



# Building an archive for ‘future pasts’: Undergraduates document their local Covid-19 ‘moment’ in World History

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## Abstract

A substantial body of history teaching scholarship links student archival engagements and primary source work to various desirable educational outcomes, among them an enhanced capacity for historical thinking and imagination. A related scholarly literature considers the interface between pedagogy and public memory-making. This article enters and links these points of discussion by reflecting on a collaborative classroom project of digital archive-building, using the online Dublin Core-complicit platform Omeka. At the University of Johannesburg, during the first six months of 2021, first-year students in an online world history classroom produced, submitted, and categorised a body of primary sources—both textual and visual. These submissions reflected their own, ongoing experiences of Covid-19 and of lockdown policies. They used photographs and wrote in their home languages to convey the disruptions, innovations, hardships, and resiliences felt as young people within diverse lifeworlds. Aligned to photovoice methodologies, the exercise promoted a reflection of historical consciousness in two ways: first, by situating the pandemic of the present within a broad global history; and, second, by considering ‘future pasts’ as a politics of memory, research, and representation. The article describes the production of the archival database, ‘Joburg21’, and considers the pedagogical challenges and rewards of building a digital ‘archive for the future’.

**Keywords:** Digital humanities; Historical thinking; Memory; Archival turn; Source work; Decolonising history; Covid-19; Remote teaching.

A vast history-teaching and curriculum policy literature promotes the benefits of awarding university students meaningful opportunities to encounter and grapple with primary source materials from archives. Source work is considered core (the *sine qua non*, the 'mantra') for the development of historical thinking and imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Through class activities that engage students in reading, appraising, analysing, organising, and contextualising archival documents, students become acquainted with the nuanced work and dilemmas of the historian's craft. As importantly, such activities empower students to appreciate a key distinction between history (the disciplinary undertaking) on the one hand, and the past (time and events before the present moment that include what is unrecorded and unavailable in published accounts) on the other hand.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore also the contingencies of history that can be conveyed through source work: contingency both of the past itself and of what is 'recovered' as historical narrative. Trouillot points to this tension as a key politics of the archive, which produces knowledge and silences simultaneously.

Recently, the 'archival turn' within historical research has brought this politics—a politics of memory-making in a world of power relations and inequalities of 'voice'—into focus also in pedagogy and its ethics.<sup>3</sup> Discussions about source work and its learning outcomes for history are being freshly drawn into dialogue with the fields of museum, heritage, and library studies.<sup>4</sup> This is also because archives have in many cases become more accessible with digital technologies and expanding online environments. These realities have enlivened further critical reflection on teaching with and from archives,<sup>5</sup> and are also

1 BA Van Sledright, "What does it mean to think historically... and how do you teach it?" *Social Education*, 68(3), 2004, p. 232; KL Harris and R Van der Merwe, "'What's in the box?' – archives, history skills and honours students", *Yesterday & Today*, 23, July 2020, p. 30; T Andrews and F Burke, 'What does it mean to think historically?' *Perspectives on History*, 2007 (Newsletter of the American History Association): <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2007/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically> (Accessed 8 May 2023).

2 M-R Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). For a contrasting perspective on the same issue see Dray on Collingwood's positivist account of source 'incompleteness' and the 'non-existent past', in WH Dray, *History as Reenactment: RG Collingwood's Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 233–242.

3 W Hayden, "And gladly teach: the archival turn's pedagogical turn", *College English*, 80(2), 2017, pp. 133–58.

4 J Hoyer, "Out of the archives and into the streets: Teaching with primary sources to cultivate civic engagement", *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, 7, 2020; M Neal, K Bridgman, and SJ McElroy, "Many happy returns': Student archivists as curators of public memory", J Greer and L Grobman, *Pedagogies of public memory: Teaching writing and rhetoric at museums, archives and memorials* (New York, Routledge, 2016), pp. 117–131.

5 J Enoch and P Van Haitisma, "Archival literacy: Reading the rhetoric of digital archives in the Undergraduate Classroom", *College Composition and Communication*, 67(2), December 2015, pp. 216–242.

related to pedagogical issues raised by the exigencies of the pandemic classroom.<sup>6</sup>

Practitioners of teaching are continually searching for creative ways to inspire historical thinking in their curricula. Rationales for honing primary source literacies have resided in promoting skill sets: conceptual, ethical, theoretical, and practical.<sup>7</sup> These include, for example: disciplined and logical thinking, as students read and weigh up diverse and competing voices towards factual and contextual understanding and analysis; cosmopolitanism and empathy with strangers, as students come into contact with people living in foreign times and circumstances; critical awareness of interests, biases, and perspectives held by various creators of sources produced for different purposes.

