

An autoethnographic chronicle: The evolution of self-documentation in African American community archives

kYmberly Keeton^a

^aUniversity of North Texas, Information Science Ph.D. Program, USA

kYmberlykeeton@my.unt.edu

ABSTRACT

There is a lack of African American community archives in Black libraries, museums, and institutions of higher learning in the Midwest and South of the United States. To better understand why this was/is happening, my doctoral research explores how individuals in Black communities archiving their personal and communal history. It is informed by a mixed-methods approach including autoethnography, phenomenology, material probing, and creative research techniques. By extension, the methods are non-exhaustive to help examine issues affecting African American communities in Texas from a personal and communal perspective in that prohibit its participation, and responsibility for self-documenting and collecting its local narratives for inclusion in Black Spaces, i.e., Black Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (BGLAM). The results of the first stage of this study suggest the need for a researcher to be involved as a participant and documentarian in community archival work in the African American community.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Archives; Information Need; Community Engagement; Information Use; Self-Ownership.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

African American, Community Archives, Social Issues, Access, Entrepreneurship.

SECTION 1: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CHRONICLE

I remember when I walked into the Museum of Fine Arts Houston as an undergraduate at the University of Houston. I was taken aback when I learned they had an art library housed in the museum! After graduating I had to figure out how I was going to survive as a creative writer and decided to enroll in graduate school to become a special librarian with my training being fixated on African American history, the visual arts, libraries, museums, and archives. My practicum application at the University of North Texas included two opportunities for me to intern at the Hirsch Library at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and the Houston Museum of African American Culture. During the practicum, I realized that most art libraries exist in white libraries and academic institutions, and there was/is a need for them to be housed in African American museums and academia. In like manner, neither of these institutions at that time owned a community archive about their respective African American communities in the realms of art or communal history that could be accessed in an online environment or tangibly. For this purpose, my doctoral research is motivated by using an interdisciplinary mix-methods approach to examine and document social issues affecting African American communities and institutions from the past and present-day in Texas that prohibits its evolution, participation, and responsibility for self-documenting and collecting its local endemic narratives for inclusion in Black spaces, i.e., Black Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (BGLAM).

In 2014 at the beginning of my professional career, I noticed the lack of community archives and history embedded in special collections and as primary resources in an academic library setting at Lincoln University of Missouri, a Historically Black College, and University in Jefferson City Missouri. It was surprising when I went through the interview process that the panel did not know that Chester Himes, an African mystery writer was born in the state capitol and lived across the street from the university until he was twelve years old. After accepting my contract as a Faculty Librarian, I had to sit and think for a while after discovering that Inman E. Page the university's first president and the university library named after him was one of the first African Americans to graduate from Brown University in 1877. I never found a printed copy of his graduation oration the *'Intellectual Prospects of America,'* or a link to access it on our special collections section of the university library website. I made a conscious decision as a change agent at this institution to collect papers, articles, photographs, mementos, and oral histories by Black community members who lived, worked, and were a part of the university's history and legacy. In the Summer of 2018, I moved to Austin, Texas, and accepted a position as the African American Community Archivist and Librarian at the Austin Public Library, Austin History Center.

Through my work at the Austin Public Library, Austin History Center, within a short amount of time I learned about the displacement of the historic Black East Austin, an African American community on the east side of I-35 (The University of Texas at Austin sits on the west side of the highway). It was the bedrock of the African American community from the early 1900s through the 1990s. Recognizing the lack of diversity in the city was visually impairing, forcing me to think about documenting the lives of the African American community through an archive, i.e., documents, images, and memorabilia when they have left the city limits because of gentrification. Another critical observation, I remember there was a folder left for me by my predecessor. She informed me in a note to begin where she left off by documenting the Volma

Overton, Sr. Community Archive. The family papers were inside a manilla folder. The next day when I returned to work, the folder was gone. Later that afternoon, I attended a staff meeting and learned that my white colleague I barely knew would be archiving the Overton family history. It happened in real time – my first week. As the only African American professional in the institution led me to think about being subjected to systematic racism and power-induced moves by white administrators. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I resigned from the institution and started a creative information agency.

