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Uncovering Black Lives (UBL) Project

Exploring the Informational Experiences of African American Genealogists

Presented by

Dr. LaVerne Gray, Jeongbae Choi³, Shannon Crooks, and Isabella Corieri

October 9, 2025

Research Team



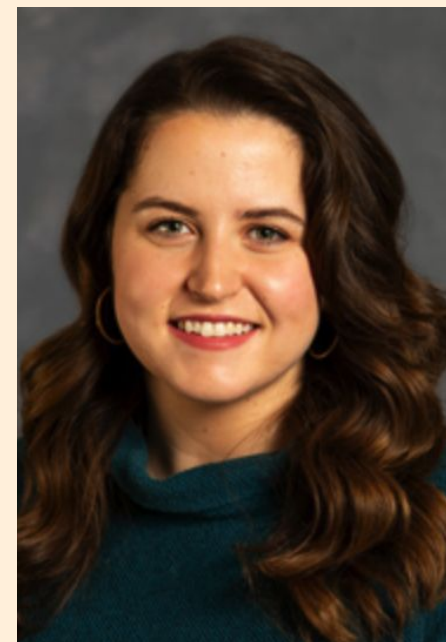
Dr. LaVerne Gray is an Assistant Professor at Syracuse University School of Information Studies. Her research focuses on the Black information experience, which comprises familial genealogies, community-based information networks, and collectivism.



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.



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



Bella Corieri is a PhD Candidate at the Syracuse University School of Information Studies. Her research interests include community infrastructuring practices, spatial storytelling, and feminist mapping.

Project Overview: Uncovering Black Lives

Funding & Compliance

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

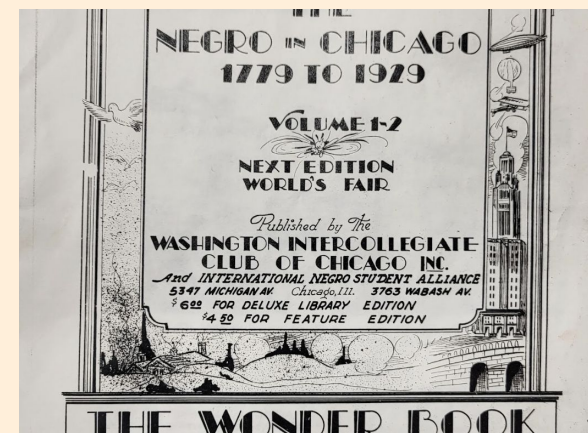
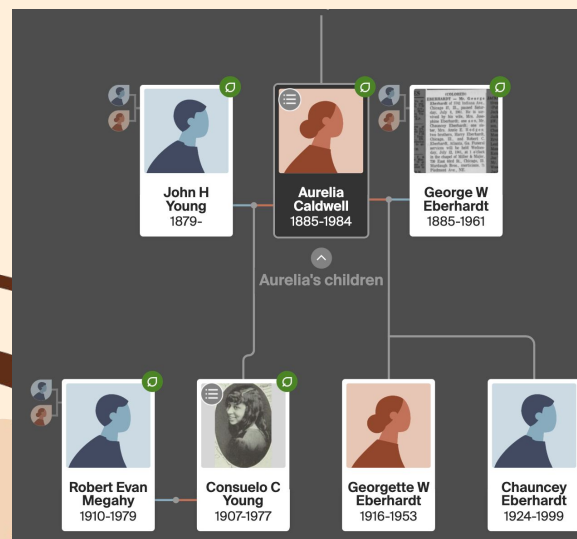
Three guiding questions

