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In the span of years since 1904, when William O. Thompson became the first known Black student to graduate from Michigan State University, the MSU campus community has seen both enormous and insufficient change centered around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In a new project supported by resources from University Archives & Historical Collections and forthcoming from Michigan State University Press, University Distinguished Professor of History and Associate Dean in the Graduate School Pero Dagbovie explores dimensions of this history.

Dagbovie calls himself a lifelong Spartan. He earned his bachelor’s degree, his master’s degree, and his doctorate in history at MSU. His research and teaching interests cover a broad range of subjects and time periods, and he is currently the editor of *The Journal of African American History*, the oldest scholarly journal in the field of Black history. The journal was founded by Carter G. Woodson in 1916. A project informed by the history of African American students at MSU has interested Dagbovie for years, and he has used this time of isolation during the pandemic to dig in.

For nearly a year, Dagbovie has sifted through material in University Archives & Historical Collections, reading old year books, letters, directories, and news from the *M.A.C. Record* and the *Holcad* that reveal what we might expect and what we don’t expect. Much of what he has explored is available digitally, and though this history cannot and should not be easily oversimplified, what Dagbovie has found is both confirmation of the challenges faced by African American pathfinders at the university and evidence of a progressive university working to change problematic national practices and prejudices.

“I’m not saying it was a utopia here,” Dagbovie said. “But it wasn’t all racism. The history of the African American presence at MSU from the late nineteenth century until the end of the Great Depression is particularly complex and fascinating.” He found an occasion when (then) President Jonathan L. Snyder wrote a recommendation for Myrtle Bessie Craig, ’07, the first Black woman to graduate from MSU. After her time at MSU, Craig, later Mowbray, (possibly with help from that recommendation from President Snyder) became a teacher at two historically
Black institutions, one in Kansas and one in Missouri. The Mowbray Scholars Program at Michigan State University’s Honors College is named in her honor.

In fact, what Dagbovie has discovered is an important trend: most Black students who attended MSU in the early years of academic integration went on to teach at historically Black institutions. In other words: Black individuals who studied at MSU later helped hundreds of other Black students. Dagbovie cited Clarence Banks, one of the first Black members of the MSU Dairy Club in the 1920s. “Banks was an expert in Holsteins,” Dagbovie said. “He learned everything at MSU, and he took what he learned with him to share with students in Bordentown, New Jersey.”

Learning is viral, and, of course, antiviral. When one person gets a shot at education, that person can help many others. Access to information and education are part of the land-grant vision, and Dagbovie discovered that vision was at work at a time when we tend to think it wasn’t always working very well.

Dagbovie found archival documents about the desegregation of dormitories on campus, which he says was likely sparked by a single Black student speaking out. For years, what circulated by way of oral history seemed to suggest that President Hannah independently spearheaded that desegregation. As Chair of the Civil Rights Commission, Hannah did work to advance civil rights and support desegregation, but what Dagbovie discovered reframes history and highlights the power of someone who might otherwise be overlooked as powerless. That kind of research also shows the power of what hides in plain sight. The boxes of materials in University Archives & Historical Collections and the digitized resources available through UAHC present possibilities for researchers to learn more about people who helped effect change, and they present opportunities for scholars to restore visibility of and recognition for those change makers.

“It’s amazing to consider the changes that took place because of Black student activism”

“Every tongue / unfurled as the body’s flag. Every breath / conjured despite loss we’ve had,” writes Tyhimba Jess in “Fisk Jubilee Proclamation,” the first sonnet in a crown of sonnets informed by the experiences of formerly enslaved African Americans who formed a choral ensemble at Fisk University. Sometime – and many times – between the formation of that ensemble and Jess’s 2016 book Olio, in which “Fisk Jubilee Proclamation” appears, Black students were speaking up on MSU’s campus in East Lansing, unfurling their tongues, asking for equity.

Of course, progress depends on support from all kinds of campus partners. It grows out of what is progressive, and a hundred years ago people at the MSU Library were still or only beginning to think about how to effect positive change. Dagbovie researched this history, too. “I looked,” he said. “I wanted to see what White students were learning about Black people in library materials. I found a catalog for the Home Reading Courses from 1926 mentioning what students should be reading.” The list reveals the deficiencies of the era. Among suggestions was Up from Slavery, Booker T. Washington’s 1901 autobiography. That it was included on a list 25 years after its initial publication might say something about its impact. It might also reveal something about the want of books about Black experiences and Black struggles – a scarcity MSU subject librarians are working to correct as they collect more materials that represent underrepresented perspectives.

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The articles, correspondence, and pictures Dagbovie has studied reveal the university’s successes and some of its struggles. The material reflects early work to build a more just campus and culture, but some materials reveal early issues of anti-Black rhetoric, prejudice, and use of stereotypes. Dagbovie found evidence of social isolation among Black students during the first half of the twentieth century, and directories and letters documenting struggles they faced.

One of the first Black students to live in what is now East Lansing, William O. Thompson, lived with an elderly janitor and other students. Gideon Smith, who graduated in 1916, was the first African American to play on the Michigan State varsity football team, and he was among the first group of Blacks to play college football at predominantly White universities. “He was a hero and an ambassador,” Dagbovie said. “He helped MSU beat Michigan for the first time. Everyone revered him.” Even so, Dagbovie’s research also indicates how such reverence had its limitations.

As Dagbovie reads about pioneering African American students who were included in academic life but often couldn’t afford to live on campus or in East Lansing, or who enrolled and later dropped out, or who juggled athletics and academics, he confronts both past and present. “I’m walking in the footsteps of these folks,” Dagbovie said. “There’s a spiritual component to this project.”

Dagbovie’s project serves as a meaningful example of how Library resources might be used. Our Libraries at MSU store important history. Not all of that history is admirable, but it should be remembered and should remain active in some way: in our research, in our thinking, and in the way we imagine and reimagine the future.

There were certainly others important to consider and important to remember. Dagbovie’s project is a tribute to many who were sometimes or often thought of as “other,” and his book will be an important one in this century of reckoning.

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*Note: I use the name “Michigan State University” or “MSU” for all references to the institution, which was in other times called “Michigan Agricultural College” and “Michigan State College.”