

Building an Oral Repository of African Immigration Experiences in French: The Griotte Project's Reparative Historiographic Praxis Through Service-Learning at the University of Central Arkansas

K. Adele Okoli

Abstract

Central Arkansas and the campus of the University of Central Arkansas are home to a vibrant and growing community of multilingual French speakers of diverse cultural and national identities of West and Central Africa. French serves as an important tool of Black transnational community building, networking, and civic organization in our area. However, Black French speakers in the United States are often erased in official records of the presence and activities of immigrants in Arkansas, as well as from representation in French syllabi. To address and repair these gaps, the author, advanced French students, and community members are building a repository of oral histories of Arkansas African immigration stories in French, activating the university archive as a dynamic teaching and learning space. This article critically reflects on the translation of decolonial, antiracist, and feminist theory into pedagogical praxis through the coordination of a French-language oral history service-learning project from the academic perspective of an associate professor in French in affiliation with the Africana Studies and Gender Studies programs of a predominantly white public regional teaching university in the American South. The UCA Griotte Project entrusts students, the majority of whom are women of African descent, with collaborative leadership of the project to decentralize historical authority and destabilize the teacher/learner dichotomy. When we occupy and open the archive as a space of experiential learning and shared knowledge creation, we are transforming an institutional site of memory to write a more accurate, just, and inclusive history for the future.

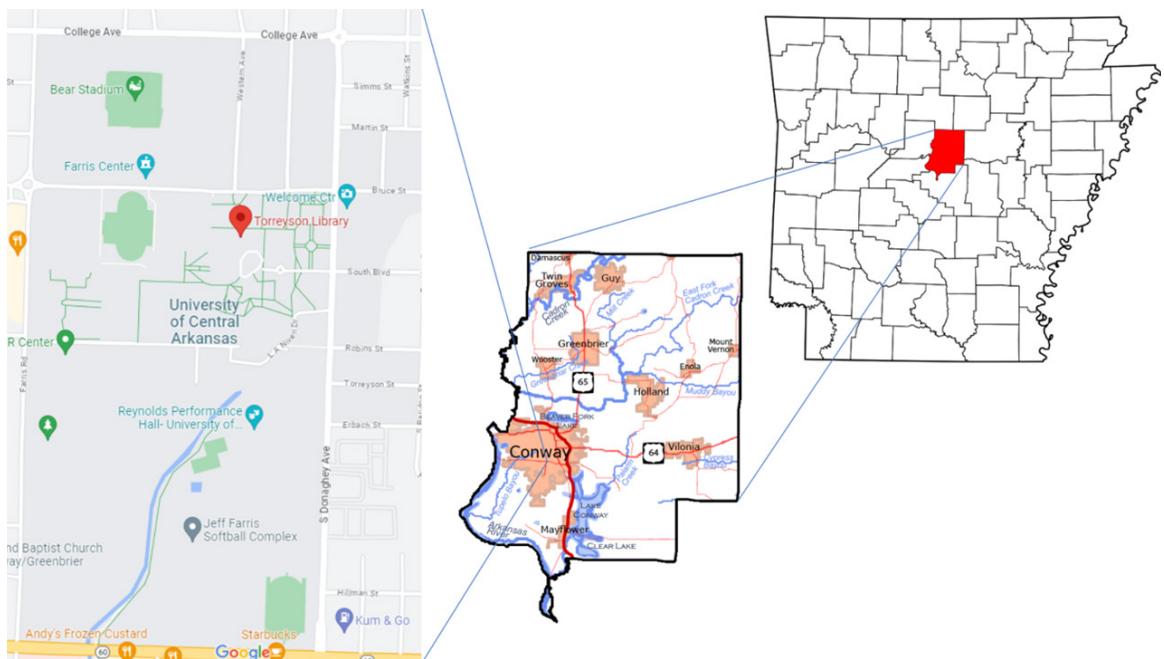
The University of Central Arkansas is a predominantly white comprehensive public regional university with an estimated full-time undergraduate student population of 7,301. The undergraduate student population is roughly 62% women-identified; 16% Black or African American; and 4% international (College Factual, 2022). While the details and campus impact of their experience are not reflected in general statistics, a vibrant and growing community of bi- and multilingual French speakers of diverse cultural and national identities of West and Central Africa, including Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, Mali, Rwanda, République du Bénin, and Senegal, reside in Central Arkansas. Many work and/or study at the University of Central Arkansas (see Figure 1).

In a typical semester, for example, our university campus is home to many French-speaking African students and staff members, and on average, one-third to one-half of the author's students in advanced French courses are students of African descent. According to the records of the Center

for Global Learning and Engagement, the campus office charged with supporting the academic success and overall wellness of international students, in recent years of institutional memory (2016–2022), the university has welcomed an average of 94 French-speaking international students per year. This is a conservative estimate that does not include French-speaking students who are already U.S. residents at the time of their application to the university (P. Bailey, personal communication, February 6, 2023).

As per P. Bailey (personal communication, February 6, 2023), associate vice president for global learning and engagement at the University of Central Arkansas, the Center for Global Learning and Engagement does not record international students from Rwanda or Canada as French-speaking in their annual statistics—although many of those students do speak French as their primary language—because English is the dominant official language of those countries. Neither does the office record multilingual French-speaking students who have already experienced

Figure 1. Maps indicating the campus of the University of Central Arkansas within Conway in Faulkner County, and Faulkner County within the state of Arkansas. Visualization by Dr. Joseph Y. Thomas, Assistant Professor of Computer Information Systems and Data Analytics, University of Central Arkansas, October 2, 2023.



intra-African transnational immigration to an officially anglophone country before arrival at the university—for example, those who have attended high school and some college in Nigeria, where English is the official language. Further, some African students come from international, intercultural, interfaith, multilingual families (for example, Nigerian-Ivorian), yet will select only one country of origin for institutional and immigration records.

