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## 45TH *National Conference*

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AFRICAN AMERICAN GENEALOGY AND HISTORY IN FOCUS**





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# Uncovering Black Lives: Exploring the Informational Experiences of African American Genealogists

October 12, 2024

**Dr. Laverne Gray** (Assistant Professor)

**Jeongbae Choi** (PhD Candidate ABD)

**Shannon Crooks** (PhD Student)



# Research Team



**Dr. LaVerne Gray** is an Assistant Professor at Syracuse University School of Information Studies. Her research focuses on the Black information experience, which comprises familial genealogies, community-based information networks, and collectivism.



**Jeongbae Choi** is a PhD candidate at Syracuse University School of Information Studies. His research interests include information literacy, information pathology, the philosophy of information, library education, historical librarianship, and information policy.



**Shannon Crooks** is a PhD student at Syracuse University School of Information Studies. Her background in social work enriches her perspective on library services and forms the foundation of her research on community engagement.

# UNCOVERING BLACK LIVES PROJECT

This project, RE-250139-OLS-21, was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). IRB Approval #: 23-219

## Eligibility:

African American genealogy practitioners  
All levels welcome

## Participation options:

- Narrative Interviews (60-90 minutes)
- Focus Groups
- Observation

# CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

SCAN BELOW QR CODE TO COMPLETE  
ELIGIBILITY SURVEY



<https://t.ly/sWevg>

# Project Goals

- 1) Capture **narratives** of African American genealogical community members in professional practice, associations, and online environments.
- 2) Explore and analyze the **collection and artifacts** of African American genealogists.
- 3) Uncover **familial histories** toward the development of a dissemination tool for use in libraries and archives that **service African American genealogists**.
- 4) Utilize multiple **qualitative approaches** for data collection to develop protocols for investigating an **information community of color** defined by the activity of family historical research.

# Research Questions

- **RQ1.** How do the information communities of African American genealogists support familial research?
- **RQ2.** What processes and mechanisms do the communities use in familial collection building?
- **RQ3.** What activities are employed to contribute to uncovering and reconciling the histories of African Americans?

# Research Methodology

# Research Methodology

- **Qualitative Narrative Inquiry**

- Lived and told stories: Understanding experiences through personal, social, and cultural stories
- Collaboration between researcher and participants: Co-composition of stories and relationships with long-term engagements

- **Approaches to Narrative Analysis**

- Thematic analysis: Content (“What”)
- Structural analysis: Narrative structure (“How”)
- Dialogic analysis: Context (“Who,” “When,” “Why”)