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

Research Approach and Methodology

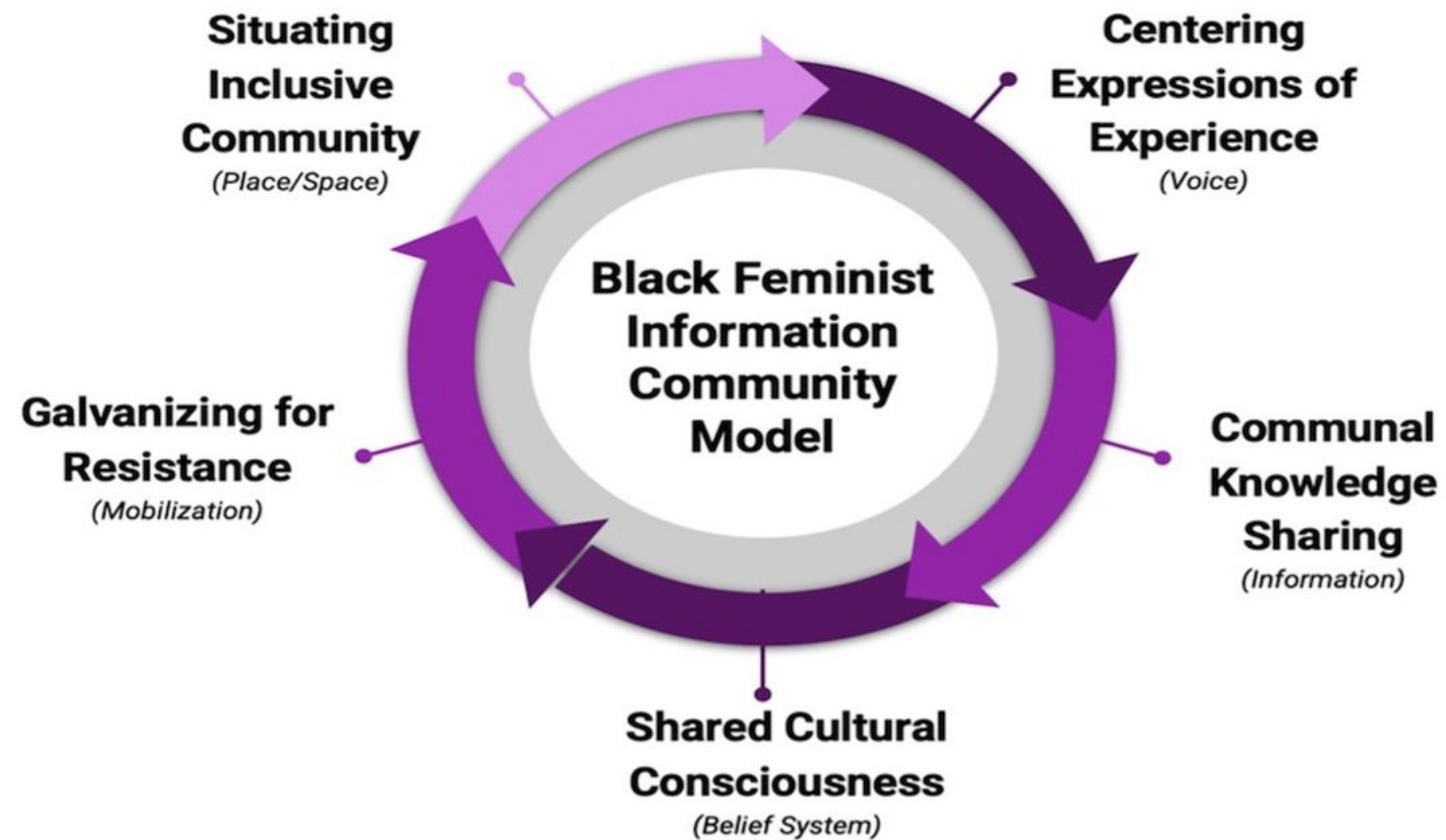
Conceptual Frameworks

- Black information experience
- Information communities



- Black Information Community/Collectives
- Information Intimacies: Genealogy & Family Research
- Critical Inquiry and Reflexivity
- Black Feminism

Project Overview: Uncovering Black Lives



Black Feminist Information Activist Community Context, In B. Mehra (Ed.) Social Justice Design and Implementation in Library and Information Science, p. 109.

Research Approach and Methodology

Data collection:

- **Interviews:** African American genealogists (all level)
- **Observations:** AA Conferences, societies
- **Field research:** Over 10 locations (Summers 2024 & 2025)

Analysis method: Collaborative qualitative narrative analysis

- **Lived and told stories:** Understanding experiences through personal, social, and cultural stories
- **Collaborative approach**
 - **Between researcher and participants:** Co-composition of stories and relationships with long-term engagements
 - **Between researchers:**
- **Integrating different voices among researchers**
 - Diversity: Four 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
- **Approaches to Narrative Analysis**
 - Thematic analysis: Content (“What”)
 - Structural analysis: Narrative structure (“How”)

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
4. in order to identify themes.
5. While listening for the second time, themes begin to emerge.
6. Document the themes while listening for the second time.
7. Step away from the themes, take time to think about the interview in its entirety,
8. make connections between the stories, and then come back to document any additional themes.
9. Review all interview narrative maps together and determine commonalities in themes.

