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BLACK CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

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The Family Reunion as Cultural Infrastructure

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CULTURETECHLENS · *Culture, Clearly Seen.* · Black Cultural Intelligence **Research Brief CTL-RB-LIFE-000003** · Domain: LIFE — Black everyday life · Status: Research **Question:** What social and historical functions does the reunion perform? **Geography:** Chicago-rooted; Black Chicago families' reunions in Southern hometowns treated as documented reverse migration. Comparisons only when documented. **Period:** 20th century–present · **Compiled:** 2026-09-28

1. Thesis

The Black family reunion is not a party that happens to recur. It is a **recurring, family-governed institution** — with dues, committees, minutes, bank accounts, scholarship funds, printed programs, and rotating hosts — that performs at least seven durable social functions: reactivating dispersed kin networks, transmitting lineage and memory, honoring elders while forming youth, moving money, governing itself, reconnecting migrants to places of origin, and manufacturing the family's own archive [C001][C002][C003]. The evidence supports the institution; it does not support nostalgia about it.

2. The question and the rules of this brief

The only question this brief answers is: **what social and historical functions does the reunion perform?** Every significant claim below is entered in the claim ledger (`claim-ledger.json`) with source, source type, date, evidence, confidence, contradictory evidence, and notes, and graded VERIFIED / SUPPORTED / PROVISIONAL / DISPUTED / UNRESOLVED. Functional claims received the strictest grading. Of 32 claims: 6 VERIFIED, 17 SUPPORTED, 4 PROVISIONAL, 5 UNRESOLVED,

0 DISPUTED. This brief studies ordinary families, not celebrities, and treats uncertainty as a finding rather than a failure.

3. What counts: boundaries

A **family reunion** is a kin-governed, recurring gathering of people related by blood, marriage, or recognized fictive kinship, organized by the family itself [C030]. It is not:

- a **church homecoming** — congregation-governed, anchored to a church calendar; the two can coincide, and at least one documented 1937 homecoming in Gorgus, North Carolina was familial rather than church-sponsored, which is precisely why the boundary must be drawn by governance, not by mood [C008][C019];
- a **class reunion** — cohort-governed, anchored to a school;
- the **NCNW Black Family Reunion Celebration** — a public cultural festival conceived by Dorothy Height and sponsored by the National Council of Negro Women, first held on the National Mall in September 1986; organization-sponsored, open to the public, and programmatic in a way kin reunions are not [C017];
- a **funeral repast** — though funerals can originate reunions: the Felix/Blackwell family reunion began in 1953 after the 1952 funeral of matriarch Nay Woodrow Blackwell [C015].

Boundary cases exist (a reunion held at the family church; a homecoming that functions as a reunion), and they are classified here by **who governs**, not by what it feels like.

4. Method: ERA × PLACE × GENERATION × ACTIVITY × OBJECT × INSTITUTION

Each function below is examined across six dimensions. **Era:** when (from early-20th-century homecomings through the 2016 minutes artifact to 2026 scholarship). **Place:** where (Southern hometowns, Northern cities, the old homestead). **Generation:** who acts (elders as transmitters, youth as recipients, middle generations as organizers). **Activity:** what is done (presentations, tributes, voting, eating, photographing). **Object:** what is made (trees, minutes, shirts, programs, videos). **Institution:** what governs (the family association, the committee, the nonprofit). The method is designed to keep the reunion visible as infrastructure — roles, records, and resources — rather than as atmosphere.

5. The historical arc, in brief

Documented data points: a familial homecoming in Gorgus, NC (1937) [C008]; the Felix/Blackwell reunion founded 1953 [C015]; Thelma Doswell's 1,500-name tree (1959) and 5,000-name tree (1991) [C014]; Ione Vargus's fieldwork across 14 reunions (summer 1986), the African American Family Reunion Conference (1988), and Temple's Family Reunion Institute (1990) [C009]; national planning-advice literature by 1993 [C027]; the reunion-tourism economy by 2004 [C013]; a 2016 reunion's minutes showing dues, scholarships, and genealogy as routine [C001]; technical-communication scholarship (2022) [C011]. The arc shows **institutional thickening over time**: from gathering, to organized gathering, to studied and advised institution.