Yet, ideals of teaching historical thinking do not always manifest in practice.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, effective transmission of this skill set is not the only concern. Samantha Cutrara points out that rationales for assigning primary source work can threaten to discount—and even implicitly disparage—the existing capabilities students bring into the classroom.<sup>9</sup> For example, they often discount the value of subjective readings and interpretations of documents that students bring with them, viewing these as naive and a deficit to be rectified. She argues that subjective readings have value because they may “allow for greater conversations about power and privilege through and in the discipline of history, in ways that the [traditional] Historical Thinking approach does not do.”<sup>10</sup> What Cutrara invokes here, also, is the emotional and affective nature of archival encounters that can engage students in a more dynamic way with studies of the past.

Source work in the classroom does not always help students to connect a given document, object, or image to its own ‘biography’ and the factors that explain its preservation and availability. It may not raise questions about the rationales through which

6 S Motala and K Menon, “The hill we climb: in search of a new pedagogy”, *South African Review of Education*, 27(1), 2022, pp. 140–159; AP Lee and K Springer, “Socially engaged oral history pedagogy amid the COVID-19 pandemic”, *The Oral History Review*, 47(2), 2020, pp. 227–239; TD Oyedotun, “Sudden change of pedagogy in education driven by COVID-19: Perspectives and evaluation from a developing country”, *Research in Globalization*, 2, 2020, 100029.

7 SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, “Guidelines for primary source literacy”, Association of [American] College and Resource Libraries, 2018, pp. 3–6. <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForPrimarySourceLiteracy-June2018.pdf> (Accessed 10 June, 2023).

8 LM Westhoff, “Lost in translation: The use of primary sources in teaching history”, RG Ragland and KA Woestman, *The teaching American history project: Lessons for history educators and historians* (New York, Routledge, 2009), pp. 62–76.

9 S Cutrara, “The subjectivity of archives: Learning from, with, and resisting archives and archival sources in teaching and learning history”, *Historical Encounters*, 9(1), 2019, pp. 117–132.

10 S Cutrara, “The subjectivity of archives...”, *Historical Encounters*, 9(1), 2019, p. 123.

collections are created, their aims, and function in a wider social context. Students are sensitive to and interested in the issues of visibility and silence for history writing in diverse and unequal societies. Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario Ramirez demonstrate the importance of local community archives as “responses not only to the omissions of history as the official story written by a guild of professional historians, but the omissions of memory institutions writ large ...”<sup>11</sup> Archives, as they explain, can be spaces of affect and emotion. Repositories geared to retrieve experiences and voices marginalised in ‘official’ accounts can nurture a greater interest and sense of connection to the past. The authors report how students visiting one community archive were “‘surprised’ and ‘inspired’” to find out about largely unknown histories and “‘excited to see themselves as part of history.’”<sup>12</sup>

What is pedagogically at stake in all this relates to questions of engagement but also a wider ethics (and not merely a technique) of remembering within the contexts of social inequality in which teaching happens. History educators have innovated methods to assist student reflection on government archives as products of history, inviting their awareness and remedial action. Tammie Kennedy and Anika Walker, for example, outline and assess a classroom project in which students generated sources that expanded collections of previously ‘hidden’ stories, through oral history research.<sup>13</sup> By contributing new accounts and voices to the available record, students had the opportunity to “‘explore how memory is political, context-dependent, and imbued with emotion and imagination rather than simply fixed, academic facts ...’”<sup>14</sup>

Michael Neal, Katherine Bridgman, and Stephen McElroy describe the value they observed in creating opportunities for students in an archival collection to retrieve, sort, classify, and summarise the content of previously unprocessed documents, making ‘lost’ voices newly available.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Karen Harris and Ria van der Merwe describe a class assignment (“What’s in the box?”) in which they required students to identify, contextualise, and present documents from unprocessed boxes in a local and understaffed archive.<sup>16</sup>

As students contribute to archive-making, the constructed and contingent nature

11 M Caswell, M Cifor, and MH Ramirez, “‘To suddenly discover yourself existing’: Uncovering the impact of community archives”, *The American Archivist*, 79 (1), 2016, p. 62.

12 Caswell et al, “‘To suddenly discover...’”, *The American Archivist*, 79 (1), 2016, p. 71.

13 TM Kennedy and AL Walker, “A pedagogy for the ethics of remembering: Producing public memory for the women’s archive project”, J Greer and L Grobman, *Pedagogies of public memory: Teaching writing and rhetoric at museums, archives and memorials* (New York, Routledge, 2016), pp. 91–104.

14 TM Kennedy and AL Walker, “A Pedagogy for the ethics of remembering...” J Greer and L Grobman, *Pedagogies of public memory...* p. 91.