Approaches to Narrative Analysis

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

Research Progress

Data collected:

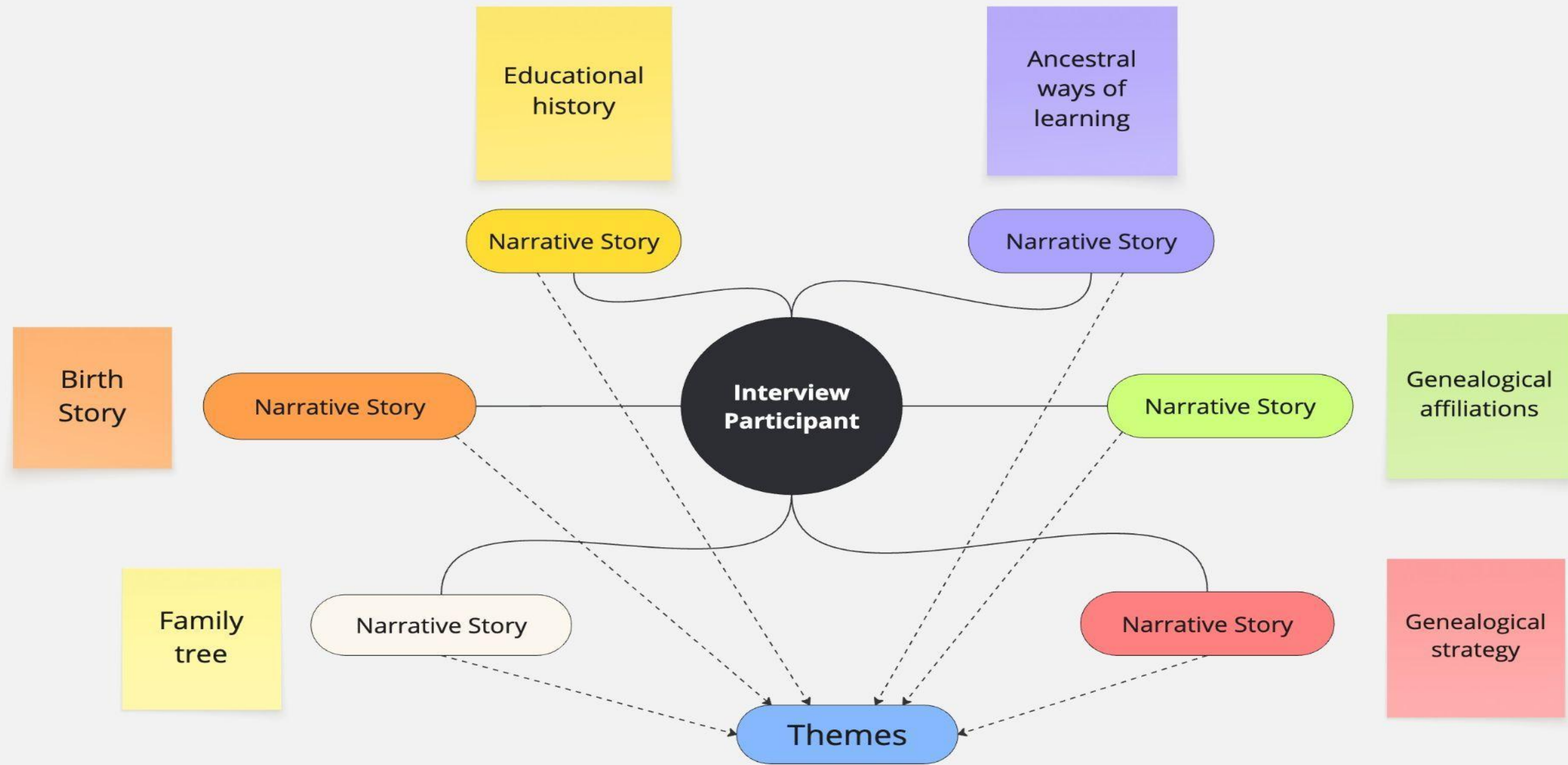
- **Interviews:** Nine participants
- **Observations:**
 - Genealogy conferences & societies
- **Field research:** Over 10 locations (2024 & 2025)
 - Charlottesville, VA
 - Cambridge, MD
 - Charleston, SC
 - Chicago, IL
 - Montgomery, AL
 - Selma, AL
 - Jackson, MS
 - New Orleans, LA
 - Washington, DC
 - Mount Vernon, VA
 - New York, NY