6. Function 1: Reactivating the dispersed kin network

The Great Migration scattered families across regions; the reunion periodically re-concentrates them. Vargus's fieldwork followed migration routes — north to Boston, south to the Carolinas — because reunions sit on those routes [C029]. Auslander's 2001 fieldwork at an Atlanta-area Thompson reunion found participants narrating slavery, Jim Crow, migration, poverty, and Klan violence alongside later achievements: the reunion is where the dispersed network rehearses its shared history aloud [C010]. Grade: SUPPORTED. What is not shown: how many dispersed kin actually attend, or what share of families sustain this — prevalence is UNRESOLVED [C024].

7. Function 2: Transmitting lineage and memory

This is the best-documented function. Doswell's trees — 8 × 6 feet, 1,500 names (1959); over 5,000 names (1991) — are reunion-generated archives now held by the Library of Congress, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, and the Virginia Museum of History and Culture [C014]. A 2016 reunion's minutes record a standing family-history report and Ancestry.com research [C002]. Planning literature prescribes lineage presentations, photograph collection, videotaping, and family history books [C002]. NMAAHC's Family History Center (25,000+ visitors guided, 100+ programs since 2017) exists adjacent to this demand, and its Community Curation Platform collects the personal histories families bring [C018]. The surrounding demand is measurable: a 2022 Pew survey found 36% of Black adults used two or more methods to research family history, with oral history central to most researchers' practice [C021]; at least one documented family has held annual reunions for over half a century with lineage traced to the 1700s [C022]. Grade: VERIFIED. The mechanism is concrete: elders speak, someone writes it down, the record is stored and re-presented.

8. Function 3: Honoring elders, forming youth

Programs set aside formal space for elder tributes and youth activities [C005]; scholarships move money toward the young [C003]; Vargus's research program emphasized youth explicitly [C009]. The generational division of labor is consistent across sources: elders transmit, the middle generation organizes, youth receive — and are thereby inducted into the kin network's expectations. Grade: SUPPORTED. Not shown: measured effects on youth outcomes [C025].

9. Function 4: Moving money

The 2016 Allen minutes are a primary artifact of reunion economics: $180 annual dues, a bank account with a balance, named scholarship recipients, a $500 scholarship donation [C003]. Planning literature describes dues, registration fees, and family associations or corporations offering loans, advice, and scholarships [C003][C004]. Copeland (2018) documents the other side: recurring host groups, limited capital, weak recordkeeping — the financial infrastructure is real and also fragile [C004]. Grade: VERIFIED for the coordination itself; PROVISIONAL for broader mutual-aid claims (loans, "reclamation" committees), which rest on thin evidence [C023].

10. Function 5: Governing itself

Reunions elect, appoint, and rotate. Standing committees documented include scholarship, by-laws, church, social, and reclamation [C001]. Families incorporate — or are advised to — as nonprofits to stabilize continuity across generations [C004]. Host-family rotation distributes cost and labor [C001]. This is the least romantic and most infrastructural finding: the reunion persists because it has **procedures**, not just feelings. Where procedures are weak, organizers report the failure modes plainly: limited capital, poor accounting [C004]. Grade: VERIFIED.

11. Function 6: Returning to place

Reunions move bodies back across the migration map. Planning literature documents return to the South and to the old homestead as both practice and prescription — Chicago writer Dee Parmer Woodtoor argued reunions should be held where the family originated [C006]. Jones's North Carolina homecomings and Vargus's Carolinas fieldwork anchor the return pattern in scholarship [C006]. One 2024 account describes reunions taking families "back to hometowns" [C006]. Grade: SUPPORTED — for the practice in general. The Chicago-specific version (Black Chicago families reuniting in Southern hometowns as documented reverse migration) is UNRESOLVED: no Chicago-specific archival evidence was located in this pass [C007]. The brief's geography is therefore stated as an aspiration with a research plan, not as a finding.

12. Function 7: Making the archive

Reunions manufacture records, and some of those records enter formal archives. The Doswell trees sit in three institutions [C014]. Alexandria, Virginia's public library runs a "Black Family Reunion" project scanning residents' family documents and images into its Local History/Special Collections [C020]. NMAAHC's collection holds a Perryman family reunion photograph, donated by Tulsa historian Eddie Faye Gates [C020]. The 2016 minutes are themselves an archive — bank balance, dues, recipients, research — produced without any archivist present [C001]. Grade: SUPPORTED. The reunion is a **records-generating institution** whose outputs sometimes graduate into public custody.

