

From Archive to Action: Building a Black-Centered Information Ecology Through BGLAM

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ABSTRACT

In the face of anti-DEI legislation and cultural backlash, this article introduces Black Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (BGLAM) as a liberatory framework for cultural sovereignty. Drawing from Black feminist thought (Collins 2000; hooks 1994) and archival justice, BGLAM redefines information work through three ecologies: framework, practice, and pedagogy. These ecologies emerge through cultural design (ART | library deco), community activism (The Black COVID-19 Index), and education (African American Community Archives as Theory [AACAT-1870]), establishing a Black-centered information ecology grounded in self-determination, creativity, and collective memory—transforming inclusion from a bureaucratic demand into an act of liberation.

Introduction

Across the United States, DEI initiatives face ideological retrenchment. Legislative restrictions on inclusive education and the arts seek to silence the complexity of Black cultural life. Within this political climate, BGLAM emerges as both a method and a manifesto: an approach to cultural stewardship that resists erasure by asserting that Black knowledge is not a supplement to the archive, but the archive itself.

Rooted in the continuum of Black feminist epistemology, BGLAM extends what Collins (2000) identifies as the politics of empowerment and what hooks (1994) calls “education as the practice of freedom.” It frames information ecology as the dynamic system of people, values, and technologies that produce and preserve Black knowledge.

The term information ecology refers to the interconnected systems of people, practices, technologies, and values that shape how knowledge is created, shared, and sustained (Nardi and O’Day 1999). Within BGLAM, this ecology is explicitly Black-centered, privileging community epistemologies and collective agency (Collins 2000). Likewise, community co-curation describes participatory processes in which local communities collaborate to shape archival content, interpretation, and access, ensuring that representation and authorship remain in community hands (Flinn 2011).

The Framework: Liberatory Information Ecology

BGLAM reimagines traditional GLAM institutions as Black-centered systems of memory and creativity. It challenges neutrality, recognizing that archives and museums are never apolitical; they are battlegrounds for narrative authority. This framework treats archives as spaces of care and repair, where ethical responsibility replaces institutional detachment.

The theoretical ground of BGLAM is nourished by scholars who center Black life as information praxis. Bailey (2021) frames digital resistance as an act of survival, and Gumbs (2020) envisions the archive as a ceremonial site of becoming. Together, they affirm that liberation is not an abstract ideal but an information strategy—one practiced through collective creation, curation, and memory.

Practice: Archival Action and Art as Memory

BGLAM's praxis materializes in projects such as The Black COVID-19 Index and ART | library deco. Created in partnership with the City of Austin's Cultural Affairs Department, The Black COVID-19 Index documents oral histories, photographs, and artworks that testify to how Black communities endured and reimagined daily life during the pandemic. These archives become instruments of healing rather than repositories of loss.

Likewise, ART | library deco operates as a digital art library, exhibition platform, and pedagogical archive—embodying BGLAM's aesthetic of freedom. As noted in a 2025 VoyageAustin feature, Keeton's curatorial practice merges librarianship, art, and community storytelling to sustain Black cultural memory as a living archive (VoyageAustin 2025). The project's manifesto declares:

“This is more than preservation. It is a declaration. ART | library deco is a living, evolving testament to Black creativity, intellect, and memory—pushing boundaries, redefining archives, and asserting that Black history is not only worth remembering, but worth building upon.”

In both projects, archival work becomes a form of activism. Black digital memory insists on continuity in the face of algorithmic disappearance. BGLAM transforms that insistence into institutional design.

The Pedagogy: Teaching Ecology

The third ecology of BGLAM—pedagogy—emerges through African American Community Archives as Theory (AACAT-1870). The course functions as an independent learning environment where archival practice, theory, and community activism converge.

“As a librarian, archivist, and community historian, I developed this survey course in response to the ongoing erasure and politicization of African American history, archives, and cultural memory. This course is a radical assertion of community-based knowledge and archival sovereignty. Rather than wait for traditional institutions to validate my work, I have created an independent learning space rooted in Black archival theory, historical truth-telling, and cultural self-determination—designed to educate, empower, and preserve on our terms.”

Through AACAT-1870, pedagogy becomes praxis. This teaching aligns with concepts in the Black Digital Humanities, where learning itself becomes an archive. In this environment, students do not consume knowledge—they build it.

Conclusion

BGLAM transforms the functions of the archive, the library, the gallery, and the museum into a living network of Black cultural sovereignty. Guided by Collins (2000) and hooks (1994), it understands knowledge-making as both a form of resistance and a means of restoration. Echoing Gumbs's (2020) vision of the archive as ceremony, BGLAM reframes DEI not as an institutional checklist but as a collective ethic of survival.

As Ruha Benjamin (2024) writes, "Imagination is a battlefield of ideas and possibilities; it's where we practice freedom before we live it." BGLAM, too, begins in the imagination, transforming ideas of inclusion into practices of liberation.

In a time when inclusion is contested and memory is politicized, BGLAM offers a model for sustainable equity—an information ecology that educates, empowers, and preserves on our terms.

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Author

Dr. kYmberly Mieshia Dionn Keeton is a visionary Texas-based creative force—an award-winning writer, art librarian, Black scholar and theorist, cultural historian, and archivist. As the founder of ART | library deco, a digital African American research art library and repository, and principal consultant at The K Agency, she merges innovation, scholarship, and community. Keeton is also the founder and instructor of the independent course African American Community Archives Theory (AACAT-1870), currently leading its first cohort. Her interdisciplinary research explores African American community archives in Texas, cultural philanthropy, and the evolving role of Black Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (BGLAM). A PhD graduate from the University of North Texas, she serves on numerous cultural boards and enjoys writing, reading, and time with her dog, Roxy Blue.