MATRIX: Online Projects

MATRIX hosts a number of interesting online projects, including the African Online Digital Library, the American Black Journal, The Quilt Index, the Flint Sit-Down Strike Audio Gallery, H-NET, the Michigan Writers Network, and The Spoken Word. A brief written tour through these galleries will give the reader some idea of what MATRIX is up to these days. But the best way to learn about these interesting projects is to go to the online sources themselves and take a look around.

The African Online Digital Library

The African Online Digital Library (AODL) is the cooperative result of the African Studies Center at MSU, MATRIX, and outstanding research institutions in Africa. AODL is technically a digital repository. What it does is apply American digital librarianship and research to African studies. AODL serves students of African languages and cultures both in the United States and Africa, especially in western and southern Africa. Working through multilingual and multimedia materials, AODL delivers a valuable technological model and resource for a region with very limited electronic access.

The AODL collection features several interesting and unusual projects. For example, it is in the process of digitalizing prominent Africanist Phil Curtin’s personal collection of fieldwork photographs. AODL has also made available online the research of West Africanist Charles Becker. Becker, of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, France, has conducted extensive AIDS research in Africa and has published on the history of medicine there as well.

The nature of the online digital medium allows the transference of perishable photographic images to high quality, lasting digital format. AODL is full of galleries documenting different lived experiences of African peoples. L’Institut Fondemental d’Afrique Noire (IFAN), located in Dakar, Senegal, has undertaken the enormous task of transferring their entire collection to the digital medium. A sample of this collection is currently available at http://www.aodl.org/ifan.php. A click on this link will take the user to images of Francophone West African culture and civilization. Photographs of hair styles, statuettes, homes, local rituals, jewelry, and much more represent only a fraction of this vast collection of anthropological material.

In addition to IFAN, the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA has created “Passport to Paradise: Sufi Arts of Senegal and Beyond,” a gallery of fifty photographs from Senegal documenting various artistic tributes to the life and teachings of a local Sufi saint named Sheikh Amadou Bamba (1853-1927). Access the link www.aodl.org/passport.php and browse images of the art works created by the Mourides, a Sufi movement founded around the teachings of Bamba. Paintings, murals, and posters from in and around Senegal abound in this collection.

AODL is currently researching ways to adapt digital technology to the task of language dissemination and preservation. Attempts to represent the Pulaar language, for example, the most widely spoken of the West Atlantic languages in Africa, are underway.

American Black Journal

A five-year collaboration between Detroit Public Television and Michigan State University, the American Black Journal (ABJ) project is digitally transferring this historic television program to an online format for a public audience.

As many of the Post’s readers may know, the ABJ was and is perhaps the single most important and influential television program committed to documenting African-American experiences in Detroit and the United States. Originally called Colored People’s Time, the ABJ went on the air in 1968, an era when African-Americans and others were deep into the struggle for civil rights.

While many digital collections devoted to African-American experiences are limited to specific areas such as civil rights or music, ABJ explores a much broader spectrum, including interviews, round table discussions, field recordings, and artistic performances. The collection also contains digitized video footage of African-American history in the automobile industry, the nationwide urban civil revolts in 1967 (including those in Detroit), the emergence of Motown Records and rap music, and much more. Visit the ABJ’s website today at http://matrix.msu.edu/~abj.

The Flint Sit-Down Strike Audio Gallery

“The Flint Sit-Down Strike Audio Gallery” documents the struggle of General Motors’s autoworkers in 1936-7 for a fair labor deal from the giant automobile manufacturer. This gallery collects audiotape recordings produced by the Labor History Project at UM-Flint. Between 1978 and 1984, professors and students at UM-Flint conducted a series of interviews with strike participants from 40 years earlier. Some of these participants were in their seventies and eighties when interviewed. Their memories provide a fascinating glimpse into this definitive event in labor history in Michigan and the United States. They recall the working conditions that led up to the strike, the difficult months preceding the strike, and the struggle of United Auto Workers (UAW) to establish credibility.

As these audio clips demonstrate, the strike was a classic case of David versus Goliath. In 1936, General Motors was the richest industrial corporation in the world, with plants in over fifty cities and towns across the United States. The largest stockholders in the corporation were the fabulously wealthy Du Pons. The strikers, on the other hand, averaged about a tenth grade education, came from poor families, and consisted of many Southerners and Eastern European immigrants. It was therefore easy for strike opponents to claim that the laborers were being forced into their acts of radicalism.
by “outside agitators” (code words for Communists and Socialists). To a certain degree this charge may have been true, yet it is untrue to say that the aim of most of the strikers was to take over the plants on a permanent basis. Like most of the country, they only wanted a “new deal” that might help them better their lot in life.