13. The objects: what reunions leave behind

Material culture is documented, not assumed: T-shirts, banners, mugs, family emblems, history books, and souvenir programs are made and sold; videotaping and professional photography are standard [C012]. The object biography runs: commission → wear/display → store → sometimes archive. The reunion T-shirt is the most visible artifact of the institution — a uniform for a temporary polity — and the souvenir program its constitution in miniature: order of events, names of officers, the family tree, the dead remembered. Grade: SUPPORTED. Objects vary by family; no catalog of typical reunion objects exists in the literature located.

14. Chicago: what the evidence shows, and what it doesn't

Chicago appears in the evidence as a **planning and market node**, not yet as a documented origin point for South-bound reunion travel. The 1993 planning literature gives a Chicago-area host example (Lansing, Illinois) and a Chicago writer's voice (Woodtoor) [C027]. The 2004 business press lists Chicago among cities courting reunion tourism [C013]. What is missing: Chicago Defender reunion notices, Harsh Collection holdings, or oral histories documenting Chicago families' Southern reunions [C007]. The honest statement: Chicago's reunion infrastructure is plausible and partially visible, but the archive for it has not been opened in this brief. Next sources are named in §23.

15. Women's work

The genealogical and organizing labor is repeatedly women's: Doswell built the trees; Melbahu Gibbs is remembered as the family's genealogist; women planners are quoted as authorities [C016]. Vargus, Jones, and Allen — the scholars who built this field — are women. But no quantitative account of who organizes reunions was located; "women do most of the organizing" is SUPPORTED as a case-level pattern and must not be stated as a measured general fact [C016]. The missing-women audit (§22) treats this as both a finding and a warning.

16. Migration, both directions

The reunion sits at the intersection of the Great Migration (1916–1970) and its reverse. Northward migration created the dispersion the reunion repairs; Southward return — for the reunion weekend — rehearses a relationship to origin that reverse migration later makes permanent for some families. Institutional video evidence illustrates the context: the Phillips Collection's student-conducted oral histories of second-wave migrants to Washington, DC, and WNIT's *Echoes of the Great Migration*, in which descendants describe Southern-rooted traditions maintained in Northern cities (see `visuals.md`, Videos). Shimer College's Chicago-rooted migration discussion with Carol Adams and historian Timuel Black supplies the city's own migration narrative. Video illustrates; it is never the sole evidence for a claim.

17. The church next door

Churches host reunions, lend committees their names (the "church committee" in the 1993 planning literature), and share personnel — but the reunion's governance is familial [C001] [C030]. Jones's distinction between familial and church-sponsored homecomings is the analytic lever: when the family governs, it is a family reunion even if it meets in the fellowship hall [C019, PROVISIONAL on the original text]. The NCNW celebration, meanwhile, is governed by a national organization and open to the public — a different species despite the shared name [C017]. Confusing these forms is the most common category error in casual writing about reunions; this brief refuses it.

18. The economics of reunion season

By 2004 the Black press was describing a "multimillion-dollar reunion season": travel, lodging, catering, T-shirts, bus lines, airlines, and photography services oriented to reunions, with cities — Chicago among them — competing to host [C013]. One visitors bureau (Greenville-Pitt County, NC) estimated $2.3 million annually from Black reunions [C013]. Caveats are load-bearing here: the $2.3 million is a local bureau estimate, the widely cited $428 average trip spend covers friends-and-relatives leisure travel generally (not reunions), and no national reunion-spending total was documented [C013]. The economy is real; its size is not yet measured. Grade: SUPPORTED with caveats.

19. The digital turn

Reunions now run on technical communication: planning documents, newsletters, programs, websites, and social media groups are the institution's paperwork [C011][C028]. Allen's research program — the 2020 dissertation *Hospitable Literacies* and the 2022 article on technical communication literacies — makes the paperwork itself the object of study [C011]. The 2016 minutes reference Ancestry.com research, placing commercial genealogy platforms inside the reunion's archive function [C028]. Grade: PROVISIONAL on specifics, pending full-text review; SUPPORTED that the digital layer exists as a research subject.