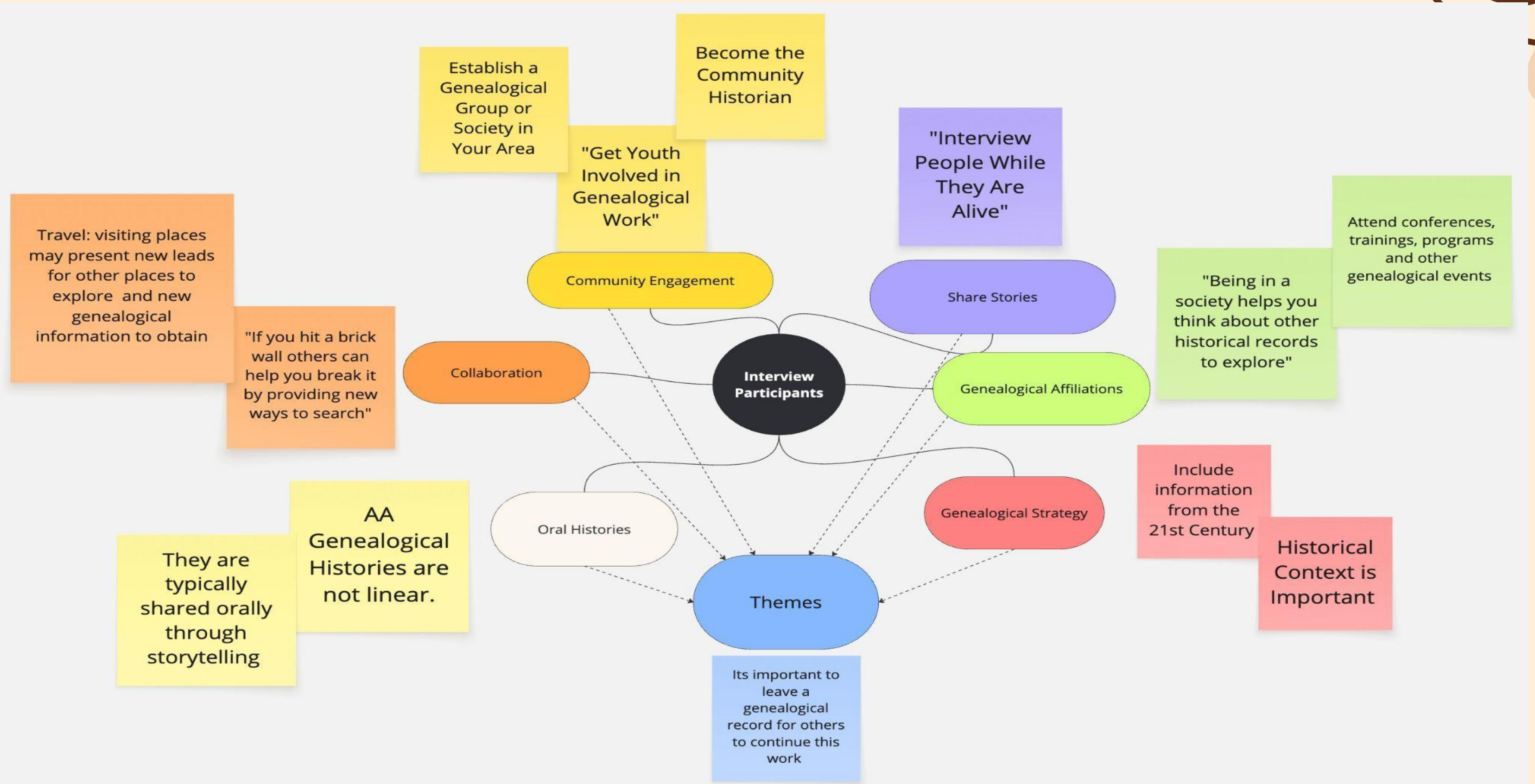
Source: Earl, J. (2022). *Routledge Atlas of African American History* (2nd ed)