French-speaking students across campus have been instrumental in the founding, leadership, and cultural activities of numerous registered organizations for student life and community service in the past few decades, including the Ivorian Association, the Griot Society, the African Students Association, and the Muslim Student Association. For 2023–2024, the author of this article was the faculty advisor for the highly active and well-organized African Students Association, led by an executive committee of student leaders hailing from diverse cultures and several countries. These students reflect the strength of family networks as well as social and cultural organizations of the transnational French-speaking African immigrant community in Central Arkansas. Many are multilingual, speaking French, English, and one

or more languages of African origin such as Hausa, Wolof, Lingala, Baoulé, and Dioula. As a language widely spoken in 29 African countries, French serves as an important tool of Black transnational community building, networking, and civic organization for speakers of diverse national and cultural origins in our local area.

However, this diverse Black French-speaking community is often erased in official records of the presence, activities, and experiences of immigrants in the region. For instance, in recent sociological and demographic reports, African immigrants are subsumed within the racial and national category of “African American,” with no mention of their great linguistic diversity and dexterity (Appold et al., 2013). Similarly, although these reports always highlight the presence, impacts, and experiences of hispanophone immigrant communities in the region, the author of this essay has been unable to find mention of Black francophone immigrant communities in such documents. For example, recent data collected in the American Community Survey makes no mention of Côte d’Ivoire, one of the most well-represented countries of origin among international students at the University of Central Arkansas, in its Table B5006: “Place of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population in the U.S.” (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2021). Likewise, no demographic data appears compiled or accessible regarding Black French speakers, or speakers of African languages, in Arkansas, as the national Census Bureau presents only the following options within its category of “Other Languages Spoken at Home according to the American Community Survey”: Spanish, Other Indo-European Languages, Asian and Pacific Island Languages, Other Languages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, Table S1601).

Oral Historiography of French-Speaking African Immigrants

Oral historiography is widely recognized as an important and effective way to integrate immigrants’ valuable perspectives and experiences into archives and shared place-based memory (Baird, 2012; Borja, 2017; Buccitelli, 2016). Yet the author of this essay has been unable to find evidence of oral history archives centering the lived experiences of French-speaking African immigrants to the United States. The most notable oral repository to seek and amplify the stories of African immigrants to the United States in their own words is an English-language collection housed at the University of Kentucky (2011) with the institutional scaffolding and support of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History (Musoni et al., 2019). This repository, which is exemplary in its well-organized digitization practices for accessibility to patrons, includes recorded stories of a few French-speaking interviewees exclusively in English, focusing on (and, in fact, archivally formalizing) their linguistic assimilation to English-speaking society. In this sense, the experiences of French-speaking African immigrants in the United States are underdocumented, or inadequately represented in state, archival, and other institutional forms of record that will go on to constitute the realm of historical knowledge in the future.¹ Celebrating its 50th year of operation in 2023, the Nunn Center is a well-established global leader in the collection of oral histories and of oral history in higher education teaching and learning. The Center houses over 18,000 oral history narratives and over 50 ongoing projects (University of Kentucky, 2023).

Archives such as the public one housed at the University of Central Arkansas are key “sites of

memory” and institutional power (a term coined by French philosopher and historian Pierre Nora, *Lieux de mémoire*, 1989). While archives offer unique opportunities for the cohesion of social memory as a medium for historical continuity and composite constellations of community identities (Carrier, 2000, p. 42), archives’ long history of fetishization of paper documents and written forms of record reinforces Eurocentric and colonial traditions of writing and thereby shaping history and communal memory. This overreliance on written documents to accurately reflect the reality of a given sociohistorical era stands in contrast to the predominantly oral traditions guiding the transmission of memory, history, and social values in many other cultures, including the *griots* and *griottes* of West and Central Africa—a class of poets, historians, and musicians who create and preserve shared intergenerational memory through interactive oral storytelling (Bidima, 1995; Hale, 2007; Figures 2–6 below). Further, while stories and perspectives of immigrants of African descent in French are widely studied in both fictional and nonfictional literary form, these stories overwhelmingly focus on immigration to metropolitan France and other French-speaking societies where French is not a marginalized or minority language as it is in the United States (including, for example, now canonical works in French of the 20th and 21st centuries by writers such as Diome [2001], Mabanckou [1998, 2009], Fanon [1952], and Césaire [1939, 1956]).

This systematic erasure of an intersectional linguistic, cultural, and racial minority community from archives and records of the United States is a form of institutional violence through silence that is further reproduced through the most established approaches to teaching the humanities, including the author’s field of French Studies. Further, from an educational perspective, the present and future of French—both as a language and as a field of study—are Black. Because the vast and growing majority of the world’s French speakers are of African descent (currently over 60% reside in the African continent), French Studies curricula and syllabi in the United States should center Black experiences and cultural forms of French expression in order to prepare students in higher education for the reality and diversity of the French-

¹ The author intends this term to describe the underrepresentation of French-speaking African lived experience in archives, records of state institutions, literary narratives, and common understandings of African American history in Central Arkansas. In this essay, it is not synonymous with the term “undocumented” or in any sense a comment on federal legal structures or statuses of immigrants.