The COVID-19 Pandemic ushered in a new way of visualizing Black community archives in (BGLAM) spaces. An archivist so happened to email me one day about a list of virtual community archive repositories developed at the start of the pandemic in the United States. Days passed, and no one had a clue as to what was going on; I began easing myself into the process of working remotely as an entrepreneur. Again, I looked at the list she sent and realized no representation of African Americans existed. Using a Google form, I created the BLACK COVID-19 INDEX, a virtual space to collect photos, poems, letters, artwork, or blog posts about their personal experience during the pandemic. The criteria required participants to agree to be published in a literary arts journal forthcoming in 2023! The observation naturally arose in me during this process that being an advocate for change presents itself in the oddest of times. It takes a radical effort to be able to step outside of the status quo and be purposeful in creating spaces for inclusion for African American people. This occurrence presented more questions on my part as a researcher; I needed to talk with a trusted community member to engage in a critical discussion about African American community archiving.

Vividly, I remember standing in one of the last Black communities in East Austin in early 2021. The sun was shining bright in the [Rogers Washington Holy Cross Historic District](#) on this chilly day in December. I was in for a treat getting to talk with Ms. Pat Calhoun. Her father was the principal of Kealing Junior High School, the first junior high school for African American students in Austin, Texas. Ms. Calhoun's mother was the supervisor of the Travis County Schools for African American Students. Her family home, a community archive sitting within ten feet of the first African American Architect licensed in Texas, the John Chase home. We talked about African American history and the current politics in Austin, Texas. Musical notes by Nat King Cole filled the sky, courtesy of an African American truck sitting in front of the King-Tears residence, the first African American family to open a funeral home business in Texas, directly across from the Calhoun residence. As we continued, we discussed the core of my research: Why African American people do not archive their family history? Her response was assertive and without apology, “We don’t value our history, because we have never been valued as a people.”

Our time was up, I was preparing to leave and looked at her through the screen door and smiled because this was another observation, i.e., an issue that I knew I needed to examine more closely, even if it dealt with my own culture. It was my quest to discover a methodological framework where (I) in the first-person narrative is used to document my experiences and that of the study participant through interviews, text, and imagery in this study. As has been previously reported in this chronicle, the core of my research is embedded in understanding and

acknowledging the complexities that bind African Americans from contributing to their self-documentation about their personal and community history. Using an interdisciplinary mix-methods approach and autoethnography as the guide in which I as the researcher take part in the study process, allows for the opportunity to explore data provided by African American people in the state of Texas and through my entrepreneurial pursuits.

SECTION 2: METHODS

A myriad of definitions describes a [community archive](#) housed in archives, libraries, museums, and community and art complexes. The meaning that compliments this research study is noted by (Welland & Cossham, 2019), “Community archives are often the result of local, grassroots or community initiatives (where community does not necessarily have a geographic meaning) and do not assume that collections were originally created for legal or business reasons, but for other reasons as well or instead, for example, cultural, spiritual, iconic, political activism and advocacy reasons.” (p. 6). Based on this definition, an introduction to my interdisciplinary mix-method approach sets up the process of developing the research to collect data:

- [Autoethnography](#); is a qualitative method that involves a product and process, with the researcher being immersed in autobiography and ethnography (Adams et al., 2017).
- The [phenomenological method](#) is one of the more practical ways that allow for the first-person point of view to be the defining factor about participants engaging or collaborating about their subjective experiences (Smith, 2018).
- [Blogging](#) as a research method reveals that it is possible to creatively capture information and document it in an ethnographic study, and to make oneself available to the process of taking part in subjective participant observation (Rebecca Olive, 2013).
- Using [objects and walking probes](#), where participants in this study engage with their images and news is a method that will help produce verbal and textual responses (De Leon & Cohen, 2005).
- The [ethnographic study of talk](#) is an attractive non-traditional research approach supported by the observational findings and personal participation of the researcher and participant (Majors, 2004).
- [Virtual repatriation and digital cultural heritage](#) (Kate Hennessey, 2009), adds value to the research approach, independent cultural institutions, i.e., BGLAM which intentionally creates inclusive spaces for access to various types of cultural media, “...innovative programming and design that is responsive to the needs of community stakeholders—are providing significant possibilities for sharing curatorial and ethno-graphic authority with originating communities,” (pg. 5).
- To analyze data for this body of work, a creative formula has been adopted using [creative research techniques](#) as a method by which, “the researcher is allowed to include his/her creative practice (the use of imagination and original ideas),

creative methods and/or creative output in research or as part of the research output,” (“Creative Research Techniques | Elsevier Author Services Blog,” 2020).