15 Neal et al, “‘Many happy returns’”, J Greer and L Grobman, *Pedagogies of public memory...* pp. 117–131.

16 Harris and Van der Merwe, “‘What’s in the box?’...”, *Yesterday & Today*, 23, July 2020, pp. 30–43.

of archives may become more apparent. Some curriculum developers have framed this component of primary source literacy as the product of professional choices and individual decision-making. For example, a relevant learning outcome conceptualised in the *American Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* proposes that students should:

*“Understand that historical records may never have existed, may not have survived, or may not be collected and/or publicly accessible. Existing records may have been shaped by the selectivity and mediation of individuals such as collectors, archivists, librarians, donors, and/or publishers, potentially limiting the sources available for research.”<sup>17</sup>*

The wording here shows how some discussions of source work can elide archival politics. I am convinced by calls, like Cutrara’s, for pedagogies that promote student *“learning into ... power and politics”*.<sup>18</sup> This may require grappling further with the idea of historical thinking. Some scholarship strives to address politics of historical thinking and sources in postcolonial teaching contexts to promote critical historical interpretations.<sup>19</sup> Other interventions address the politics of historical research to awaken agency in the present.

A compelling and, for my own classroom endeavours, relevant intervention that extends historical thinking as a concept, is Andreas Körber’s elaboration of “future pasts”<sup>20</sup> As he explains, the focus of most teaching aims is “on chronology, causes and consequences presented firmly from a—mostly national—retro-perspective”.<sup>21</sup> For Körber, there is a second teaching opportunity in conveying a sense of the present as a ‘future past’.

The aim here compels teachers to take up issues of pedagogical ethics and to grapple with the current conditions of society. Students are encouraged to think of people (professional historians and others) in a future period as appraisers and narrators of our own times and our own actions. For Körber, “the concept of the future as an open possibility, to be rather freely manipulated by the individual itself” has less potential for historical consciousness than “[t]he concept of a future past, of a retrospective sense-making about the self,

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17 Outcome 2D in the *Guidelines for primary source literacy*. SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force, *Guidelines...*, p. 5.

18 S Cutrara, “The subjectivity of archives...”, *Historical Encounters*, 9(1), 2019, p. 118. (original emphasis

19 For example, A Ibrahim, *Historical Imagination and Cultural Responses to Colonialism and Nationalism* (Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, 2017).

20 A Körber, “Extending historical consciousness: Past futures and future pasts”, *Historical Encounters*, 9 (1), 2019, pp. 29–39.

21 Körber, “Extending historical consciousness”, *Historical Encounters*, 9 (1), 2019, p. 29.

anticipated in the present".<sup>22</sup> Such reflexive posture can:

*"help in conceptualizing our questions to the past not only to refer to who we are today because of the past and to our possibilities of acting in the light of the past, but also to taking into account the consequences of our actions in the future and for the past of those coming after us."*<sup>23</sup>

In my own teaching of a first-year global history module at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), always a large classroom of between 400–500 students annually, I have been interested in exploring methods for developing historical thinking, sensitive to the insights of archival politics. In the next sections I describe a collaborative classroom project that was designed and implemented during the Covid-19 lockdown, integrated into conditions of remote teaching. It encouraged students to consider their experiences of the present as 'future pasts'.

It is important to note here that UJ showed extraordinary ingenuity in providing students for almost two years with devices and monthly allotments of 'data' (bandwidth) to enable studies to continue their studies during national lockdown. The inevitable challenges were compounded, nonetheless, by South Africa's chronic, almost daily 'loadshedding' (power outages) and the infrastructural and technical issues that constitute its digital divide. These are important elements of social and economic inequalities in a country with the highest Gini coefficient in the world.<sup>24</sup>

## **Building a digital "archive for the future" during the time of Covid-19**

During the first half of 2021, I introduced a class project that straddled UJ's flagship themes promoting the 'fourth industrial revolution' (4IR) and a decolonised curriculum. Almost 400 students in an online Johannesburg first-year university history classroom built a

22 Körber, "Extending historical consciousness", *Historical Encounters*, 9 (1), 2019, p. 33.

23 Körber, "Extending historical consciousness", *Historical Encounters*, 9 (1), 2019, p. 36.

24 The World Bank, "New World Bank Report Assesses Sources of Inequality in Five Countries in Southern Africa", 9 March 2022 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/09/new-world-bank-report-assesses-sources-of-inequality-in-five-countries-in-southern-africa#:~:text=South%20Africa%2C%20the%20largest%20country,World%20Bank's%20global%20poverty%20database; see also, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gini-coefficient-by-country> (accessed 10 June 2023).

digital archive by uploading images and narratives that reflected their own experiences and local life-worlds under Covid-19 and ‘lockdown’ policies. Students used phone cameras to document their subject matter and articulated the meaning of their images in home languages, contributing to a number of thematic collections that revealed personal and community hardships but also their wellsprings of resilience. We called the site ‘Joburg21’ to reflect place, year, and the youthful perspectives convened in its database.