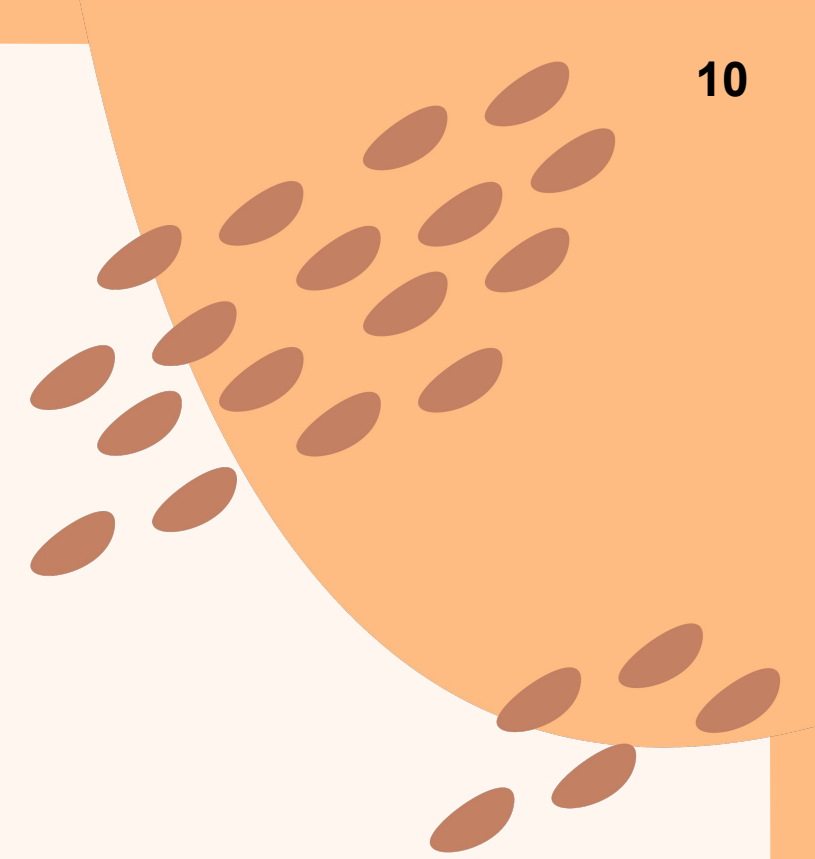
# Research Process

- **Participants**

- **Number:** 4 (3 women and 1 man)
- **ID:** 001, 002, 003, 004

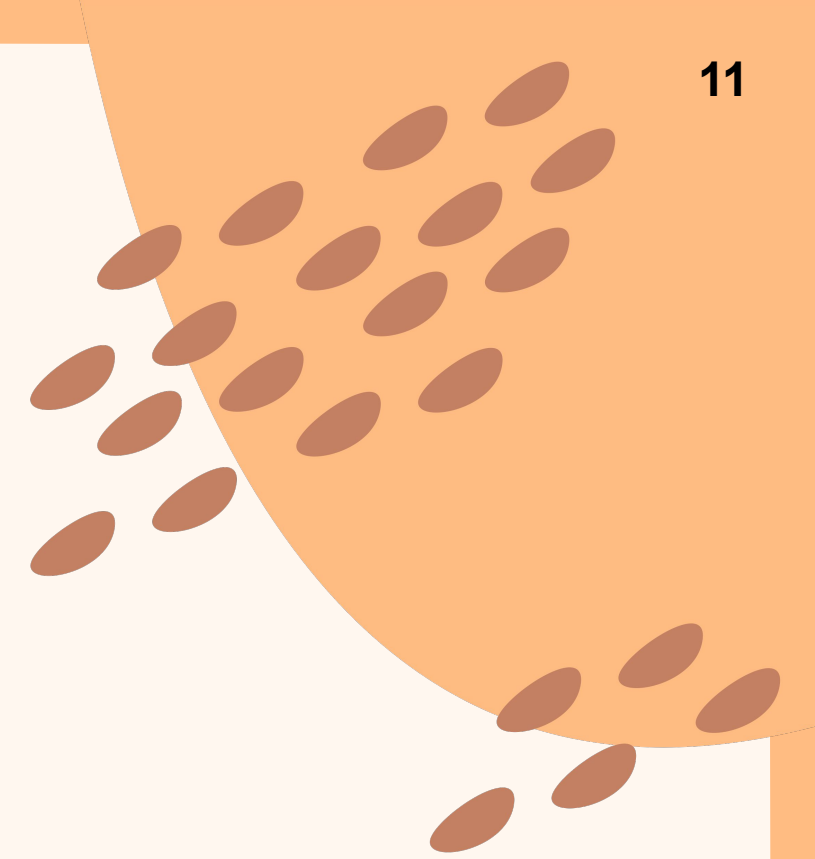
- **Research Characteristics**

- **Diversity:** Three researchers analyzed the transcripts individually.
- **Researcher Perspectives:** Cultural and experiential influences on approach to analysis
- **Iterations:** Two iterations of thematic coding to refine the analysis.
- **Group discussion and reflection:** After each iteration



# Interview Approaches

- **Techniques for engagement**
  - Building **rapport** to establish trust
  - **Empathy** in interviewing
  - Naturally progress and evolve organically