Current progress: Near completion and ready for publications

Narrative Mapping (Shannon)



Findings (Participants 7-9)



Structural Analysis (Jeongbae)

- Identifying common narrative structures & elements
- Recurring domains & themes

1. Place & Time

- ✓ Migration & place continuity
- ✓ Temporalities of discovery

2. Communities & Networks

- ✓ Family & local community roles
- ✓ Institutional & professional networks
- ✓ Mentorship & apprenticeship

3. Memory, Identity & Meaning

- ✓ Intergenerational memory & trauma
- ✓ Spiritual & emotional connection
- ✓ Identity work
- ✓ Historical reclamation & healing

4. Practices, Tools & Barriers

- ✓ Learning & knowledge transfer
- ✓ Research practices & tools
- ✓ Barriers & workarounds

5. Public Engagement

- ✓ Civic & public engagement

Holistic & Grounded Theory Analysis (Isabella)

“And then I always bring the question up is like, well, how long did it take to forget him?”

Theme: Personal and public memory

“There’s a lot of anti-blackness that floats in and between these topics”

Theme: Historical reclamation and healing

“if you descend from enslavers, you should know, you know?”

Theme: Identity work for reconciliation

“(Online participation) is the backbone of a lot of communities”

Theme: Importance of networks

Tools for Discovery: Ancestry.com, rootsweb, 23&Me, professional networks, oral histories

Foundational Inspiration for Participant 005

“I got really tired of people doing this romanticized notion of the past”

- Research on the sanitization of violence in museums
- Familial curiosity concerning family migration history

“I tried to become a member, but nobody called me back. I called and left a message. I emailed people, no one responded to me.”

Theme: Barriers to entry into networks

“I love teaching people about how to research their family. And even though I could get paid to do it. I’d rather teach people how to do it.”

Theme: Public engagement as motivation

“And if you find your family member’s name, and like one or two of your family members’ names in that will, most likely that’s the enslaver.”

Theme: Identity work for reconciliation

Tools for Discovery: Family documents (Bible), local libraries, newspaper.com, ancestry.com, networks of genealogists, family wills, oral histories

Foundational Inspiration for Participant 006

“Everywhere I went, I would look for someone in the phone book with my last name and I would never find it”

- Familial curiosity about paternal side met by barriers in communication between relatives.

Soil Sifting (Dr. Gray)



[StoryMap](#)

The 'Uncovering Black Lives' Toolkit (Pilot)

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.
- Collection Building and maintenance of paid resources

2. Offer educational programs and workshops

- Conduct regular workshops on research methods and African American history
- Develop comprehensive online tutorials for genealogists.
- Offer information & data literacy instructions for critical evaluation of sources, addressing misinformation, proper documentation, etc.
 - Who created this record and why?
 - When was it recorded (at the time, or years later from memory)?
 - What information does it actually provide, and what doesn't it say?

The 'Uncovering Black Lives' Toolkit (Pilot) (cont.)

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.

4. Outreach and Partnerships

- Connections with local genealogy groups, historical societies, and museums
- Advisory board/Trustee representative/governance participation
- Municipal partnerships (local and state record keeping)

5. Establish and create strategic planning for sustainability of service and materials

- Evaluation of services and materials
- Dedicated personnel time

The 'Uncovering Black Lives' Toolkit (Pilot) (cont.)