This collaborative project was integrated into the fourteen-week-long history module, *History 1A: Global History of Humanity to 1500 CE* as its final activity and ‘unit’ of five units, each unit focusing on a ‘revolution’ or ‘turning point’ in global history. The aim was to engage students in historical thinking in two ways. First, the structure of the course with its emphasis on global ‘turning points’ worked towards an imaginary that assisted students in contextualizing their experiences of the present into a broader chronology of the past.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, our discussions aimed to situate and compare the pandemic of the present—and our ‘everyday’ experiences of it—within world-historical events. The most direct comparison was with unit four, which explored social histories of the fourteenth century’s ‘black death’ as it affected everyday life, medical thinking, governmental policies, public compliance, and push-back in parts of Afro-Eurasia.<sup>26</sup>

Towards a second form of historical thinking, I aimed to encourage students to imagine their place in history but also their own historical agency in relation to K rber’s conception of ‘future pasts’. Here students understood that they acted as makers of history by producing and submitting sources, comprising their own subjective accounts and perspectives, to a repository “for the future” (Fig.1). I intended this aspect of the exercise to shine a light on the processes that constitute a politics of memory, research, and representation.

The digital archive-building project (Fig. 1) was crafted as an answer to two questions posed within the module, viz.: (1) How will future historians recount our own local moment of global change during Covid-19? (2) What sources will be available, and in what languages and words, for documenting the experiences and perceptions of young people in Johannesburg (that is, beyond official or elite voices)?

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25 JA Whitehouse, “Teaching history through turning points”, *Curriculum and Teaching*, 37(2), October 2022, pp. 5–13.

26 Our focus on the social history of the fourteenth century bubonic plague drew on chapters and sections from J Byrne, *Daily Life during the Black Death* (London, Greenwood Press, 2006).



**Figure 1. Banner for our online “archive for the future”**

In 2019 I had written a successful teaching innovation grant to purchase a platinum version of the software package Omeka.<sup>27</sup> Omeka is an archive-building database and platform developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media Studies at George Mason University. The product has open-source options, but also includes professional packages for purchase when large amounts of digital storage are required (as for this class project).

Recently, a number of history and library science educators have employed Omeka for engaging students with archives in different ways. Most have asked students to submit archival items of pre-selected texts, photographs, and object images into existing platforms with commentary, collate student work, or curate exhibitions using pre-submitted ‘items’.<sup>28</sup> For Joburg21, students were the authors of the sources in a custom-made digital archive with a mandate to document their own experience of the present historical moment in different ways and to render these sources identifiable through Dublin Core metadata.<sup>29</sup>

Students generated and used photographic images—a minimum of five ‘items’ per student—using written text to describe the images and tell stories that highlighted the impacts and changes in their daily lives. As a group, they contributed around 2000 images

<sup>27</sup> See [www.Omeka.net](http://www.Omeka.net)

<sup>28</sup> C Hoelscher, “Constructing history: A student-created public history exhibit using Omeka”, *Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources*, Society of American Archivists, Cast Study #11, 2019, pp. 1–6. See <https://www2.archivists.org/publications/epubs/Case-Studies-Teaching-With-Primary-Sources> (Accessed 14 June 2023); EL Cuenca and M Kowaleski, “Omeka and other digital platforms for undergraduate research projects on the middle ages”, *Digital Medievalist*, 11(1): 3, 2018, pp. 1–21, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/dm.69> (accessed 14 June 2023); B Billeaudeau and C Eisel, “Using Omeka to bring women’s history to online learners”, SK Stein and M Macleod, *Teaching and learning history online: A guide for college instructors*, (New York, Routledge, 2023); AC Marsh, “Omeka in the classroom: The challenges of teaching material culture in a digital world”, *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 2013; N Ingram-Monteiro and R McKernan, “An Omeka S repository for place- and land-based teaching and learning”, *Information Technology and Libraries*, September 2022, pp. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ital.v41i3.15123> (Accessed 12 June 2023).

<sup>29</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dublin\\_Core](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dublin_Core)

and narrative accounts in multiple languages, tagged with keywords. They mapped most of these submissions using geo-location software (Fig. 2). Finally, they catalogued their contributions using Dublin Core metadata.



**Figure 2. Geo-mapping feature. Moving cursor over a peg opens a window summary for each item.**

Students organised their photographic ‘items’ into ten thematic collections: medical care, spread of information, ‘alternative’ cures, vaccines, hardship, resilience, style and fashion, religious practices, friendship, family, education and economy.