Figures 2–4. Kongolese multi-instrumental musician, dancer, and griot Papa Titos Sompa (third from right in Figure 2) visited with UCA Griotte Project interns and advanced French students during the residency of New Orleans-based multimedia narrative artist Queen Cherice Harrison-Nelson of the Guardians of the Flame Maroon Society (center in Figure 2) to lead a trilingual participatory workshop on mobilizing African oral history traditions, storytelling, and art as activism.

Photos by K. Adele Okoli, Irby Hall, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas, September 7, 2023.

Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figures 5–6. Griot Papa Titos Somba and Queen Cherice Harrison-Nelson engaged the campus community in a public installation of The Plague Doctor, a performance intervention to mobilize community truth telling regarding the violence of white supremacy in the ongoing history of public education in Central Arkansas. Photos by Carl Olds. Alumni Circle (directly in front of Torreyson Library, which houses the archives, and Old Main), University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas, September 7, 2023.

During their residency, Papa Titos Somba and Queen Cherice Harrison-Nelson also activated The Plague Doctor at Little Rock's Central High School, standing on the site where a white mob attempted to block a group of Black students, the Little Rock Nine, from entry to desegregate the school in 1957.

Figure 5



Figure 6



speaking world. However, this is rarely the case in pedagogical praxis of most French programs in the United States (Organisation internationale de la francophonie, 2022).

University of Central Arkansas Oral History Archives: The Griotte Project

To address and repair these gaps, in Fall 2022 the author began collaborating with library staff archivists as well as with service-learning French students and local community members to build a repository of 48 oral histories in French of Arkansas African immigration stories at the University of Central Arkansas. According to initial research, this will become the only such oral repository in French in the United States. When we occupy and open the archive to students as a dynamic space of experiential learning through the shared creation of new knowledge, we are transforming and activating the power of an institutional site of memory to write a more accurate, just, and inclusive history for the future.

Although the author is new to the field of oral history and is working with library staff to revive it at her institution, the University of Central Arkansas once had more established practitioners of oral history in the humanities and in the archival space. In 1968, professor of history Waddy William Moore III organized an Oral History Office to conduct interviews of Arkansans. Moore interviewed over 500 Arkansans on various topics, including persons who engaged in efforts to desegregate schools in the Arkansas Delta, former teachers, students who attended Little Rock Central High School during the 1957 desegregation crisis, World War II veterans, and people associated with the University of Central Arkansas throughout the years. Shortly after Dr. Moore's retirement in 1993, the Oral History Office closed, and the Archives and Special Collections acquired the transcripts, recorded interviews, and other materials. The open-access interview transcripts continue to be used extensively by visitors to the archives for educational, journalistic, and scholarly research purposes, but the UCA Griotte Project has become the first new oral history material of any kind entered into the archives since 2006.

Oral history has long been a tool for historians and archivists to fill in gaps in written documentary records. Gathering archival collections relating to the underdocumented experiences of women, people of color, and working-class people has historically presented challenges to archivists. One of the challenges that Webster (2016) has

highlighted through an innovative statistical study is the number of articles in *American Archivist* on oral history that mention keywords relating their subject areas to diverse populations other than white men of socioeconomic means between 1938 and 2011. Webster (2016) tellingly found that while these groups together constitute the majority of the American population, only 6% of the journal's articles mentioned any of them (pp. 264–266).

Archivists of the 21st century have an ethical imperative to do the work of seeking out collections and revising their institutions' collection development policies to focus on expansion in areas representing populations whose experiences, perspectives, and even existential presence have been neglected. As aptly stated by Risam et al. in *Anti-Racist Community Engagement: Principles and Practices* (2023), "Institutions of higher education need to be held accountable to communities and by community-engaged faculty and students" (p. 2). To these ends, this project expands the holdings of public archives in an invaluable way by assembling a community constellation of some of the unique experiences of Arkansans. Students, faculty, and staff seek to transform the archive in a way that intentionally "decenters whiteness by . . . highlighting the wealth of knowledge that communities of color possess about their own communities" (Bellinger-Delfeld et al., 2023, p. 11).

Oral history projects require much organization and forethought before the first word is spoken into the recorder. Inspired by interview models offered by the Nunn Center, the author collaborated with service-learning students, including international students from Côte d'Ivoire and the République du Bénin, to design a list of open-ended questions that invite narrators (interviewees) to share their lived experiences spanning diverse cultural, national, and socioeconomic backgrounds without pressuring them to speak about traumatic experiences or political views (Musoni et al., 2019). Because this project depends on student labor, the author met often with archivists in the planning stages to decide how interviews would be conducted, how gathered data would be processed, and how the transcripts and audio generated during the interviews would be sustainably preserved in perpetuity.

The author and the supervising university archivist made several decisions early in the planning process to ensure that the interviews would be accessible to as many researchers as possible for as long as possible. This project only

records audio interviews and does not video-record the narrators. After some discussion, the archivist and participating students felt strongly that some narrators might be made uncomfortable by the camera. The archivist emphasized the comparatively more significant risk of video files becoming unreadable or corrupted because of their size. The author and students also decided that the interviews would all be in French because most of the narrators feel more comfortable speaking French than they do English, and an objective of the project is to document the presence and experiences of a transnational linguistic minority group in Arkansas.

