the black experience in this region. It is difficult to determine how this collection weakness developed but, as F. Gerald Ham notes, archivists are at times closely tied to the interests of historians.² With segregation in place at the University of Miami until 1961 there was more than likely very little interest in documentation available on the Black community in South Florida. It was in 1961 that the University admitted qualified students without regard to race or color. Since then research interest in the black experience has significantly increased based on the number of requests received from faculty and students for primary sources. In 2008 the Libraries implemented a strategic plan with specific objectives to strengthen the special collections. It was at this point that the Libraries identified the African Diaspora as a collection development priority and began to plan for an enhanced infrastructure to provide electronic access and delivery of these materials.

With a significant mass of information and materials related to the African Diaspora, it was necessary to determine a focused collection development plan for subject specialists. We based our strategic areas of focus on connections with relevant curriculum, areas of research, and student, scholar, and community requests. Historically the Libraries have established partnerships with University Faculty teaching courses relevant to the Civil Rights Era and Caribbean History. These faculty members have frequently offered project development and community service opportunities to their students to provide real-life experiences and to expand their knowledge in these areas. For example, the History Department offers classes in African American History, the Civil Rights Movement, and Ca-

ribbean and Latin American History, and initially faculty would look to the surrounding community to identify relevant private archives. Our collection development goals, however, were to acquire primary source materials that would satisfy needs for research, teaching, and learning not only for the UM community but also for surrounding colleges and universities and, in some cases, for elementary and secondary education too.

In our search for relevant archival collections we were able to locate and acquire three significant collections documenting Civil Rights activism in Miami: the Dr. John O. and Marie Faulkner Brown Papers, the Theodore R. Gibson Family Papers, and the Bob Simms Collection. The acquisition of the Bob Simms Collection was a catalyst for future acquisitions and an introduction to the area's most trusted archivists. Mr. Bob Simms provided our "entrée" to the community and guided the Libraries' archivists to the significant history collected by agencies, churches, and individuals within the region. These were receptive to our efforts due to their familiarity with Bob Simms' activist work in the community. In addition, collection-related events and exhibitions generated media attention, exposing the materials and prompting meetings most specifically with the Brown family and the Founder of the Black Archive History and Research Foundation of South Florida, the trusted Black archive of the region.

The Black Archive was founded by Dr. Dorothy Fields in 1977 to preserve the documentary and photographic history of Black Miami and South Florida from 1896 to present. Its collections document both the exceptional and the everyday activities of Black South Florida life, focusing on the South Florida African Diaspora and the Jim Crow era. The Archive has received funding from Miami-Dade County and from the IMLS, but the operations are funded primarily through grants and donations. While the Black Archive is an exceptional operation funding challenges can occur and limit staffing, supplies, and other resources. University of Miami Archivists were introduced to Dr. Fields by Robert Simms and they also participated as consultants for their IMLS grant. The relationship grew over time and we began to learn more about the Archive's mission to the community and its holdings.

While we were able to increase our holdings of materials from the African Diaspora, our efforts began to uncover issues placing these historical records and cultural memories at great risk. In our exploration of the region we discovered an extensive wealth of materials, some with adequate resources and others with limited facilities, human resources, technology, and expertise. Due to the limited resources available many of these materials were hidden to researchers and the community and at risk for deterioration without adequate preservation strategies. It also became evident that many of the materials within these collections belonged to the community and should remain in the hands of those who had worked so diligently to preserve the historical records. Consequently we adjusted our strategy and began to focus on building a collaboration to empower these

institutions and a partnership that would be mutually beneficial for all contributors. The Libraries had relevant expertise and technology and the area archives provided the cultural memory and context to expose the rich history and culture of the region. To advance this new objective, we offered training in our archival methodology, internal workflows, and infrastructure, but we encouraged the maintenance of some of the strategies already employed by area agencies and institutions to acknowledge and learn from already existing insight and to gain trust. Shilton and Srinivasan note that reconciliation with community efforts allows the community and institutions to learn and gain reciprocally about the appropriate context of the materials and collective memory, as well as to promote trust within the multicultural community.³