# Interview Approaches

- Role as a **Black Woman Interviewing**
  - Both **insider's** (emic) perspective & **outsider's** (etic) perspectives are necessary to understand what really happened.
  - Unstructured life story interview seeking to highlight “**the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, and lessons of a lifetime**” (Atkinson, 2002)

# Analysis Process

• **Interviews** → **Transcribing** → **Familiarizing** → **Initial analysis**

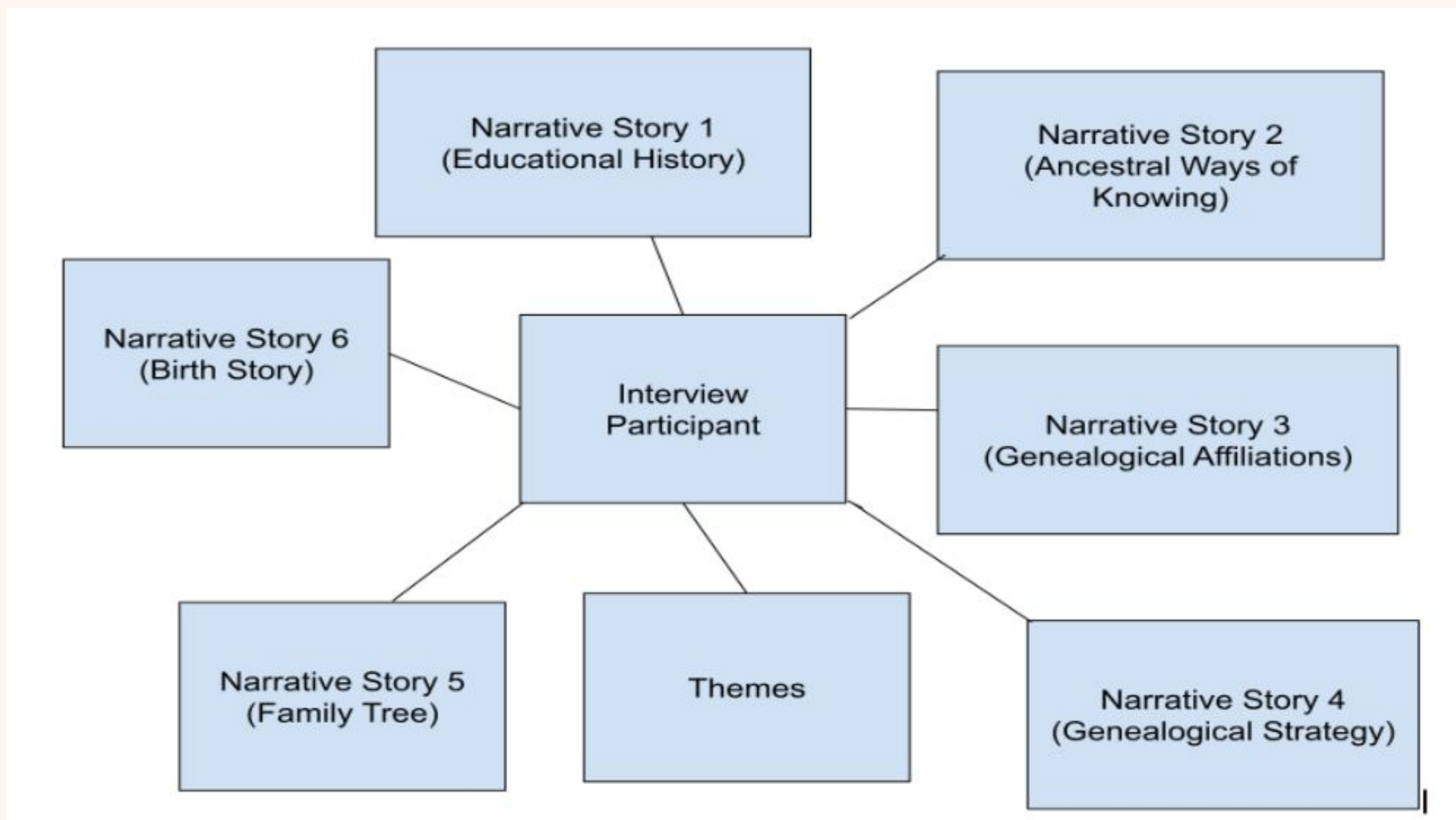
→ **Discussions** → **Refined analysis** → **Synthesizing the findings**