## Methods and processes

In developing the Joburg21 site, I was fortunate to have assistance from UJ’s Centre for Academic Technologies (CAT), with 2–3 hours weekly of designated assistance by a staff member who crafted the site’s theme and structure, designed its banner, and assisted with the arduous process of verifying student identities in their accounts.<sup>30</sup> The Omeka project did not translate into easy teaching, particularly in a remote context, with other acute challenges. I spent most evenings and weekends assisting individual students troubleshooting their accounts and attending to a range of frustrating technical problems. Regular loadshedding (scheduled and unscheduled) augmented the challenges of our online context.

Omeka offers several “roles” for those with accounts on the site. As ‘super-

<sup>30</sup> This was the wonderful Anna Coetzee, see acknowledgments.

administrators', the senior tutor, CAT staff member, and I divided up 400 first-year accounts equally to check each one by hand: its activation status, adherence to instructions, to verify a student's identity and registration, and to assign a role of 'contributor'. We reached out to absent students or those for whom we had identified problems. Once this was set up, contributions could commence.

As contributors, students could navigate behind the site's public view to upload and submit items. The four tutors for the class were given rights as 'administrators', enabling them to navigate, search, publish contributors' items, and to amend minor errors and issues in order to enhance the site's public interface. Attending to these details also took up my time, for example, deleting inadvertently replicated submissions or duplicated images within a single submission; requesting revision for misplaced metadata; and the like. Tutors and I were responsible for publishing each 'item' as they assessed and marked submissions, after first determining its originality and ethical compliance.

Students were allotted just over two weeks for the photovoice part of the exercise, photographing their images and writing up brief explanations and descriptions for each. I encouraged students to write these short descriptions in the form of a story, bringing their own voice, creativity, and style to their narratives. These varied in length, from one to three or four paragraphs, depending on what they wished to convey. I encouraged my linguistically diverse class to use home languages in these write-ups, a relevant consideration for a classroom in which English is a second language for the majority (80%).<sup>31</sup> I offered ten additional marks (beyond the 100 marks possible) to students who wrote in a language other than English.

I wanted students to be able to tell their story in their own words and to produce an archive that reflected the larger cultural context of Johannesburg and surrounds. In class we discussed why language was a crucial resource in an archive for future historians. An archive reflecting home and community languages was vital because the Covid-19 lockdown and vaccination were at the time generating new vocabularies and terminologies. In their evaluations students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that this linguistic diversity was "a valuable part of the project".<sup>32</sup>

Three different sets of written instructions and a training video I created to demonstrate the submission process explained the rationales and contours of the project and its various

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31 According to UJ data reported in 2022. With thanks to Vice Dean (T&L) Prof. Suzy Graham for sharing this data.

32 Out of a possible score of 4, students' approval of home language use scored 3.5.

technical steps. Instructions were downloadable and viewable in the online course management platform, Blackboard, but I also explained each instruction in special remote sessions using the available conferencing software. In course evaluations, over 60% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed that the task was “technically challenging”.

As a first step, students created and activated Omeka accounts. Success on both counts earned students ten marks automatically, including those who weathered the frustrations and sought my assistance. The second step involved uploading their images and texts, and formatting them into retrievable sources within the Omeka database. This involved an intricate but relatively easy process of ‘adding an item’.

As noted, each student was responsible for five items. An ‘item’ represented one source, that is, one completed submission within Omeka. This included an original image/ photograph or thematic set of photographs; identifying its location on a map using Omeka’s GIS plugin; the entry of information according to the specific Dublin Core metadata descriptors; and a short narrative description or story, cut and pasted as one Dublin Core element. Students ‘tagged’ images with their own descriptive, multilingual search terms and assigned it to one of the ten thematic collections.

Because there were many elements of this assignment, marks (of up to 110 in total) were awarded for the different elements required. As mentioned, a student received ten marks for successfully creating and activating an Omeka account and up to ten bonus marks for the use of home language, including narratives that demonstrated linguistic ‘code-switching’. Up to six marks were possible for each of five photo ‘items’—a judgement of their originality and local nature, creativity of format and content, and their communicative power. Up to six more marks were awarded for accurate and complete assignment of Dublin Core metadata, mapping, tagging, and theme. Finally, up to six marks could be earned for the story or narrative description of a respective photograph. The Omeka project, run in the final two weeks of the module, constituted 20% of the students’ mark for the semester.

## **Ethical considerations**

This archive was designed to be a public contribution as a digital database and website, searchable by item, collection, exhibit, keyword, and location. Because the project involved students in archive building as producers of ‘future-historical’ information and as actors representing their own knowledge and experience, the issue of ethics was an important concern.