With our focus now changed to access rather than ownership, efforts turned to recruiting partners and establishing the CAAD. The core provisions of the Collaborative included leveraging resources, incorporating more flexible methodology for processing, and building a supporting infrastructure to enable organization and discovery. The Libraries worked collaboratively with those institutions and agencies willing to join the Collaborative to develop guidelines and goals for the alliance that would benefit all partners and give each a voice in future direction. A Steering Committee was convened, composed of individuals designated by partner institutions to discuss activities, priorities, training, and emerging issues. The Committee agreed to the adoption of “More Product, Less Process” (MPLP) archival processing concept/method.⁴ The Libraries, already adept at Archon,⁵ encouraged adoption of the software and assisted partners in the implementation of a separate instance for their particular location. If the infrastructure was not available at their location, we provided access to the Libraries’ instance for Partners to input relevant materials. Ultimately the collaborative works as a partnership to:

- Encourage opportunities for sharing and collaboration in training, expertise, programs, events, and resources
- Share best practices and expertise in collection development, inventory, processing, preservation, and digitization
- Develop a sustainable archive of finding aids and other materials creating a fully searchable resource for discovery, research, and information
- Build and promote community awareness
- Develop service learning and civic engagement opportunities, research projects, internships, and fellowships for students

Relationships and Collections

The CAAD membership reflected the mosaic of groups that inhabit the Florida landscape and had the cultural insights that allowed them to make the initial contacts with the community that would provide more visibility to “ethnic” archives. As previously stated, the Libraries acquired three collections that were donated by African American activists involved in civil rights advocacy in Miami in the 1960s. They are relevant to the history of the region, rich in content and reflective of the complexities of the racial encounters in the 1960s in the South with concurrent black Caribbean and South American migrations. Individuals such as Bob Simms, a community leader and a trustee of the UM, were pivotal to the conversations that took place around the concept of an African Diaspora archives. His own life and family history is rooted in the tradition of the Tuskegee Institute where his parents were faculty members. A teacher and avid photographer, he understood the importance of comprehensive historical narratives and helped to bridge contacts between the community and the institutional archives. In concrete terms, he facilitated introductions to other leaders whose papers were also included and was an articulate advocate for the documenting activity. The librarians and archivists organized public events to showcase, among other things, photographs of segregated communities, correspondence, campaign materials, and various historical documents from Black politicians, generals, pastors, and citizens so that new conversations could replace the apparent silencing of these events within some cultural institutions.



Community leaders at the St. Alban's Day Nursery groundbreaking ceremony, c. 1950. Reverend Theodore Gibson is holding a sign reading “On this site St. Alban's Day Nursery will erect a new nursery building dedicated to the welfare of young citizens.” The photograph was part of the “Glory in the Grove” exhibit.

Photo: Bob Simms

Courtesy of University of Miami, Special Collections

Lectures, exhibits, and tangible research with the materials became tools for education, mechanisms by the “majority institution of the “minority” point of view”, and public testimonies for marginalized communities. Against a background of school segregation and derogatory labeling it became crucial not only to break intellectual barriers by reifying silenced and forgotten cultural contributions, but also for physical bodies to inhabit formerly prohibited spaces. Archiving became a meaningful lived experience that placed a positive value on the “other” identity. This otherness is seen in a tangible way in the Theodore R. Gibson Family Papers which trace the encounters of Black Bahamian immigrants, who settled in South Florida’s Coconut Grove, with NAACP advocacy in the 1960’s as they were confronted with the threat of constant gentrification in the 21st century. The Theodore R. Gibson Family Papers also reflect the complexities of “ethnic” categorization through the microcosm of school desegregation well into the 1990s with nomenclature changing from the “Bi-Racial School Desegregation Committee” to a “Tri-Racial School Desegregation Committee” that attempts to be inclusive of Hispanic immigrants from the Caribbean.⁶

In the past two years the Libraries’ Special Collections librarians have also emphasized reaching out to more recent marginalized communities that have entered the public discourse with the label of “illegal immigrant.” For instance, UM Special Collections librarians have focused on documenting the Haitian Diaspora whose historical contributions to South Florida History were not reflected within the over 500 archival collections curated by the UM repository in spite of the group’s significant immigrant presence in the region. New acquisitions include the records of the Haitian Women of Miami, an organization that advocates for the social, economic and political interests of the Haitian Diaspora. Special Collections also hosted additional public events on “Archiving Haitian Memory” where Haitian-American Marleine Bastien, a feminist and immigrant rights activist, was invited to speak on issues of human rights, due process, and health care for the poor, women, and children and the historical contributions of Haitian immigrants.