Further, the project's commitment to interviewing narrators in French achieves a second goal paramount to the missional value of diversity proclaimed by both the university and the archives. The interviews have achieved the historical distinction of becoming the archives' first oral history documents in any language other than English, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the campus community. Conducting interviews in French has the additional benefit to the project's student leaders of providing them with a high-impact experiential learning opportunity in which they apply their own French language skills and cultural competencies. Although this decision runs the risk of inadvertent inaccessibility because of language barriers among prospective researchers, the risk is minimized by including as accurate an English translation as possible with the French-language transcript in archival processing and preservation in both digital and print formats. With this bilingual processing, the repository is accessible to French- and English-speaking researchers as well as both local and global community members.

As with any archival collection, the preservation of materials for future access is crucial. Although the archives staff at the University of Central Arkansas have developed procedures to preserve recorded audio and transcripts of oral histories conducted in the past, this project presented several factors that required the creation of new procedures. The significant difference is that given the decades-long dormancy in oral history praxis at the university, previously conducted interviews were recorded on reel-to-reel and cassette tapes, while this project uses digital recorders. Archives staff have been working since 2020 to convert reel-to-reel and cassette tapes to digital formats. The process of converting physical media to digital media requires the establishment of institutional

policies that ensure systematic, uniform conversion of materials into file formats less likely to become obsolete in the future. In line with the archival best practice of redundancy in conservation, audio files created during this project are thus saved in both .WAV and .MP3 formats in a minimum of three different locations. Both .WAV and .MP3 files have been commonly used formats for several decades. Because both formats have become consumer standards for storing audio files, files saved in these formats will likely remain accessible in the future. They are convenient for streaming and downloading even with minimal technologies such as cell phones, increasing accessibility to global researchers.

With the general process and detailed procedures of the project collaboratively established, service-learning internship students are working closely with the author and the university archivist to conduct, arrange, describe, summarize, catalog, and archive the content of oral interviews using recording technology purchased with a service-learning seed grant that the project has been awarded. Kerston Hadley, a French major of African descent who won a competitive Student Undergraduate Research Fellowship Grant from the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (in fact, this accomplishment is historic as she is the first modern languages major from the university to ever win this grant), received compensation for her internship work as student project director, with the author of this essay as her faculty mentor in French for the calendar year of 2023. Hadley aspires to be a K-12 French language instructor in the Arkansas public school system after graduation and is also seeking TESOL certification to teach English to speakers of other languages in Arkansas, including French-speaking students.

At the beginning of the Spring 2023 semester, five advanced students majoring or minoring in French began to work on the project as service-learning interns. During a brainstorming session in a group meeting among the author, the archivist, and the students, the project was organized into four principal parts or sequential steps, with the tasks divided equally among the service-learning students according to their self-identified interests, skills, and professional aspirations after graduation from the university. While divided into subtasks, the four main tasks involved in the creation and conservation of one interview are conducting the interview, transcribing the interview, translating the interview, and archiving the interview. The following describes the workflow of the project team:

Figure 7. The Spring 2023 UCA Griotte Project French student intern team in the UCA Archives, left to right top row: Emily Breniman (Arkansas), Student Project Director Kerston Hadley (Arkansas), and Linda-Diane Bates (Arkansas). Left to right front row: Caren Oladjobi Mongadji (République du Bénin) & Aïcha Aïssata Diaré (Côte d'Ivoire). Photo by K. Adele Okoli, January 2023.



Figure 8. UCA Griotte Project Interns Kerston Hadley, Linda-Diane Bates, Aïcha Diaré, Caren Mongadji, and Emily Breniman become the first collaborative group to receive the Student Research Award from the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, April 19, 2023. Photo courtesy of Daniel Klotz.



Two international students minoring in French, one from Côte d'Ivoire and one from the République du Bénin, lead in the first task of identifying participants and conducting interviews in French. After completing the interviews, the students digitally transfer raw audio files to the archives with metadata tags of keywords in French. The next student, who is double majoring in linguistics and French, then creates a written transcript of each interview in French by processing it through transcription technology.

She collaborates with the student project director to flag and correct transcription errors, which are somewhat common in French given its high number of homonyms, particularly of verbal forms and tenses. After the French transcript is completed, another student translates the transcript into English, and the translation is double-checked by another student. Two students work together to write descriptions and summaries for each interview and assign keywords for searchability according to the interview's content. Finally, the

last student, a French minor and history major who aspires to be an archivist, assists archives staff in cataloging the interviews, uploading the audio files, and uploading the English and French transcripts to the archive's digital asset management system for public use. This collaborative process, supervised by the student project director with the support of both her professor-mentor and the university archivist, ensures that all students involved receive a fair amount of labor and learned skills transferrable to their future careers.

Named the UCA Griotte Project in honor of woman-identified West and Central African oral historians, the repository is housed digitally as well as in print in the university archives, located in the Torreyson Library. Students self-selected this feminine title because the initial cohort of undergraduate advanced French students to conduct and process interviews were all woman-identified and primarily of African descent: Linda Diane Bates (an African American student from Arkansas), Emily Breniman (a white American student from Arkansas), Aïcha Aïssata Diaré (an international student from Côte d'Ivoire), Kerston Hadley (an African American student from Arkansas), and Caren Oladjobi Mongadji (an international student from the République du Bénin). Because the collection seeks to represent the diversity and individuality of lived experience for Black French speakers in Arkansas without privileging one perspective over others, the UCA Griotte project does not partner formally with any one community organization. While community leaders such as Presidents of the Ivorian Association (Lou Foua in 2023–2024; anonymous narrator 2022–2023); Raïsta Ouattara, the Secretary of the Ivorian Association; Madère Touré, local humanitarian activist and founder of the Pan-African food truck business AfroBites; and others have participated in the project as narrators, they have done so as individuals rather than as representatives charged with chronicling organizational history. For example, service-learning students Aïcha Diaré and Caren Mongadji interviewed other French-speaking students they knew personally and organically through participation in the African Students Association.

