



Keywords for Black Louisiana (K4BL) Statement on the TAAF Investigation of Dr. Leila Blackbird

March 6, 2026

It has come to our attention that a former and founding member of [Keywords for Black Louisiana](#), Dr. Leila K. Blackbird, has been investigated by the Tribal Alliance Against Frauds (TAAF) for her claims of Cherokee and Apache heritage.

TAAF has determined that Blackbird's claims "are neither substantiated nor transparent." Their press release and full report are [here](#). I encourage you to **read** the report and release **before** continuing.

Although Blackbird left the K4BL collective in 2024, as Founding Director and Editor-in-Chief of K4BL, I want to be transparent with our community and institutional partners about her relationship to the project.

K4BL is a collective of researchers creating digital projects highlighting the Black life and culture of the Gulf Coast. Among our many projects, Keywords for Black Louisiana builds and maintains two public-facing, community-engaged digital editions--a document set (docs.k4bl.org) of transcribed and translated documents and a story set (stories.k4bl.org) that narrativizes the individuals and communities described in those documents.

When Keywords for Black Louisiana began transcribing and translating documents in 2020, I began it with four graduate student members and myself as faculty lead and director. Three were my advisees or mentees at my institution. One was Blackbird.

Blackbird's claims of Indigenous identity did not help her secure a role on this project. I met Blackbird when she was a graduate student at the University of Chicago. When I met her, she disclosed her identity as "unenrolled Cherokee and Apache." She also

described herself as a graduate student doing archival research on and in Louisiana, and doing secondary source readings on Black and Indigenous history.

I invited Blackbird to join the project as a French and Spanish transcriber and translator because of her research interests and her professed language skills. That said, **I cannot speak to how or whether her claims of Indigenous identity assisted her in acquiring the language and research skills she brought to the project.**

From 2020-2021, in these early years of what would become K4BL, each of the four students took on a “lead” role. The options I provided were French, Spanish, Digital, and Ethics, with one point person for all four (Team Lead). As I had not reviewed Blackbird’s language or digital skills, because she was not my advisee or mentee at my home institution, Blackbird served initially as Ethics Lead. The role of the Ethics Lead was to contribute initial secondary source research on issues of race, gender, and antiblackness that might be relevant in the process of transcribing and translating documents, and in documentary editing or published Louisiana history. This was an internal bibliographic role, not digital, public-facing or community facing, and not contingent on her claims of Indigeneity. Her written work was reviewed by the team, including myself, at all times.

From 2021-2022, after a vacancy in the Team Lead, and as a graduate student further along in their program, I asked Blackbird to serve as Team Lead. Team Lead continued to be a non-public facing clerical and team management role, directly supervised by myself at all times.

In 2022, I secured additional funding for the project. I reached out to Dr. Guadalupe Garcia to join the team as a Managing Editor and to colleagues at Tulane, Dillard, and Xavier to form a Community Engagement and Ethics Team (Community Team). With funding I was also able to add members and expand the project, which I did, reorganizing the work into five teams: the Executive, Community, Digital, Research, and Editorial teams. These same teams continue to guide much of the work in K4BL. Details on our current structure are [here](#).

The Community Team represents K4BL’s commitment to Black public historians and researchers in Louisiana. The Community Team designs and executes our summer workshops and spring meetings, maintains connections with Black public historians (who now form our Keywords Community Circle and Advisory Board), and guides the project’s Black-centered, Louisiana-centered, descendant-engaged practices. The Community team has a residential requirement (the individuals live in Louisiana) and

members must be respected and valued members of the Black historical and educational community of Louisiana.

Blackbird lived in Chicago the entire time she served on the project. **She could neither join nor lead the Community Team and was never asked to. She did not do work focused on the community engagement elements part of K4BL.**

In 2022, Blackbird transitioned to the role of Senior Research Editor **because of her knowledge of both French and Spanish languages.** Her role from that point on, supervised by myself and Dr. Garcia until Blackbird's departure from the project was to edit French and Spanish documents and support the transcriber/translators of both language teams. Her secondary research on Louisiana history was valued; she created a Louisiana History Reader with texts by historians of Louisiana including Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Daniel Usner, and more.