1. Listen to the interview straight through once while making brief notes and identifying the narratives.
2. Wait 2-3 days before listening to the interview a second time.
3. Listen to the interview a second time but use initial analysis to separate the narratives in order to identify themes.
4. While listening for the second time, themes begin to emerge.
5. Document the themes while listening for the second time.
6. Step away from the themes, take time to think about the interview in its entirety, make connections between the stories, and then come back to document any additional themes.
7. Review all interview narrative maps together and determine commonalities in themes.

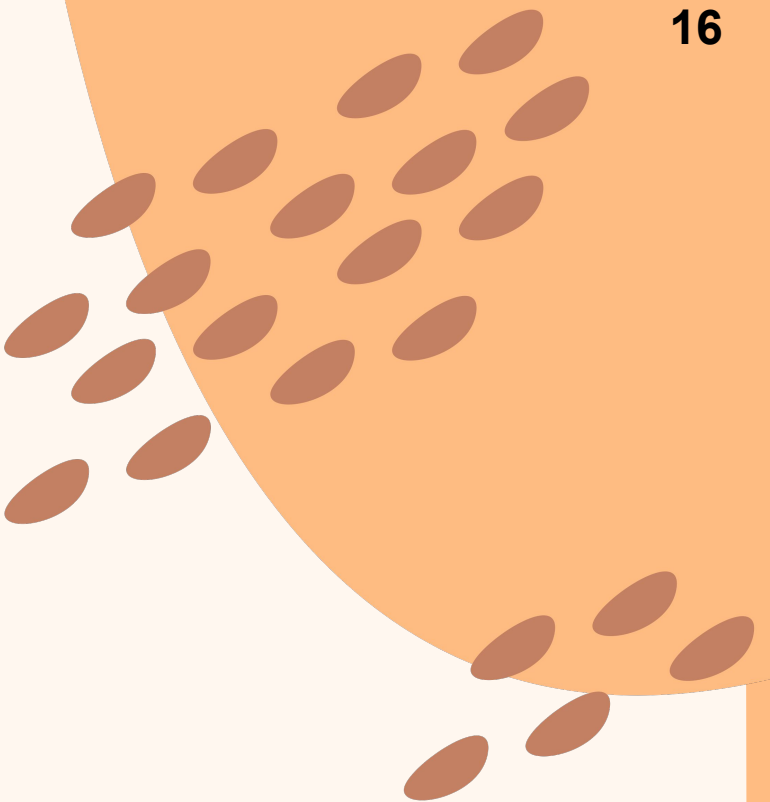
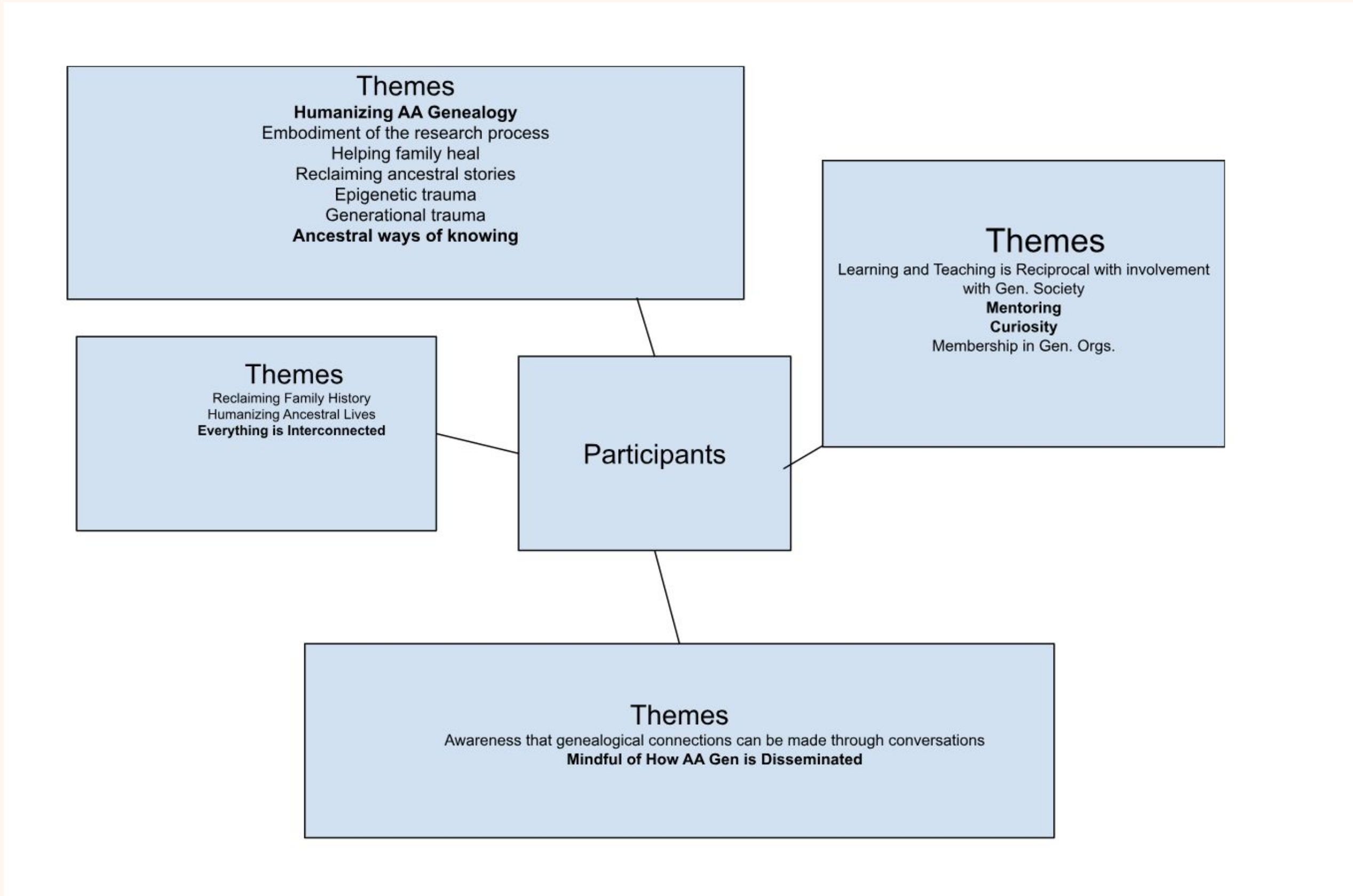