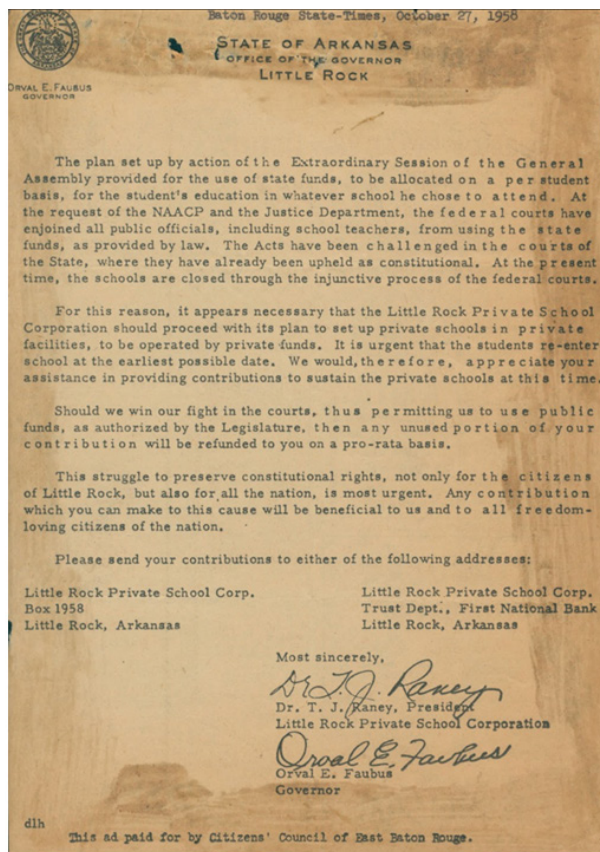
While it is a living human institution, the archive of the university is also a public monument invested with layered and dense documents of state and campus history. It shapes and conserves the contours of our shared collective memory as a teaching and learning community. The archival creation, dissemination, and conservation of oral history provides one avenue in which “the academy can choose to respect the community's knowledge of itself and adopt a more stewardship role of facilitating the collection of interviews” to bridge perceived divisions between academic institutional memories, practices, and cultures and the more inclusive rich histories of the local communities in which universities are embedded (Allen & Montoya, 2019, p. 23). Like many archivists in the American South, the university's supervising archivists have inherited an archive abounding with voices and traces of the white supremacist racism that has operated as a central logic and guiding power structure of the state since its beginnings.

To highlight two among many examples, for the past several decades the archive has housed the Governor Ben T. Laney Collection, which includes over two dozen boxes of documents and manuscripts as well as 17 scrapbooks. Laney, who served as governor of Arkansas during the Jim Crow era of state-sanctioned racial oppression and segregation of Black Americans from 1944 to 1948, went on to become a leader of some national prominence in the white supremacist political landscape as chairman of the States' Rights Democrats, also known as the Dixiecrats. In addition, the archive holds the collection of Della Hall Tyson, secretary for Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, a mid-20th-century head of state whose staunch and vocal opposition to racial desegregation of public schools garnered nationwide media attention during the Little Rock Crisis of 1957.² The archive preserves documents and correspondence surrounding Governor Faubus's mobilization of the National Guard to block the entry of the Little Rock Nine, a group of Black students, to Central High School. It also contains documents and manuscripts of the following academic year, known as the “Lost Year” of 1958–1959, during which Faubus closed

² Faubus was the presidential candidate nominated by the National States' Rights Party, a white supremacist political party violently against racial integration and the advancement of civil rights, in 1960. In 1958, five members of the National States' Rights Party bombed the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation Temple in Atlanta, and the first chairman of the party, neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan domestic terrorist Jesse Benjamin Stoner, Jr., participated in at least one of the racially motivated bombings of the Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Figure 9. The archive of the University of Central Arkansas contains many historical documents of the Little Rock Crisis and the Lost Year similar in content and subject to this clipped advertisement, published October 27, 1958, in the Baton Rouge State-Times newspaper under the guise of a signed letter from the office of the Governor Orval E. Faubus.

The advertisement seeks to raise funds from white supremacist political and educational organizations in the neighboring state of Louisiana in support of the Faubus administration's extreme actions and radical attempts to block the racial integration of public education in Arkansas.



all public high schools in Little Rock, locking out 3,665 students and locking in almost 200 public teachers and administrators to sit in empty classrooms while his administration continued to politically organize and take radical action against racial desegregation of high schools (Gordy, 1997, see Figure 9).

While it is crucial to conserve such historical documents of racism and its harms and to engage the public in critically facing the reality of this history, an antiracist archival practice cannot end there. The trauma of racism, and even Black resistance to racism in the pursuit of freedom and equal civil rights, should not be the only stories told of African American history in Arkansas. A more expansive and truthful archive should seek and work to amplify diverse stories of Black lived experience from the perspectives of Black Arkansan residents, including those that occur beyond American narratives of antiracist struggle. To these ends, rather than centering narratives of dehumanizing trauma, which are an overly dominant mode of mediatized representations of

people of African descent as well as of immigrants, migrants, and refugees in American and European historiographies, the repository centers the lived experiences of immigrants in their paths to Arkansas in pursuit of freedom, empowerment, and joy.