For more information on this exciting episode in U.S. labor history, visit the website at http://www.historicalvoices.org/flint/index.php.

H-Net

An unqualified success in its field, “H-Net” is an international consortium of scholars and teachers dedicated to coordinating Internet networks with the objective of advancing teaching and research in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. H-Net is committed to pioneering the use of new communication technology to facilitate the free exchange of academic ideas and scholarly resources.

Among H-Net’s most important activities is its sponsorship of over 100 free electronic, interactive newsletters (“lists”) edited by scholars in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and the Pacific.

Subscribers and editors communicate through electronic mail messages sent to the group. These messages can be saved, discarded, downloaded to a local computer, copied, printed out, or relayed to someone else. Otherwise, the lists are all public, and can be quoted and cited with proper attribution. The lists are connected to their own sites on the World Wide Web, that store discussion threads, important documents, and links to related sites on the web.

H-Net lists reach over 100,000 subscribers in more than 90 countries. Subscriptions are screened by the list’s editors to promote a diverse readership dedicated to friendly, productive, scholarly communications. Each list publishes between 15 and 60 messages a week. Subscription applications are solicited from scholars, teachers, professors, researchers, graduate students, journalists, librarians and archivists.

Each network has its own “personality,” is edited by a team of scholars, and has a board of editors; most are cosponsored by a professional society. The editors control the flow of messages, commission reviews, and reject flames and items unsuitable for a scholarly discussion group.

The goals of H-Net lists are to enable scholars to easily communicate current research and teaching interests; to discuss new approaches, methods and tools of analysis; to share information on electronic databases; and to test new ideas and share comments on the literature in their fields.

Please visit the H-Net website at http://www.h-net.org and read more about this impressive achievement.

Michigan Writers Network

The Michigan Writers Network is an online interactive community where all Michigan writers can share ideas, discuss their craft, and learn about the work of fellow authors. Whether you write for profession or pleasure, the Writers Network encourages all people interested in the craft of writing to join their listserv discussions at listserv@h-net.msu.edu. There, writers interested in fiction, poetry, drama, creative nonfiction, journalism, and children’s literature will find willing interlocutors ready to discuss the finer points of writing.
Recent features at the Writers Network webpage include a gallery of poetry on the role of sports in women’s lives and an introduction to the work of writer and anthropologist Ruth Behar. Currently, the featured writer at the Writers Network is Jeannine Hathaway, a self-described nun, mother, student, and teacher. Visit the Michigan Writers Network at http://www.michigan-writers.org/index.html and listen to Ms. Hathaway read from her poems.

**The Quilt Index**

“The Quilt Index” represents one of the more unusual projects hosted by MATRIX. This index is basically an online research and reference tool providing a centralized collection of documents on the art of American quilts and quilt-making. “The Quilt Index” features hundreds of images of quilts from Kentucky, Tennessee, Michigan, and Illinois. A trip to the website, at http://www.quiltindex.org, will reveal hundreds of images of and documentary information about quilts from both public and private collections, libraries, and museums; bibliographies of secondary materials relevant to quilt study; and study aids for researchers seeking out rare primary and secondary materials on quilts.

**The Spoken Word**

“The Spoken Word” harnesses the increasing digitalization of libraries to the needs of undergraduate education and promotes the advantages of digital repositories over more traditional storage models. In particular, “The Spoken Word” aims to enhance undergraduates’ abilities to interpret and use original source audio materials. The development of critical thinking skills among students is as much a part of this project’s goals as digitalization. Indeed, the two are vitally linked. Current theories of classroom pedagogy reflect the positive educational effects that curricula based on digital-audio materials can have. “The Spoken Word,” in a sense, tries to empower students to critically construct their own relationships with digital-audio materials, thus transforming pedagogical and educational practices. “The Spoken Word” assesses the effects that audio organized in digital repositories has on classroom teaching, student comprehension, academic projects, and the utility and value of digital libraries. For more information on this intriguing project, go to http://www.historicalvoices.org/spokenword.