# Findings

# Narrative Mapping (Shannon)



# Findings – Participants (Shannon)



# Findings (Jeongbae)

- **Focus: Thematic and Structural Analysis**
- **Common Narrative Elements**

Motivation for  
research

Challenges faced

Use of  
oral histories  
&  
artifacts

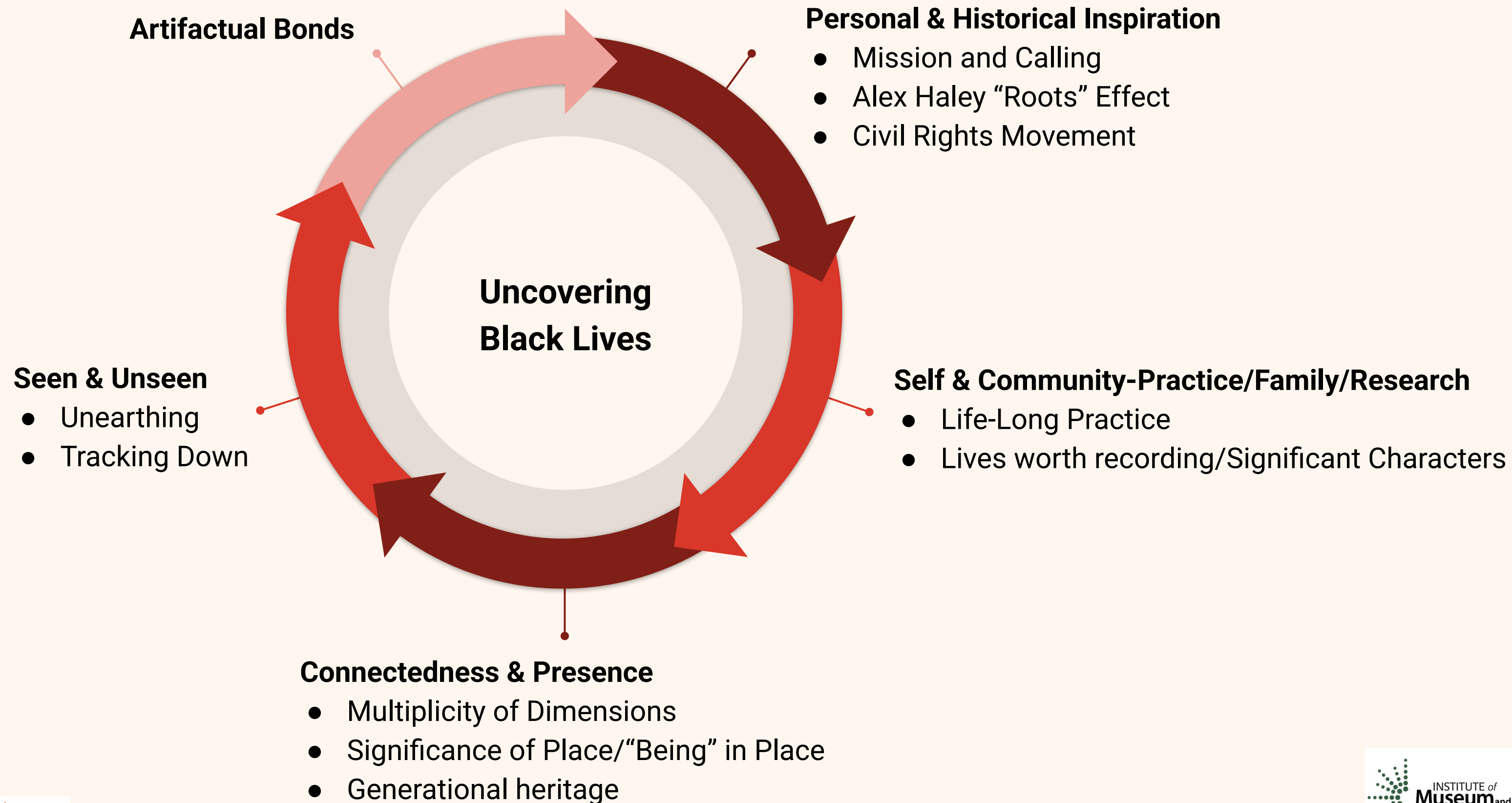
Community  
engagement

Research  
methodologies  
&  
technology

Influence of  
historical contexts

Impact on  
personal &  
communal  
identities

# Findings (Dr. Gray)



# Quotes from Participant 1

“We were taken to a documentary. It was so poignant to me because my mentor said **‘what do you see when you see,’** because at the end of the documentary there is a little black boy sitting on the sidewalk and my mentor said **‘what are you thinking?’** And what I was thinking and what I shared with him is that they are just like us. So that was my **introduction to African culture and being supported by a community that celebrated African culture.**”