Furthermore, the UM libraries have started oral history initiatives to capture all aspects of South Florida’s African Diaspora experience. We are currently conducting interviews of Haitian activists and artists living in the diaspora. In the area of research, two graduate theses were completed as a result of the oral history field work undertaken under the context of the African Diaspora, one on political activism in Liberty city, and the other on Haitian music.⁷ Special Collections was thus able to support the research needs of graduate students while at the same time adding original and undocumented content to the repository through the oral history projects.

Special Collections librarians have also partnered with other UM offices that are involved in civic and community engagement. In the past couple of years the UM Special Collections have collaborated with the UM Law School Center

for Ethics and Public Service to produce a series of oral history movies around the topic of school segregation and desegregation in South Florida, using the George Washington Carver School as a microcosm. Interestingly, the UM Law School Center for Ethics and Public service also saw a need to be of service to the University's surrounding community by not only providing legal counsel but by preserving its cultural heritage through a series of oral history projects that would focus on the experience of Carver students as they moved out of segregated school systems in the 1960's and beyond.



Cub and Boy Scouts of Coconut Grove, 1953

Group photograph of the Scouts about to take their first train ride, a trip from Miami to Fort Lauderdale. The photograph was part of the "Glory in the Grove" exhibit.

Photo: Bob Simms

Courtesy of University of Miami, Special Collections

The exhibit "Glory in the Grove" consists of photographs from the Bob Simms' Collection featuring the school images of George Washington Carver faculty, students, sports, and parades that support the narrative of the oral history interviews. The project bridges the apparently disparate members of Coconut

Grove historical black churches, the UM law school interns, Special Collections librarians, and students from a private high school to create a collaborative narrative which includes context from the interviewees' points of view. Community outreach has come full circle through the Bob Simms Collection with instruction in primary source materials, meetings with community members in Special Collections, displays of historic documents, and interviews conducted by high school students under the tutelage of law students. This collaborative model has been of great interest to faculty and students interested in bridging scholarship and civic engagement.

Archival Methodology

Since 2009, the UM Libraries' Special Collections has officially implemented the More Product Less Process approach to address their own backlog and were able to successfully publish collection level record descriptions for approximately 90% of their archival collections by using Archon. As previously stated, providing access to the content remained the overarching goal of the project, but lack of resources was a challenge for the CAAD partnership. In an effort to address the backlogs and standardize the organization of information under the CAAD umbrella, the UM libraries organized More Product Less Process and an Archon training workshop for archival staff who were part of the CAAD initiative. The Libraries developed and led group training sessions on DACS single level minimum collection descriptions in conjunction with hands on training in Archon. Individual follow up sessions were provided to address questions specific to individual institutions. As previously noted some members hosted their own instance of Archon while others added their finding aids directly to the CAAD website. Publishing finding aids on the CAAD website brings together historical documents from various "minority" archives that were previously inaccessible and therefore hidden. As a result, the experiences and perspective of people of African descent, from Florida and the Caribbean, become more visible and find a place within the official structure of South Florida's network of educational institutions.

Education and Outreach

With the CAAD established and the influx of new collections and finding aids from CAAD Partners, we initiated an effort to inform Library Faculty and encourage integration of this new content into student instruction sessions as an additional tool for more outreach. To facilitate these efforts, a subject liaison from the UM Libraries' Education and Outreach department participated in the original team convened for the CAAD implementation. The Africana Studies librarian's primary function is to provide reference services, information literacy

instruction, and collection development for the Africana Studies program. Pursuant to this function, the Africana Studies librarian works closely with the Chair of the Africana Studies program as well as graduate students and faculty with a strong research interest in the African Diaspora, a diverse group given the multidisciplinary nature of the subject. In addition, the Africana Studies librarian coordinates and collaborates with library colleagues to acquire and provide access to the materials in this focused area of research. These duties and relationships expanded with the implementation of the CAAD and in turn enriched access and use of the CAAD.