20. What the scholars have actually shown

The field is small and cumulative: Jones (1980) gave anthropology's account of homecomings as kinship work [C008]; Vargus (1986–2020) built the sociological infrastructure — fieldwork, conference, institute, book — and the thesis of the reunion as an independently Black-controlled institution [C009][C029]; Auslander (2001) showed the reunion as a stage for historical memory, where a single afternoon's talk spans slavery to professional achievement [C010]; Copeland (2018) translated the institution into nonprofit law and named its failure modes [C004]; Allen (2020–2022) opened the paperwork — the literacies by which reunions are planned, recorded, and remembered [C011]. No scholar in this set studied Chicago specifically; no representative survey exists [C024][C032].

21. What this brief cannot claim

Five UNRESOLVED claims bound the brief: whether many Black Chicago families reunite in Southern hometowns [C007]; national prevalence and frequency [C024]; measured health or well-being outcomes [C025]; a post-emancipation origin story via "Information Wanted" reunifications — excluded for lack of sourcing [C026]; and pandemic-era adaptation [C031]. These are not footnotes; they are the research agenda. A brief that hid them would be marketing.

22. Red-team summary

The full audit is in `red-team.md`. Headlines: **Functionalism audit** — the brief risks making every reunion activity "serve" the institution; Copeland's failure modes (weak records, limited capital) and the thin mutual-aid evidence [C023] are retained as counterweight. **Anecdote audit** — the Doswell trees and the 2016 minutes are extraordinary and ordinary respectively; neither is presented as typical. **Selection/survivorship** — documented reunions are the organized ones; failed, lapsed, and conflict-torn reunions are nearly invisible in the record. **Celebrity bias** — none; all cases are ordinary families. **Missing women and institutions** — women's labor is visible but unmeasured; church and funeral institutions are adjacent, not centered. **Visual provenance** — no historical photograph of a Black reunion could be rights-cleared in this pass; visuals are reference-linked or built, never misattributed. **Copyright** — the 2016 minutes are quoted as facts, not reproduced; the Perryman photograph is cited, not downloaded.

23. What would make this brief stronger

In priority order: (1) inspect Jones (1980) in full to firm up C008/C019; (2) retrieve Auslander (2001) and Allen (2022) full texts; (3) work the Chicago archive — ProQuest Historical Chicago Defender for reunion notices, the Vivian G. Harsh Collection, Abbott-Sengstacke papers — to resolve C007; (4) verify the Doswell trees' institutional holdings directly; (5) locate the Allen Family Reunion minutes' provenance and custodial context; (6) commission oral histories with Chicago reunion organizers, with attention to women's labor and to reunions that lapsed.

24. Key terms

Family reunion — kin-governed recurring gathering (§3). **Homecoming** — return-centered gathering; familial or church-governed [C019]. **Reclamation committee** — a standing reunion committee (1993 literature), evidently charged with recovering lapsed or lost kin ties [C001]. **Family association / corporation** — formalized reunion body, sometimes nonprofit [C004]. **Reunion season** — the summer concentration of reunions and its tourism economy [C013]. **Reverse migration** — post-1970s Southward movement; reunion return-travel is its rehearsal, not its proof [C006][C007].

25. The institution, plainly stated

Strip away the food and the music and what remains is this: a self-governing body that taxes its members, keeps minutes, funds scholarships, writes its own history, photographs itself, buries its dead into its origin story, and periodically reassembles its scattered people in the places they came from. That is infrastructure. The family reunion performs the work that, in other contexts, is done by states, churches, and archives — for Black families, it has often had to do that work itself. The evidence for the work is strong; the evidence for who exactly does it, how often, and at what scale is still being gathered. Both statements are true, and this brief holds them at the same time.

References

Compiled 2026-09-28. Source priority observed: primary artifacts; archives; government/institutional records; historical Black press; peer-reviewed scholarship; books; reputable journalism; specialist secondary sources; oral histories. Search snippets, AI summaries, unsourced aggregators, and repeated claims were not used as evidence.