Service-learning students collaborated in French to compile and refine a list of questions to provide a basic structure for the interviews. Below is the sample list of guiding questions used to anchor interviews conducted fully in French, along with the English translation completed by French student Kerston Hadley for IRB review purposes only. The introduction and questions below serve to structure interviews following narrators' completion of IRB-approved consent forms that allow for the option of anonymity. Narrators may end the interview or withdraw consent to participate at any time. Interviewers are encouraged to ask open-ended, nonjudgmental follow-up and clarifying questions when narrators indicate interest in sharing more on any given topic.

Intervieweur : Bonjour, je m'appelle _____ et j'étudie le français à UCA. Je suis le cours _____ de Dr. Okoli ce semestre (OU je suis stagiaire). Aujourd'hui nous sommes le [DATE].

Comme on vient de discuter, le but de ce projet est de recueillir et conserver les récits des expériences vécues des gens francophones qui habitent dans l'Arkansas. Nous explorons les points de vue et les histoires variées d'immigration dans l'Arkansas pour approfondir notre compréhension de l'Histoire contemporaine de la communauté francophone ici. Ces histoires orales seront numérisées et conservées dans les archives de l'université sous la direction de Phoenix Smithy et seront disponibles aux chercheurs. Merci de votre participation.

Questions de base

- Comment vous appelez-vous?
- D'où venez-vous?
- Quel âge avez-vous? Quand est votre anniversaire?
- Quand est-ce que vous êtes déménagé dans l'Arkansas et pourquoi? Qu'est-ce qui vous y a attiré?
- Pourquoi avez-vous choisi cet état?
- Aimez-vous vivre ici? Pourquoi?
- Qu'est-ce que vous avez trouvé difficile à votre arrivée aux États-Unis? Quels sont quelques challenges auxquels vous avez fait face?
- Quelle est quelque chose que vous trouvez drôle, surprenante ou choquante ici dans l'Arkansas?
- Qu'est-ce que vous aimez faire pour vous amuser? Quels sont vos passe-temps préférés?
- Quelles sont des choses qui vous manquent dans votre pays natal, s'il y en a?
- Quelles sont quelques similarités entre votre pays ou ville d'origine et l'Arkansas?
- Quels sont vos rêves et vos ambitions dans la vie? Avez-vous l'intention de rester dans l'Arkansas dans l'avenir?
- Avez-vous une bonne communauté ici? Comment avez-vous fait de nouveaux amis?
- Combien de langues parlez-vous? Lesquelles?
- Parlez-vous français souvent? Avec qui?
- Y a-t-il autre chose que vous voudriez me dire à votre sujet ou par rapport à vos expériences dont nous n'avons pas encore discuté aujourd'hui?

****Conclusion :** Merci bien pour cette contribution de grande valeur!

Interviewer: Hello, my name is _____ and I study French at UCA. I am in Dr. Okoli's _____ course this semester (OR I am an intern). Today is the [DATE].

As we have just discussed, the goal of this project is to collect and preserve the stories of the lived experiences of Francophone people living in Arkansas. We explore the diverse perspectives and histories of immigration to Arkansas to deepen our understanding of the contemporary history of the Francophone community here. These oral histories will be digitized and preserved in the university archives under the direction of Phoenix Smithy and will be available to researchers. Thank you for your participation.

Guiding Questions:

- What is your name?
- Where are you from?
- How old are you? When is your birthday?
- When did you move to Arkansas and why? What attracted you to it?
- Why did you choose this state?
- Do you like living here? Why?
- What did you find difficult when you arrived in the United States?
- What are some of the challenges you have faced?
- What is something you find funny, surprising, or shocking here in Arkansas?
- What do you like to do for fun? What are your favorite hobbies?
- What are some things you miss in your home country, if any?
- What are some similarities between your home country or city and Arkansas?
- What are your dreams and ambitions in life?
- Do you intend to stay in Arkansas in the future?
- Do you have a good community here? How did you make new friends?
- How many languages do you speak and what are they?
- Do you speak French often? With whom?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself or your experiences that we have not discussed yet today?

****Conclusion:** Thank you very much for this highly valuable contribution!

The following translated³ excerpts of interview transcriptions include narrators' responses to some of the questions above.

The first narrator, Eliada (Eli) Kasiko Mwamba, born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1999, responds to interviewer Caren Mongadji's question, "What are some of your favorite hobbies?" in an interview conducted March 5, 2023:

Eli: I play a lot of sports and go to the gym a lot and everything. I play volleyball, soccer, basketball. I play boardgames, but I read, too.

Caren: You read?

Eli: Yes, but you know, I don't believe that reading is really a hobby. I don't think reading when you're a college student is a hobby. It's actually more like a necessity because...

Caren: A little obligation!

Eli: Yeah! It's ... when I say read, I don't mean for classes, I read books.

Caren: Books, yeah, yeah.

Eli: Yes, but I think we should do more, I don't want to read novels, actually. You can, but anyway, at the moment you arrive to start your studies at a university, you realize in fact, I should learn more. So, it's more books that give me a certain understanding of certain aspects of life, like philosophy books, finance book, or ... Oh yea, it's mostly financial advice books and all that.

Caren: So, besides all that, what else do you like?

Eli: Ah, yeah, I go out with friends.