“I knew ... **even though I was self-taught, some of it felt like it was innate.** You just want to get the dates and the things and, you know, where it happened. But it’s also the stories behind it. Now, I don’t think I’m there yet. I’m good at telling some of the stories and I have some fascinating stories that have happened to me. **But for me, it was building, getting a confidence and actually saying I was a genealogist.**”

# Quotes from Participant 2

“They have family history libraries all over the country. It was just, if you’re Black and you’re doing research, you can come to the library. And **you would just be there with other folks doing research and making connections that way.** And it was really good because, you know, sometimes there’d be somebody there who would be new to research entirely. [...] They’d have the rest of us to ask questions of, you know, we’d always be asking, okay, well, what are the surnames that you’re working with? You know, what are the areas that you’re working with?”

“With some of these lines, where I have thought, I don’t know where to go. I don’t know what else to look for. These people just didn’t exist before, you know, 1870. They’re just not there. And I will leave it alone. And then, you know, **the only way I can describe it is the ancestors. You know, it’s like, hey, did you consider this? And then you go look and that’s where they are.**”

# Quotes from Participant 3

“One of the things that I’ve learned is the **art of patience**, you know, that comes with age too. As I got older, I started to realize I would come to a brick wall. And I just couldn’t find anything else. [...] And then I realized that **I had to let it go and wait for them, wait for when they were ready**. [...] For example, [...] it took 16 years for me to finally get a picture of my great-grandfather, and it came from my cousin, the scared cousin that I’m afraid to meet, it came from her.

“I didn’t realize until about four or five years ago **that they did trace back to slavery. I didn’t even realize it’s in my Bible**. Like my, like my grandmother’s grandfather was a slave. And so, like, it’s always back to him. And so that totally substantiated my independent research of finding people through, you know, census records, marriage licenses, and things like that.”

“I feel as though **my most important job is to reclaim this**, our family history for the purpose of reparation, to repair, you know. Um ... especially for my mother’s side of the family, because on my mother’s side of the family, we are still ... struggling in a very deep way with the outcomes of slavery.”

# Quotes from Participant 4

“It was a message board. And they had one for genealogy. And [...] I found out that the majority of my time was spent correcting misinformation. [...] And it goes back to the fact that in today’s crop of genealogists, **they don’t start the way we did**. We started by reading books by experts. [...] People today don’t take a course conducted by a reputable organization. They don’t read a book written by reputable experts, you know. They start by just going online, Googling, or getting in a social media group.”

“Anyway, I spent the summer doing research. **That was before the Internet, before cell phones, before personal computers** were out. I had done everything manually, had a ton of photocopies, I had so much research I couldn’t process it all. And my mind was just filled with information, I had boxes filled with information. And I got what I call **information overload**.”

“When I [...] travel [...] I often **do research at the location**. I always check to see if I have ancestors there so I can do some research.”

# Implications for Practice

# The 'Uncovering Black Lives' Toolkit

Identify several key areas to better support African American genealogists

## 1. Enhance access to specialized resources

- Curate specialized collections to address challenges, such as historical erasure and inadequate record-keeping.
- Facilitate access to restricted materials to expand research possibilities.

## 2. Offer educational programs and workshops

- Conduct regular workshops on research methods and African American history
- Develop comprehensive online tutorials for genealogists.
- Offer information literacy instructions for critical evaluation of online sources, addressing misinformation, proper documentation, etc.

## 3. Create supportive community spaces

- Develop a collaborative platform where individuals can share their research, challenges, and discoveries.
- Enhance connections among genealogists who research similar topics and geographical areas.