As an instructor of first-year undergraduates who had not yet been inducted into the

discourse of research ethics and who were accustomed to creating and sharing personal content on social media platforms, I was in the role of guardian and gatekeeper when it came to the ethics of crafting a public site. Several issues were at stake.

The first involved protecting the privacy and dignity of students themselves and of those close to them who might appear in their images and texts. This required training in research ethics and protocols of protecting human subjects (including themselves) and the concepts of informed consent and vulnerable populations. In the first instance, students were asked to share, discuss, and photograph only what they felt personally comfortable sharing, understanding that the archive would be available to potential viewers worldwide. They were also prompted to distinguish between a common social media shot (for example, striking a sexy pose in revealing clothing) and the professional demeanor appropriate to an academic documentary project. The assignment required that students avoid photographic subject matter that showed individuals breaking national lockdown rules or behaving in ways that could be deemed irresponsible by prevailing public health standards. They had to receive permission to publicly post an image involving friends or family. The national mask requirements further contributed to the anonymity of groups, and images of people in public spaces. Finally, although they could pin a public institution (for example, a shopping centre) on the map, students were asked to geo-locate more private settings (such as a home) in a very general manner.

We raised ethical questions around some further issues. The first concerned memory-making and the ethics of representation for public exhibits more generally. I created a tutorial and online quiz assessment around an article appearing in the December 2020 issue of the *New Yorker*, "How will we tell the story of the Coronavirus?" This article traces the dilemmas of professional curators tasked with gathering Covid-19-relevant items for the National Museum of American History, even as the epidemic unfolded around them.<sup>33</sup> My students were encouraged to reflect on the specific problems raised: how to ensure inclusive and diverse representations of experience; what criteria should be employed in selecting certain artifacts, images, documents, and sources; how to avoid sensationalist, traumatic, or inadvertently dehumanising (victim) images; the value of lateral representations of difficult subject matter; how to ensure dignity of subjects captured in photographs and written accounts.

A second ethical concern resided in the project's sponsorship by UJ, with best ethical

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33 A Dickson, "Who will we tell the story of the corona virus?", *New Yorker*, December 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-communications/how-will-we-tell-the-story-of-the-coronavirus> (re-accessed 17 June 2023)

practices important for the institution's reputation. Given the contested political climate in South Africa and elsewhere regarding vaccination, lockdown, xenophobia, and scapegoating—not forgetting the American President's endorsement of the therapeutic benefits of bleach—I was aware that our site could be a potential transmitter of misinformation. While I wanted students to express themselves genuinely, it was imperative to avoid giving further publicity to opinions and claims that undermined public health interventions or exacerbated fears or social conflicts. I thus warned students in advance that we would not publish items which aired unsubstantiated claims and might thereby pose dangers to individual or collective health. We would not publish items that constituted hate speech, that promoted products sold as miracle cures, or that incited breaking the law. Filtering out items that reflected such controversial points of view or conspiracy theories constituted a real limitation to the historical record which our archive was meant to capture since their local circulations were an undeniable part of our setting. This indicates how present moralities and politics necessarily constrained our own constructions of 'future pasts'.

A separate and minor, but still present, ethical issue was plagiarism. With 2000 images, it was impossible to thoroughly check each and every image and story for originality. The marking rubric encouraged tutors to keep an eye for implausibility, and I also personally went through the entire collection. Our gatekeeping strategy resided in what we published. We left out unpublished images that indeed had been cut and pasted from internet sites or which we deemed problematic for other reasons. Students could still receive some credit for meritorious elements of an unpublished submission. We judged that all except a handful of images were convincingly homegrown, demonstrating students' keenness to portray their immediate realities.

The various ethical constraints imposed did not appear to limit student self-expression in a disabling way. Students were able to account for many important spheres of life, sufficient to generate a rich collection of images. Students did not volunteer images or stories too personal to share. For example, while I was personally made aware of numerous students who lost close family and friends to the epidemic, this was not a theme that emerged in the submissions. Such, of course, presents a further limitation to the historical record of the Omeka archive in terms of representative experience. Here again, it was more crucial that students bring their own agendas for memory-making, with many unique and diverse stories, some of which coalesced around common themes.

## Student outputs and responses

The contributions of students, both visual and textual, captured many elements of everyday life. I noticed that many chose to submit self-portraits. One student, for example, offered a memorable and humorous account of having his hair styled by his non-barber uncle, when local barbershops closed for business. The two pictures capture a lively backyard exchange between the two men, one armed with comb and scissors. This student, as others, populated the Dublin Core entry-blanks of the site to award his contribution a specific identity. This enabled Omeka to autogenerate and format a digital reference formula, both awarding him credit as the author of the source and hypothetically enabling 'future historians' to cite it.