As Senior Research Editor, Dr. Blackbird did not interface with the Community Team or with the Keywords Community Circle and Advisory Board (KCCAB) as a representative of any Louisiana, Indigenous or other descendant community, or as an arbiter of community concerns. **To put it another way, her claims of lineage and descent did not position her as an authority on Gulf Coast Louisiana within K4BL. In addition, when representing K4BL to the public she was not allowed to—was specifically told *not to*—present herself as anything except a researcher.**

This approach is intentional. K4BL operates as a collective, one whose members are not solely Black, Indigenous, Black and Indigenous, descended from Louisianians or even based in Louisiana. As a result, our project stance has always been to come humbly to Black Louisiana public historians, to learn from Black Louisiana public historians, and *even where individual members state they have Gulf Coast lineages or descent* to operate collectively as guests of Black Louisiana. We ask all members with direct descent or lineages to adhere to this collective level of humility and deference when representing the project, especially in interactions with community partners and institutions.

Her role of Senior Research Editor is a designation of language expertise not authorship. At no point in her time on the project was Dr. Blackbird the sole or primary arbiter of transcriptions, translations, project processes or philosophies. As a collective, all transcriptions, translations, workflows, philosophies, documentation, and relationships on the project are created with multiple team members involved. This is the case for transcriptions and translations as well:

- All transcriptions and translations are created in language team “power hours” which are working sessions with multiple members.
- When transcriptions and translations are reviewed, revised, and finalized, they are done so in consultation with language team editors
- Core team members (including Digital and Community team members) also read and reviewed the documents and offer comments
- Subject Matter Specialists (our core group of academic scholars with expertise in the history of slavery, the Atlantic world, or Africans in the Americas) view the documents across multiple meetings
- All documents and stories are presented to our KCCAB (which reviews all transcriptions and translations at our annual summer workshop).
- Transcriptions and translations are presented to the Managing Editor (Guadalupe Garcia) and myself, as Editor-in-Chief, for final approval and upload.
- We track each individual’s involvement in each transcription and translation, narrative and document. We list each name on internal and external documentation (downloadable as a PDF on the edition websites for every single document and we are updating this information for all stories).

This process repeats multiple times. Dr. Garcia and I read every document sent to us and either send them to the Digital team for upload or send them back to the research and editorial teams for further revision. This workflow is also available on our documentation [site](#).

Our collective process and workflow has allowed our team to catch and correct errors, small and large, before they become structural flaws. Our methodology is rooted in the document and, where it diverges from the manuscript page, builds from our engagement with published academic texts, the guidance of our Community Team, and advice from our KCCAB.

At the point that individuals have found themselves unable or unwilling to participate in the project collectively, they are asked to step back from team membership.

Blackbird left the project in 2024. She has not and will not be returning.

In summation, Blackbird’s role on K4BL was research-facing not community-facing.

Any claims Blackbird makes or has made of community affiliation, community expertise, Indigenous or Black kinship or community knowledge based on a role she held within Keywords for Black Louisiana are false.

However, and despite all of our checks and balances, and our best intentions, because we are a community-engaged project, we do provide opportunities for research team members to meet community and institutional partners. Dr. Blackbird did meet and interface with community and institutional partners in Louisiana and may have leveraged her role within the research team of the project to claim community affiliations that she does not have or cannot substantiate or both. We note that the report gestures to exactly this when it states that Blackbird “has used these claims [of Cherokee and Apache lineage] to conflate research partnerships with community affiliation” and that she used her identity to “smooth access to community relationships for research purposes.”

For our role in her proximity to harmed partners and any confusion caused as a result, I apologize on behalf of K4BL. I apologize for any harm her proximity to the project may have caused, directly or indirectly. I encourage any concerned community and institutional partners to reach out to me to discuss the situation as it unfolds.

K4BL is rooted in histories, ideologies, and resistance of Africans and people of African descent to the institution of slavery. We recognize that some of the individuals we meet in the documents live at the intersection of African and Indigenous history. We respect Indigenous nations' right to determine their own grounds for citizenship, lineal, and kinship claims. We respect Black Louisiana's right to determine its own grounds for racial, lineal, and kinship claims.

We remain grateful to Black Louisiana and look forward to continuing to build with our partners in Louisiana and around the world, with special gratitude to the KCCAB, who support us in bringing the rich history of Africans in the Americas to public knowledge and discourse.

With thanks,



Jessica Marie Johnson

Founding Director and Editor-in-Chief

Keywords for Black Louisiana

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