# Revelations from Pilot

## African American Genealogy Research:

- Uncovering Black Lives, Reconciliation, and Identity
  - Becomes a part of one's life
- Influenced by Ancestral Ways of Knowing
  - Artifacts
  - DNA
- Supported by Communities
  - Familial Heritage and Lineage
  - Solicit Feedback from others (family, friends, genealogists)
  - Genealogy Groups and Institutes
- Iterative in its Process
  - Ongoing
  - Cyclical



# Related Literature

## Genealogical Methods Literature:

- Gray, L., Choi, J., Crooks, S., Cook, A. (2023).** Locating Black Information Lives: “Scoping” the Literature on African American Genealogical Research. In: Sserwanga, I., et al. *Information for a Better World: Normality, Virtuality, Physicality, Inclusivity*. iConference 2023. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 13971. Springer, Cham.
- Stitt, J. F. (2018).** The Aftereffects of Slavery: A Black Feminist Genealogy. *Meridians*, 17(1), 150-162.
- Taylor, F. K. (2022).** Useful Resources in Overcoming the Challenges of African-American Genealogy Research. *Highway 80: A Drive-through Alabama’s Civil Rights Corridor* (6th ed.). Linus Learning.

## Interview and Narrative Inquiry Literature:

- Atkinson, P. (2002).** The life story interview. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context & method*. Sage.
- Brinkmann, S. (2014).** Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing. *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research*, 2, 277-299.
- Caine, V., Estefan, A., & Clandinin, D. J. (2019).** Narrative Inquiry. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J. W. Sakshaug, & R. A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. SAGE Publication, Ltd.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008).** *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. SAGE Publications.

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- Rebecca Hankins

**Afro-American Historical and Genealogy Society, Inc. (AAHGS)**

**Syracuse University School of Information Studies**

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# Sample Survey Pages



## Welcome to the Uncovering Black Lives Project!

Thank you for considering participating in our study on the African American genealogy community. This research is being led by **Dr. LaVerne Gray**, an assistant professor at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies, supported by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) (No.: RE-250139-OLS-21).

The **Uncovering Black Lives (UBL) project** aims to examine information behavior, explore familial collection building, and support the dissemination of unearthed histories of African Americans. For more information, please visit our project website: <https://lgray01.expressions.syr.edu/>

Next page >

0% Survey Completion

## Introduction to the Project (3)

### Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may skip and/or refuse to answer any question for any reason. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty. There is no fee required to participate.

While there may not be any direct benefits to the participant, this project has the strong potential to benefit practitioners, researchers, and users within African American genealogical communities, as the research team aims to illuminate how African American genealogical communities as sites are formed and cultivated.

### Privacy Protection and Confidentiality

The digital interview and observation data will be deposited and preserved in the Syracuse University Institutional Repository under the supervision of the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (IRB). To further safeguard your identity/identifiable private information, we will assign ID numbers to your response, which will be used in association with all data linking to you in place of your name.

Only the research team will have access to the data which contains identifiable personal information and the key which links ID numbers to personal information. All identifying information will be kept confidential. The study information might be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies, but only in de-identified form.

# Sample Survey Pages

## Your Potential Involvement

This section is designed to gauge your interest in potentially participating in further research activities related to the Uncovering Black Lives project, namely individual interviews and/or observational studies at local genealogy chapter meetings.

Your responses here are NOT a final commitment. If you express interest, a researcher will contact you to discuss possible involvement and provide additional information, enabling you to make an informed decision.

### \*Q1. (Required) Willingness to Participate in the Survey

Would you be willing to participate in further survey studies related to African American genealogy?

- Yes
- No (Skip to Q4)
- Maybe

### \*Q2. (Optional) Preferred Types of Participation

In what form would you prefer to participate in the research?

- Interview
- Observation
- Both
- Other (Please specify):

### \*Q3. (Optional) Preferred Method of Participation

How would you prefer to participate in future research activities?  
(Please select all that apply)

- Online interview (e.g., Skype, Zoom)
- Phone interview
- In-person interview
- Focus group
- Being observed during meetings
- Other (Please specify):



# Thank You!

To learn more about our project visit the website at:

<https://lgray01.expressions.syr.edu/>

# WE WILL NOW HAVE LIVE Q/A