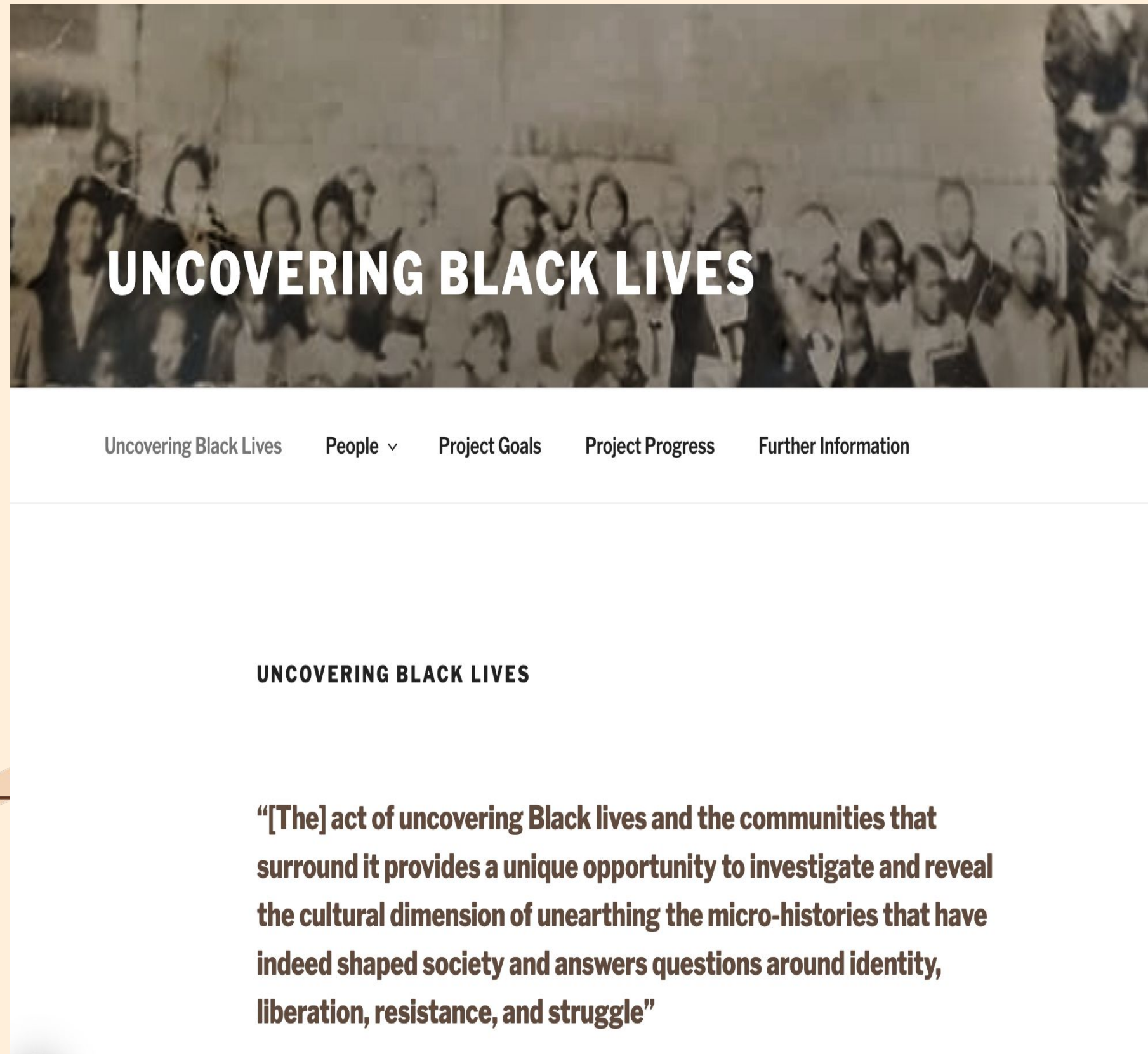
6. Flexibility in adjusting one's scope of view

- Horizontal: finding similarities and differences between events in the same/similar level
- Vertical: move across different levels (individual - institution - local - state - national) and time span (e.g., knowledge of historical migration patterns)

7. Travel and retracing steps

- Tangibility and meeting people to make connections to other genealogical records or places that contribute to family history
- Digital records may not always include all of family history so visiting places that your ancestors have lived or migrated to may provide enriching information that adds to the family narrative
- Ancestral ways of knowing may help guide you as the genealogist when you visit places that tell the story of your family's history
- You may meet people during your travels that may provide information, insights and maps to other places or people that you can reach out to to assist you with piecing together your familial lineage

Future Plans



**Make the UBL project website public
(by the end of 2025)**

Publications

- AAHGS journal paper
- LIS journal paper

**Keep updating the interviews and
observations**

Acknowledgements

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

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

The Uncovering Black Lives Project Advisory Board Members:

- Taneya Y. Koonce
- Miranda Mims
- Makiba Foster
- Allison Sutton
- Rebecca Hankins

Syracuse University School of Information Studies

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>

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/>