Prior to the creation of the CAAD, the Africana Studies librarian would regularly direct students and faculty to archives outside of the UM Libraries' system, but many researchers expressed frustration when trying to access those materials. The resources were at times in multiple locations, unavailable for online access or adequate search and discovery. Also, with the limited human resources visiting hours were in some cases one day per week at only a few hours per day. Other frustrations were associated with the inability to direct researchers to the appropriate archive due to the lack of knowledge regarding available holdings. With the implementation of the CAAD, the researchers were able to discover more materials online and in some cases training in MPLP processing allowed for expedited processing, making more information discoverable and enhancing the user experience.

The published finding aids available through the CAAD's web site provide researchers with a single point of access across agencies and institutions and remote access for initial research, allowing them to determine what they need access to and the appropriate repository to visit. This single access point available through the CAAD also simplified and enriched bibliographic instruction sessions outlining guides to primary resources. Already acclimated to the UM web environment and the Libraries' systems such as Archon, students remained in a familiar setting when navigating the CAAD interface and the single point of access streamlined the search examples used for instruction and broadened the variety of resources demonstrated per session.

The single point web-based access found on the CAAD finding aid site has also proved valuable in enabling easier, more efficient analysis and evaluation of the CAAD Partner collections to include the Libraries. As we determine collection development strategies and future collaborations the site provides an organized content management system with the necessary administrative tools to compile useful data. Data can be used to identify gaps in subject areas and high use resources across the partnership, allowing for more focused collection development expansion, consolidating existing strengths while avoiding collection duplication between collaborative partners. Within the Archon system, we are also able to incorporate local subject headings to allow for more uniformity across collections and enhance discoverability.

On-site visits to the partner repositories in the development of collection assessments and inventories further aided in providing enriched reference to, instruction on, and collection development of the CAAD resources. This enhanced and intricate access to the materials found in the repositories allowed participants such as the Africana Studies Librarian an in-depth knowledge and experience with the materials to determine the type and condition of the materials and the facilities. This exposure to the collections not only aided in the arrangement but allowed for greater contextualization and a more complete description of collections. Knowledge of the resources and the facility that houses the materials encourages on-site tours, enhances instruction, and introduces culture and community to the students and faculty. Increased graduate student and faculty on-site exposure also assists in establishing collection development needs for the University community and an increase in outreach and civic engagement opportunities.

The development of the Collaborative Archive from the African Diaspora has been an exciting and enlightening experience for the Libraries, the faculty and students, and the community. The increased access to resources and the long-term relationships that have been established between the repositories, the caretakers of those repositories, the Libraries, and the University were well-worth the long, challenging, and politically complex road to the creation of CAAD. The CAAD has opened the door to future opportunities that we hope will include shared internships from library schools across the state; collaborative virtual exhibitions bringing like materials together to provide context and exposure to hidden collections; service learning opportunities for students on campus, at partner institutions, and in the community; and the possibility of collaborative grants to enhance infrastructure and expand partnerships across the state, country, and the world. Lastly, the development of this cultural repository advances the ethnic history of the region, creates new research agendas, and recognizes the Black experience in Florida history.

Endnotes

1. Collaborative Archive from the African Diaspora, <http://scholar.library.miami.edu/caad/>
2. Gerald F. Ham, "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (1975): 5-13.
3. Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections," *Archivaria* no. 63 (2007): 87-101.
4. Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208-263.
5. Archon, <http://www.archon.org/>
6. The Theodore R. Gibson Family Papers, University of Miami Libraries, <http://proust.library.miami.edu/findingaids/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&cid=582>
7. Rudo Kemper, "Taking Back the Land: Social Mobilization and Radical Politics in Liberty City, Florida," (University of Miami, August 2011) and Kevin F. Mason, "Counternarratives of the Diaspora: Haitian Musical Performance in World Beat Markets" (Master of Music, University of Miami, May 2012), http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_theses/341/.