As another notable contribution, a student showed a photograph of herself with her sister and mother at a picnic in the Eastern Cape. For her it commemorated the most recent occasion she had seen them—just before the pandemic lockdown was declared. In her description she wrote movingly about how this image helped motivate her to continue to focus on her studies, even as she was badly missing them and worried about them, fighting the temptation to return home. She referred to the photograph as her 'anchor' in the absence of her mother's immediate presence. The theme here, of distance and separation, was common among students, with emotions of sadness expressed. What was noticeable at the same time were expressions of resilience and determination, the ingenuity of students searching for (and often finding) points of grounding in the crisis.

While some students were far from family, others were challenged by remaining in busy and full homes where making space for study could mean working at night while others slept. Additional themes spoke to economic hardship in a neighbourhood or community. Images of deserted streets and schoolrooms were common, or those showing shortages of inventory on local shop shelves. Students also reflected on the experience of worshipping in isolation due to a closed mosque or church, indicating how a weekly source of upliftment and support was now taking place virtually on zoom. Images of generic clinic spaces and masked people waiting in vaccination queues were among the submissions. Many photographs invoked the ongoing efforts to grow and maintain friendships across social distancing (for example, screenshots of WhatsApp conversations or photos of masked outdoor encounters). A couple of students showed themselves proudly getting the 'jabba', while others focused on ever-present bottles of hand sanitiser and the written directives about interpersonal spacing posted on walls and floors.

As the module instructor, a revealing theme that I found both sobering and inspiring

was evident in the many images students took of themselves in their respective lockdown study environments. Selfies taken at desks, on beds, attending zoom classes, sometimes dressed, often in their pajamas, were ubiquitous as submissions. One showed a student at his computer attending the World History online class—my class—in which my own face on the screen is recognisable. Another showed a student’s handwritten message to himself—Never Lose Yourself—hanging beside his wall calendar. Some students posed with objects of importance in their personal spaces: a Quran, a stack of books, a pet, a stuffed animal, a set of gym weights, and a candle by which to study. Many students described how learning to study remotely was learning in its own right and displayed pride that they had improved over the semester. Some elaborated on the temptations of ‘escapes’ and procrastination via internet entertainments such as YouTube. Encountering such images and texts awarded me my first genuine glimpse of students’ private life *as* students learning remotely.

These contributions showcased sets of experiences and narratives, rooted in the daily lives of students. Students understood that such ‘archival sources’ served to document a period within human history, a history they were presently living, and which could be used to increase the understanding of the Covid-19 ‘moment’ among people living in the future. As such, the project of documenting elements of a ‘future past’, as a collective and collaborative effort, had resonance and relevance within the World History space.

What did students themselves think about the exercise? The Academic Development Centre helped customize a student course evaluation survey that included several questions about the Omeka project. They could not, and did not attempt, to measure learning outcomes (in relation to historical thinking and imagination or an understanding of ‘future pasts’) but rather took note of students’ experiences and opinions of the archive-building exercise. One hundred twenty students participated in the course evaluation (unfortunately delayed into the break period), representing just under a third of the class. Students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a statement, and how strongly for each, with a maximum score of four to indicate unanimous strong agreement.

The most ambivalent score for a question in the survey (question 3.2) showed only general agreement that the Omeka project “should remain part of the World History module” in future years. There were fewer than average responders to this question and this may itself reflect some ambivalence about the project. The more specific indicators had better response rates and higher levels of agreement:

- The lecturer used online tools and resources that supported my learning (3.9)

- The lecturer made the purpose of learning in this module clear (3.9)
- The lecturer used online tools and technology to explain concepts (3.8)
- The lecture made learning materials available in an accessible format (3.8)

As mentioned earlier, there was agreement that home languages were a valuable aspect of the Omeka project (3.5) and that the technical challenges were not prohibitive. Most gratifying was a score of 3.8 for the question “The Omeka project allowed me to express my own perspective on things”. My interpretation of this is that a strength of the project lay in its inclusiveness and invitation to self-expression, with students awarded space to document their own experiences and views. Qualitative evaluations in the form of anonymous comments confirm enthusiasm about these aspects of the archive-building project. For example:

“I had some challenges with the Omeka but with her [the author] it was easy. She replies very fast on our emails and I enjoyed doing the Omeka Project because it was a platform where I was able to write something from my own perspective.”

“...Omeka assignment made me feel like a real historian.”

“ [I]t was understandable and made me fell in love even more with the module.”

“It was a great experience to do.”

Some students commented on how the assignment enabled higher marks and how they felt successful as a result:

“[I] never have i thought i would enjoy history...let alone pass it with a solid distinction”

Some enjoyed the assignment but felt the project should not continue for other reasons:

“The omeka assignment was very good but ... [I was not happy with] the marks I received and the omeka assignment should not be considered as of next year.”