To gain insight into the observations and issues that (I) as the practitioner have thought about and experienced personally and that of the participants in all phases of this research study, the methods and approaches provide important ways of collecting data that deal with the community archiving process. Because of all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that the researcher as the participant is the advocacy needed to open doors for community archival education in Black communities and repositories to be created by local (BGLAM) institutions.

SECTION 3: RESULTS

The research captured and the data are a part of my future dissertation. For this purpose, I will share a glimpse of the data retrieval process and tools used to analyze my observations and questions I have posed to the African American community in Texas about their stake in archiving their community and family history. The key to my research is the methods discussed being that they all share a distinctive and identical relationship to my participation as the researcher to create through social advocacy in (BGLAM) spaces. To distinguish between these possibilities as the researcher and participants, an IRB-approved survey, index statistics, a community visual art web archive is introduced to share brief statistics about the data retrieval process as the participating creative practitioner (“Creative Research Techniques | Elsevier Author Services Blog,” 2020).

At the beginning of my Ph.D. program in Fall 2020, I met with the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board to receive guidance and approval to develop and publish the [African American Community Archival User Research Survey](#). The survey features twelve questions; the participant's unique identifier is their zip code. Currently, data has been collected from 102 individuals, 69 of whom are African American. The first part of the survey will close in September 2023; the second phase of the survey will debut in Spring 2023. Web-archiving African American art through a community archive platform is the next area of the data collection process in this study.

Artistically at the helm of my entrepreneurial pursuits, [The Texas Black Artists Collective-Archive It](#) is a curated arrangement of web-archival resources about African American visual artists in Texas. The community web archiving project is embedded in the ARCHIVE IT! web platform. What is interesting in analyzing this data is since 2020, collection data crawls each artist's website, blog, or portfolio once a month for five days and currently has retrieved 15.3GB of visual arts data in the web archiving project. At this stage, the total collection consists of 102.4 GB of data and documents stored: 2,860,408. Contributing communal stories to the African American community archive is another data retrieval process embedded in this research study.

Writing about African American community members and collecting oral histories is an area that I have engaged in during my Ph.D. research. I have had the opportunity to create

biographical sketches about two prominent African American Austinites Richard Arvin Overton, the oldest WWII veteran at 112 years old, and Hertha Web Glenn, a former educator, club, and sorority woman at 101 years old. Their biographical sketches are published and archived at [ART | library deco](#), an online African American virtual art library, digital gallery, and repository. The [REPOSITORY](#) extends its knowledge of African American art history, improving the management of Black cultural heritage and preserving Black digital content and data, supporting their discovery, access, and reuse.

As the researcher, it is beneficial to be included in the research study not only to learn and better understand participant responses but to be an advocate for change and create it in real-time. Insights for the future include examining each question in the original survey, adding more artists to the web-archive project, writing, and archiving more African American stories, and adding the [BLACK COVID-19 Index](#) results to this study. It would be interesting to add to this research study from an international perspective, i.e., developing and teaching communities about community archiving, creating another survey, and designing an archive. All to say, my research is a valuable part of this work, my own personal observations and questions posed about African Americans and community archiving.

SECTION 4: DISCUSSION

This research study uses an interdisciplinary mix-methods approach to understand why Black people are subjected to issues that prevent them from taking ownership of their histories and engaging in communal archiving processes about their history. The evidence from the research study suggests that it is creative exploratory, based on (I) as the researcher is a participant and documentarian.

Engaging with study participants in separate phases of the research process to capture data about their interpretations and participation in community archiving in Texas is the second phase of being the researcher where (I) get to explore and capture their voices. More work will need to be done, shaping my personal and scholarly analysis of community archiving from a local and international stance.

In like manner, seeking out more authors whose work compliments and challenges my ideas (and theirs) is another focal point, analyzing the survey responses by participants and creating a creative coding system in the next phase of the research is in the works. At this stage, you as the reader have been given a brief look at the process of my work being tabulated into an exploratory dissertation as an information science, interdisciplinary major.

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