The second narrator, food truck cofounder and co-owner Madère Touré, born in Senegal in

1979, responds to interviewer K. Adele Okoli's⁴ follow-up question to the question regarding hobbies and what the narrator enjoys doing for fun ("I've noticed that you do a lot of humanitarian projects with AfroBites. What inspired you to make these community interventions?") in an interview recorded April 5, 2023:

Madère: Our culture, that's part of our culture. You can't build a business without having a humanitarian aspect. So from the beginning, we promised ourselves from the beginning, we said we're going to try to do something every month, whether it's something big or small, something that will have an impact in the community. Because in our culture, we learn that, when you receive something, you should share more. So, if it's a business, it's the same thing, we receive something, people come and support AfroBites, so we are going to return part of that support to the community. So, it doesn't matter much what all is going on, even if nothing's really going on, we support our community. We are going to give back to people who don't have enough to eat, we're going to give to people just because that's part of the core identity of the part of Africa I'm from.

After some discussion regarding the narrator's many humanitarian projects in Central Arkansas, the narrator went on to respond to the interviewer's question, "In general, what are your dreams and ambitions in life, and do you intend to stay here in Arkansas?"

Madère: My mission in life? I think my mission is to be a better person every day. The rest will fall into place. So, I get up every day and try to be a better person. That's what matters. So, not a whole lot as a mission there. But, at the same time, well, to be a better person, is to try to find the best parts of myself, right? So, to make it to that level. And umm ... ummm ... I think that's all. Try to be a better person

³ Interviews have been translated by the author for the purposes of this publication but transcribed by student interns Kerston Hadley (Arkansas) and Cynthia Fasoul (Belgium).

⁴ Interviews have been and will continue to be conducted almost entirely by students, with the author only recording two of the more than 20 completed by the time of this publication. Note that ellipses in the excerpts indicate moments of hesitation where narrators paused to think; they do not indicate interview material that has been excised or abridged.

and uh ... regarding Arkansas, why not? I think that I've already stayed here so long. It's been almost half my life here. So, I consider, or I see Arkansas, Little Rock, Conway all like my second home.

After a few further remarks on that topic, the narrator responded to the interviewer's open-ended question, "And to conclude, is there anything else you'd like to tell me about yourself or your experiences that we haven't discussed yet today?"

Madère: All I want to say is that, in life, nothing is simple. So, if a person makes the choice to come to Arkansas, as a French speaker, that person needs to be solid and strong and not allow themselves to get discouraged. It won't be easy all the

time, it won't be hard all the time. I mean, at the beginning, it will be a little difficult. But after a while, it will get easier. So, give it time. But ... also avoid holding onto stereotypes. Like, when ... when I move somewhere new, sometimes I might have some preconceived stereotypes of others already in mind. But it's essential to leave stereotypes behind, throw them out in the trash and discover things for yourself.

While the content of these excerpts may seem mundane, they offer a glimpse into the daily lives, values, and goals of narrators in their own words and in their primary language. As the coeditors of this issue have poignantly affirmed, so "much is said about immigrants, without truly incorporating their own stories and contributions into the

Figure 10. UCA Griotte Project participant and community organizer Madère Touré (right) serves volunteers free jollof rice, coconut rice, and a piri piri entrée in a community cleanup after the Little Rock tornado with Chris Jones (left), April 12, 2023. Photo courtesy of AfroBites via Instagram.



narrative.” We thus seek to critique and contest representational modes that exploit oral histories of immigration to the United States as a form of “phoenix tourism” for anglophone American listeners or readers consuming immigration narratives, mining them for familiar nuggets of trauma, struggle, and resilience through capitalist advancement catalyzed by displacement.⁵

While coined in reference to place-based disaster tourism in post-Katrina New Orleans, the theoretical concept of phoenix tourism is a useful one in critical considerations of the scaffolding of oral history interviews to destabilize the power hierarchies that have the danger of constructing interviewees as victims or objects of pity rather than as fully human subjects, experts, and producers of knowledge. Miller et al. (2017) have defined this niche area of dark tourism as a consumeristic gaze “built upon the ashes of devastation [and] destruction” (p. 200). From the affective and geographical distance of a privileged touristic position, “visitors are able to see and experience the ‘come back’ and rejuvenation of an area, while the former images of devastation, destruction, and darker images are re-imaged, re-packaged and re-sold with a recovery narrative” (Miller et al., 2017, p. 200). The lived experiences of immigrants, like all complex human experiences, have existential value beyond these scripts. Human voices do not need to sing the songs of phoenixes to merit equal representation in archives or in history. Unlike many oral history projects centering recollections of traumatic eras and events precipitating the displacement of interviewees as immigrants, narrators for the UCA Griotte Project respond to open-ended questions without any pressure

to discuss traumatic experiences—or any assumption that they have experienced many in a formative way.⁶

To further contextualize the project in more material and physical ways, it is worth noting that the archives of the University of Central Arkansas are physically located in a campus space central to the intellectual and social life of students and the broader local community—the library (Figure 1). Chancellor and Lee (2016) have highlighted the fundamental function that storytelling and oral history might offer in the consolidation and expansion of library communities. Similarly, but more broadly, scholars such as Kuszmar (2014) and McLellan (1998) have noted oral history learning outcomes of immersive community building and interdisciplinary communication that break down traditional and hierarchical barriers between scholarly and community-based research (Kuszmar, 2014; McLellan, 1998). In the process of building an oral history repository physically housed in the library, we are mobilizing a community of care through the library as a living site of humanistic epistemological production and preservation, inclusive of underrepresented empirical, emotive, and experiential forms of historical knowledge. An oral history repository of underdocumented and intersecting racial, linguistic, and cultural communities thus brings marginalized voices to the center of the campus map. Doing so challenges participants at all points of the project to consider, and perhaps even redefine, fluidly embodied and self-determined meanings of “home,” “community,” and affiliation with others both locally and globally (challenges issued by Kirk and Ozakawa-Rey, 2018, pp. 49–50).

