



Archiving the Grassroots: An Exploration of the African Activist Archive Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the scholarly impact and theoretical basis of the African Activist Archive Project (AAAP). Founded in 2004, the AAAP is the most comprehensive effort focused on preserving the records of local and grassroots Southern African solidarity activism in the United States. By digitizing ephemera produced by local organizations and activists, often ignored in more elite, institutional archival efforts, the project has helped to transform the historiography around these campaigns in the U.S., making previously inaccessible materials available to researchers. Simultaneously, the project continually engages with ideas of documentation strategy and the social theory of appraisal as proposed by archival theorists.

Introduction

The 1994 collapse of apartheid in South Africa marked the close of a deeply shameful

chapter in history. For the archival community, this transition raised urgent concerns regarding the documentary record of this period. In the final years of apartheid, South African authorities frantically destroyed records, covering up state crimes and suppressing documentation of domestic resistance.^[1] Conversely, the post-apartheid governments in South Africa and Namibia engaged in massive archival undertakings, extensively documenting their countries' liberation movements.^[2] At the same time, traces of the international solidarity work that helped make apartheid untenable remain scattered and ephemeral, at constant risk of disappearance. This is especially true in the U.S., where mostly decentralized, grassroots solidarity efforts achieved major victories, including effective divestment campaigns and the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986. Since its founding, the African Activist Archive Project (AAP) represents the most significant effort to document this movement in the U.S. Operating at the intersection of digital humanities, transnational social movement history, and archival theory, the AAP demonstrates how grassroots digitization projects reshape historiography and collective memory.



Above Image: Screenshot of the African Activist Archive homepage. Source: African Activist Archive, accessed March 5, 2026.