Student evaluations are designed to gauge subjective experience of a module. Overwhelmingly, over five pages, students registered levels of enthusiasm about the module, greater than any module I have previously taught. I attribute this, in part, to the Omeka exercise and the way—in the context of a remote classroom—it served to integrate the students into a class community, as well as into the course’s thematic content.

In the context of remote, and otherwise isolated and lonely learning, Joburg21 provided a bridge, a connection with others, and an acknowledgement of a shared situation. Students registered excitement about the public nature of this project (“we’re going global guys”) and their capacity to give voice to their experiences of the epidemic and associated social constraints. Many students showed interest in what their peers had submitted, perhaps because it contributed to a feeling of common ground. Because Omeka demanded a set of specific tasks and trainings, this brought students into online classes and into email contact with me regularly for support. My own enthusiasm for, and engagement with, this project was clearly evident to students, encouraging their engagement with the project:

“[her teaching] made me fall in love with history”

“she made the module more fun”

“I think online learning is a great experience.”

“She should keep on teaching like this, the future of history is in safe hands!”

“She offered support to those who could not understand and made sure we all move together as she did not want to leave others behind.”

As regard learning outcomes that might have been related to historical thinking and reflection on ‘future pasts’, student evaluations do not offer a useful measure. What they do reveal, however, are levels of engagement and connection to learning in a history classroom. For a large class of first-year undergraduates, an activity that sets the stage for thinking about sources, archives, and their politics in subsequent classrooms, may be counted as important wins. If emotional and personal engagement with historical methodologies can be awakened, with burning questions posed about the past and about the production of history, students may indeed begin a process of “*learning into* ... politics and power” as well

as into the ethics of history and of public memory-making.

## Conclusion

In an online exercise of digital archive-building during the first semester of 2021, my first-year undergraduate class grappled with the idea of 'future pasts', and reflected on the problems of archival sources as the basis of academic historical knowledge and writing. Instead of reading or otherwise working with pre-selected source materials, they generated sources for a collaborative repository of memory, documenting accounts of their experiences of the corona virus. Placing the project within a World History module enabled discussions and comparisons of our own times within global human experiences of revolutionary change across the centuries. It encouraged imaginative thinking about dilemmas that epidemics have posed for people living in the past, in their everyday lives of family, community, and religious practice; issues of trust in government and in 'the stranger', and of medical technologies; and in the self-fashioning of youth identities. Building an archive promoted thinking about research methodologies and appreciation for how archives and sources are products of human agency and time within specific contexts.

It is crucial to note here that new legislative constraints for developing an archival database raise immediate questions about the viability of future Omeka work in my own classroom. The strictures of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) narrow, but also blur, clarity about the scope for what participants in a collaborative project are legally enabled to share in various spaces that may be considered public, whether in a classroom or as part of an online database.<sup>34</sup> This, for historians and other humanities scholars, raises some old and ongoing concerns about historical representation, accessibility, and equality of voice in new conditions. Too-stringent management of source content repositored and preserved—in any online or public space—limits the capacity to make genuine sense of diverse and complex historical experiences and thus must be understood in political terms. In a world in which ChatGPT is able to effortlessly harvest big data off of internet sites, it would seem that limiting public expression and representation in the name of ethics can by no means be declared a clear moral victory. New impositions which shape the perimeters of 'whose story' gets told or rendered invisible must raise questions about the impact on history writing and method. These are questions that can and should be posed in the classroom as well as in the legislature.

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<sup>34</sup> The Joburg21 site is offline.

As an exercise, contributing sources towards ‘future pasts’ is demonstration of a kind of historical thinking in which students are able to consider their agency and identities in relation to the ‘gaze’ of ‘those who come after.’ This can promote a lively classroom, since— as Cutrara suggests—it draws upon students’ existing expertise and subjective views of the world as strengths to be celebrated. I am not suggesting that such an undertaking replace other excellent pedagogical practices and projects, but digital technologies like Omeka enable new ways of encouraging students—as *history* students—also to engage with emotion and passion, as well as discipline and intellect in the urgencies of our own times.<sup>35</sup>

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I am grateful for the assistance of several key individuals at UJ whose efforts made the Joburg21 experiment come to life, all in difficult times and personal circumstances, particularly Anna Coetzee and Thea de Wet of the Centre for Academic Technologies (CAT); and Kibbie Naidoo, Academic Staff Development. The project was made possible by the dedication and multilingual skills of 2021 tutors Nikiwe Veshe, Mark Hackney, Sifiso Jiyane, Juwel Khosa, and Lebohang Seganoe. Finally, and most importantly, thanks to all first-year students from History1A, 2021.

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