⁵ The narrative and descriptive language used as the framework for presenting the University of Kentucky’s *Haiti Memory Project* to the public as “The One Where We Discovered True Resilience” exemplifies this global discursive trend concerning the oral histories of Black narrators in general, stating “Interviewees tell stories of their lives in post-disaster homeless camps and provide remarkable and intimate details of their resilience in the aftermath of a life-changing event” (<https://libraries.uky.edu/nunncenter50>). This oral history repository centers on horrifically traumatic experiences of the earthquake that occurred in Haiti in January 2010. Over 100 Haitian narrators of African descent were interviewed in 2010 only months after the disaster destroyed their homes and displaced them, in the midst of ongoing traumatic experiences. The “We” in the title seems to construct an imagined international community of listeners invited to “discover” narratives of resilience through online consumption of the stories in the collection. The term “discover” carries colonial connotations of touristic travel and exploration.

⁶ The thirst for personal nonfiction narratives filtered through the lens of historical trauma is not specific to oral history or to representations of immigrant experience. This trend extends to the objectification of many marginalized groups. A strong example is the museological prevalence of oral histories and visual spectacles of Jewish dehumanization in the Holocaust, most often for proclaimed pedagogical objectives. As Horn (2021) has written, “the popular obsession with dead Jews, even in its most apparently benign and civic-minded forms, is a profound affront to human dignity” (xxiii).

Oral History as Community-Engaged Pedagogy

To turn to a more student- and learning-centered consideration of the project, as a scholar of pedagogy in Spanish and Latin@ Studies classrooms has aptly summarized, “Using oral history in the service-learning classroom offers a chance for participatory pedagogy—one that pushes us to listen, reflect, and see—like few other learning experiences can offer” (Foulis, 2018, p. 120). Roller (2015) has identified the great potential of oral history projects for linguistics students aiming to develop mastery in accurate transcriptions of recorded speech, such as the French and linguistics double major primarily leading in the transcription tasks of this project (Foulis, 2018, p. 73).

Clara Burgo, another educator working primarily with Spanish heritage language learners, has assessed that through conducting oral history interviews in Spanish in their own established community networks, her students “improved their writing and personal communication skills at the same time that bridges were built across generations and across universities and families” (Burgo, 2016, p. 452). Entrusting service-learning French students with collaborative leadership of an oral history archive seeks to achieve similar goals. Together we are striving toward the additional aim of decentralizing historical authority and authorship so that it becomes a more collective and inclusive endeavor in the service of multiple intersecting communities, as well as destabilizing the teacher/learner dichotomy to empower students as producers of new knowledge and understanding in the humanities.

The author envisions the development of the oral repository as a long-term service-learning project, with University of Central Arkansas advanced French students collaborating in leading roles as interviewers, transcribers, translators, archivists, and curators. The project began with students conducting, archiving, and summarizing the first few interviews as final projects late in the Fall 2022 semester; the repository currently contains over 20 interviews. Students will continue the work of recording and processing interviews at least through Fall 2024, hopefully culminating with a public exhibition and community engagement programming on applications of oral history in K–12 as well as higher education in November 2024. With funding from the Arkansas Humanities Council Black History and Culture Grant, programming will showcase contributions

of community members to the contemporary repository on recent lived experiences in French. With the support of grant funding for honoraria, the university will invite an Arkansas-based Ivorian dance troupe to perform, as well as one of the oral history narrators cited above, Madère Touré, to present a Pan-African menu for greater cultural contextualization and celebration of the histories represented in the repository.

Through the project, community members can share their stories with the knowledge that they are of historical importance, and students apply their advanced French skills to a hands-on learning experience in which they gain exposure to international francophone language and culture through listening to narrators’ stories and perspectives. Community members also can promote and share the stories of their businesses that have enriched our local communities. Copies of the audio interviews and their transcriptions will be made available on the UCA Archives’ website and stored both digitally and in print in the archives for future researchers across the digital humanities.

Through conducting and archiving interviews with African immigrants in our local communities, students apply their growing skillsets of French communication, critical thinking, narrative summary and analysis, translation, and collaboration with others in the French-speaking community. They work to distill and compare the main narrative and thematic elements of immigration stories shared by narrators and to consider the cross-cultural roles and values of oral history repositories more generally, especially in documenting the experiences of underrepresented groups. Finally, students and community members together are contributing to historiographic research that addresses key gaps in the dominant stories that are told regarding African American history in Arkansas as well as more global Black history. The author hopes that this case study of collaboratively building a unique oral repository of African immigration experiences in French will offer readers an example of how to deploy decolonial, learning-centered, and inclusive community engagement to all together achieve a more diverse and reparative local historiographic praxis.

At the heart of the humanities is a quest for greater understanding of the diversity of the human experience. At the same time, the guiding principle of the archive is the idea that we all have the power to make history together, and the right to publicly

access that history so that we can learn and grow from it both as individuals and as a society. This project leans into local resources and celebrates the rich diversity we have at the University of Central Arkansas to bridge those two overarching goals and build something sustainable and impactful for our future. Everyone has a story worth telling.

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About the Author

K. Adele Okoli is an associate professor of French at the University of Central Arkansas.