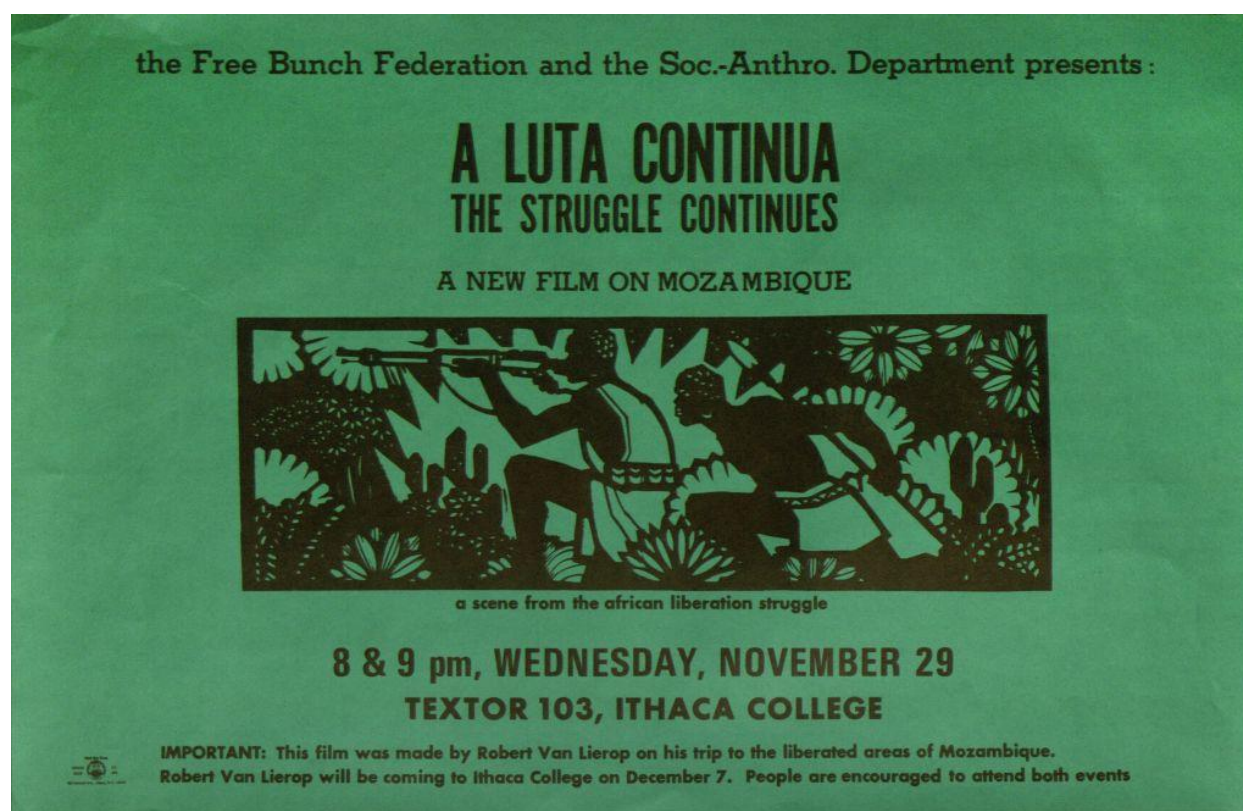
Context

Founded in 2004 by Richard Knight and Jennifer Davis, both prominent anti-apartheid activists, the AAAP focuses on documenting local and student groups concerned with Southern Africa.^[3] This focus is justified by the role of local organizing in building a base of support for the national movement, as well as practical concerns around the materials of groups that no longer exist and relied on volunteer staff. It is significant that the AAAP groups the struggles against colonialism and apartheid throughout Southern Africa together. In doing so, it challenges notions that the anti-apartheid organizing of the 1980s emerged spontaneously, or that the 1970s, a decade when grassroots organizing centered around the independence struggles in Portuguese Africa, were a fallow period for African solidarity movements in the U.S. In 2006, the African Studies Center at Michigan State University (MSU) became the sponsor of the AAAP. Despite this affiliation, the project is not a physical archive or repository. Instead, its primary objective is to digitize materials from former activists, prioritizing ephemera like posters, t-shirts, flyers, and newsletters.^[4]

Scholarly and Historiographic Implications

As it asserts the importance of grassroots organizing in the historical record, the AAAP has deeply impacted scholarship on African solidarity in the U.S. My own work, which focuses on the circulation of documentary films about Southern African liberation struggles amongst U.S. activists, would be almost impossible without the grassroots collection focus and digitization efforts of the AAAP. While some activist documentaries have survived and remain readily available online, many films have become lost to time. For instance, *Massacre at Nyazonia*, depicting the aftermath of a massacre perpetrated by the racist Rhodesian government, was screened to activists in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s, yet it is not readily available through any archive, digital or otherwise. Though the film itself may be unavailable, the AAAP enables researchers to reconstruct the life and circulation of *Nyazonia* and similar films through newsletters, advertisements, flyers, film catalogs, discussion guides, and other ephemera typically neglected in the archive.

^[5]



Above Figure: An example of some of the ephemera related to activist documentary films which has been preserved and digitized by the project. Source: Private Collection of Richard Knight, African Activist Archive, accessed March 1.

Beyond my specific research, the project has profoundly shifted scholarship around African solidarity activism in the U.S. at large, with documents from the AAAP liberally cited in the bibliographies of almost all major publications on the topic released since its inception. The access provided by the project allows scholars to excavate the lives of activists like Robert Van Lierop, a lawyer who abandoned his practice in order to make films about the national liberation struggle in Mozambique. The AAAP has made flyers and calendars advertising Van Lierop's films digitally available, allowing for the publication of secondary literature based on sources ignored by more institutionally focused archival projects.^[6] Increased scholarly interest in American solidarity with the Portuguese African liberation struggles is also greatly indebted to the AAAP.^[7] In turn, this has allowed scholars to more substantively explore the 1970s, a period long marginalized in Black internationalist literature.^[8]

Perhaps the most direct scholarly impact of the project came in the form of *No Easy*

Victories: African Liberation and American Activists over a Half Century, 1950–2000. Started in 2003 and published in 2007, *No Easy Victories* was conceived in a manner directly complementing the work of the AAAP. Featuring a number of oral histories, many from figures involved with the project, it provides a comprehensive history of African solidarity in the U.S., one that is still being expanded through a website featured on the AAAP’s [“Related Sites”](#) page.^[9] One of the most important scholarly interventions of *No Easy Victories* is its emphasis on local actors, as well as on the existence of a long-standing activist infrastructure which made the anti-apartheid campaigns of the 1980s possible. This impact further indicates that the AAAP is not an institution based on some impossible notion of archival objectivity, but itself an activist effort that allows veterans of African solidarity movements to shape their own histories and social memory.

Archival Theory and the AAAP

Among the project’s many achievements, some specific successes stand out, differentiating the AAAP from otherwise similar efforts. The AAAP’s most remarkable accomplishments come in the form of its collaborative and counterhegemonic relationships with a wide range of archival institutions, its focus on digitization and access, and its comprehensive approach to covering the entire universe of documentation related to African solidarity activism in the U.S. These achievements reflect the project’s deep engagement with ideas from archival theory, particularly documentation strategy and the social theory of appraisal.

Originally articulated by Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, documentation strategy is an archival concept that seeks to establish adequate documentation of a specific topic or event, within a multi-institutional context.^[10] The influence of documentation strategy is visible in the AAAP’s embrace of Warnow-Blewett’s notion that archivists should pursue an activist approach towards records creators.^[11] Staffed and advised by activists who were themselves creators of relevant records, the project began by reaching out to activists personally known by staff and encouraging them to locate and save, or even create, new collections of papers and multimedia materials.^[12] Outreach then expanded to include people suggested by activist friends of the

project and names that appeared in documentation.^[13] Efforts to produce new oral histories and interviews with former activists similarly reflect documentation strategy's emphasis on encouraging records creators to generate new documentation where necessary.^[14]

Predicated on the belief that archival work is inherently ideological, the social theory of appraisal, as proposed by Terry Eastwood, emphasizes the evidentiary value of the archive, as well as the importance of use as a criteria for appraisal.^[15] Since Eastwood, the social theory has been expanded upon by archivists like Verne Harris, who incorporates critical theory, postmodernism, and an emphasis on social justice into his analysis of the archive. Harris and like-minded theorists question the extent to which archives can ever reflect objective truth, arguing that rather than serving as passive repositories of information, archives are active agents in the construction of collective memory.^[16] In this perspective, archival objectivity is itself a quixotic goal, with the archivist playing an inherently political role. This view of the archive is foundational to the AAAP. Harris also interrogates how the silence of marginalized voices in the archive has been used to maintain oppressive power dynamics.^[17] In its self-identity as a "people's archive," primarily focused on local organizations otherwise missing from major collections, the AAAP commits itself to filling such archival gaps.^[18]

Related to its employment of documentation strategy, the AAAP avoids competition in its work, instead recognizing the importance of a decentralized archival world. Despite its affiliation with MSU, the project does not promote any particular institution; instead, it assists records creators with depositing materials wherever is most appropriate.

^[19] This eschewal of centralized archival practices in favor of building collaborative networks is deeply rooted in social theory of appraisal as well, aligning with Eastwood's opposition to archival centralization, on the basis that such practices limit the ability of the public to participate in memory formation.^[20] Simultaneously, the AAAP speaks to Verne Harris' concerns regarding archival gaps and silences created by the eschewal of grassroots experience and oral documentation.^[21] The grassroots-focused collection policy of the AAAP, its inclusion of community archives, and the project's deep

engagement with oral history all address these concerns.^[22]

Perhaps the greatest success of the AAAP has been its ability to make materials accessible to researchers and the public through digitization. Given its association with the AAAP, many of the digitized materials on the website come from MSU, although another forty activists have loaned their personal materials for digitization, without permanently depositing them. At the request of the Africa Fund and the American Committee on Africa, the AAAP hosts over 1400 digital files with metadata about these organizations.^[23] Although the comprehensive archives list provided by the AAAP does not have digitized records for all of the repositories or collections listed, it still enables researchers to see if any digitized items are freely available from a repository.

^[24] Digitization also expands access for scholars and the public in the Global South, although this aspect of the project admittedly raises thorny questions about archival control and neocolonialism within the archival community.^[25]

Conclusion

In confronting the silences created by decentralized grassroots organizing, the AAAP demonstrates that archives are active sites of memory formation. By prioritizing grassroots materials, embracing documentation strategy, and foregrounding the socially constructed nature of archival memory, the AAAP has established itself as a participant in the historiography of African solidarity movements in the U.S. Its work has reshaped modern scholarship on African solidarity activism, making the infrastructures of local organizing which sustained the movement across multiple decades visible. In doing so, the project challenges both archival centralization and historiographic narratives that privilege national leadership and the movements of certain decades over the grassroots organizing that sustained these campaigns. Although questions remain about the long-term sustainability of the project, its broader intervention into the politics of historical memory is already evident and impactful. The AAAP provides an outstanding example as to how activist-led archival initiatives can alter both what is preserved, and how history itself is written.

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Daniel Abelow was raised and has lived most of his life in New York City. He is currently a

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[1] This effort of the apartheid regime was exposed and investigated by Verne Harris, the archivist who served as liaison between the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the National Archives. See Verne Harris, "'They should have destroyed more': the destruction of public records by the South African state in the final years of apartheid, 1990-94," *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, No. 42 (2000): 29-56.

[2] For more information on the successes and challenges of the archives at the University of Fort Hare and the National Archives of Namibia see T.J. Stapleton and M. Maamoe, "An Overview of the African National Congress Archives at the University of Fort Hare," *History in Africa* 25, (1998): 413-22; Brian Williams and William K. Wallach, "Documenting South Africa's Liberation Movements: Engaging the Archives at the University of Fort Hare," in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg (Michigan: University of

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[7] Examples include Aurora Almada e Santos, "Action Needed: The American Committee on Africa and Solidarity with Angola," in *Transnational Solidarity: Anticolonialism in the global sixties*, eds. Zeina Maasri, Cathy Bergin and Francesca Burke (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 154-179; Martha Biondi, *We Are Internationalists : Prexy Nesbitt and the Fight for African Liberation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2025); and R. Joseph Parrott, *Dream the Size of Freedom : How African Liberation Mobilized New Left Internationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025).

[8] Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 3.

[9] See Minter, Hovey, and Cobb Jr., preface and acknowledgements to *No Easy Victories*, xii; and "Related Sites," African Activist Archive, accessed November 12, 2025, <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/related-sites/>.

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[13] Root, "Archiving the US Campus Anti-Apartheid Movement," 115.

[14] Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, 43.

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