Peer-reviewed scholarship

1. **Jones, Yvonne V.** "Kinship Affiliation through Time: Black Homecomings and Family Reunions in a North Carolina County." *Ethnohistory* 27 (1980): 49–66. DOI: `10.2307/481627`. — Peer-reviewed anthropology. *Note: findings in this brief drawn from a secondary cultural-resource summary; original not yet inspected (see claim ledger C008/C019).*
2. **Auslander, Mark.** "'Something We Need to Get Back To': Mythologies of Origin and Rituals of Solidarity in African American Working Families." Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, Working Paper No. 6 (2001). https://core.ac.uk/display/100140297 — Scholarly working paper; abstract verified, full text not yet retrieved.
3. **Copeland, Roy W.** "Ensuring the Continuity of the African-American Family Reunion by Organizing a Nonprofit Entity." *Western Journal of Black Studies* (2018). Full-text mirror: https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Ensuring+the+Continuity+of+the+African-American+Family+Reunion+by...-a0589127444 — Peer-reviewed; partly normative/legal argument.
4. **Allen, Laura L.** "Handling Family Business: Technical Communication Literacies in Black Family Reunions." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 31(3) (2022): 229–244. DOI: `10.1080/10572252.2022.2069290`. Author page: https://lauralallen.com/research/ — Peer-reviewed; scope verified via journal record and author page, full text not yet read.
5. **Allen, Laura L.** *Hospitable Literacies: The Writing and Rhetorical Practices of Black Family Reunions Online and Offline.* Dissertation (2020). Via https://lauralallen.com/research/ — Doctoral research; existence and topic verified.

Books

1. **Vargus, Ione D.** *Black Family Reunions: Finding the Rest of Me* (2020). — Existence verified via Temple University memorial (2026); not read for this brief.

Primary artifacts

1. **Allen Family Reunion meeting minutes (PDF, 2016).** Documents bank account and balance, $180 annual dues, named scholarship recipients, a $500 scholarship donation, a family-history report, and Ancestry.com research. https://d7f07637-d7ea-4eac-a363-2b8be8057104.filesusr.com/ugd/d04fa4_cf2e89e102c64612b6e2d64c3567a89d.pdf — *Note: provenance/custodial context not yet established; facts quoted, document not reproduced.*

Historical Black press / Black media (contemporary practice journalism)

1. **"How to plan a family reunion you will never forget."** *Ebony* (Johnson Publishing, 1993). https://www.thefreelibrary.com/How+to+plan+a+family+reunion+you+will+never+forget.-a013276665 — Practice journalism/advice; documents committees, dues, programs, return-to-the-South practice, Chicago-area examples.
2. **"Black America's multimillion-dollar reunion season."** *Ebony* (Johnson Publishing, 2004). https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Black+America%27s+multimillion-dollar+reunion+season-a0120842961 — Business journalism; documents reunion tourism spending and industry targeting. *Caveats in C013.*
3. **Clarke, Jasmine.** "Op-Ed: The Legacy of Family Reunions." NNPA/AFRO (2024). https://nnpa.org/op-ed-the-legacy-of-family-reunions/ — Journalism with family-history detail; documents the Felix/Blackwell reunion (est. 1953) and Thelma Doswell's genealogical work.

Institutional / government records

1. **Temple University.** "Family Reunions Create Lasting Bonds" (2011). https://now.temple.edu/news/2011-08-24/family-reunions-create-lasting-bonds — Institutional reporting on Vargus's research (14 reunions, 1986; conference 1988; Institute 1990).
2. **Temple University.** "Remembering Ione Vargus" (2026). https://now.temple.edu/news/2026-02-03/remembering-ione-vargus — Institutional memorial.
3. **National Museum of African American History and Culture.** "Family History Research for Your Family Reunion" (event page). https://nmaahc.si.edu/events/family-history-research-your-family-reunion — Institutional source; Family History Center figures; Perryman reunion photograph credit.
4. **National Museum of African American History and Culture.** "The National Museum of African American History and Culture Announces 'The Reunion'" (10th-anniversary announcement). https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/news/national-museum-african-american-history-and-culture-announces-reunion-multi-day — Context: institutional use of reunion framing.
5. **Congressional Record, Vol. 150, Issue 16 (House, H406-1).** Tribute documenting Dorothy Height's conception and organization of the Black Family Reunion Celebration (1986). https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-150/issue-16/house-section/article/H406-1 — Government record.

6. **Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs / Chronicling America APIs** (queried 2026-09-28). — Used for visual sourcing attempts; rights statements verified per item where cited.

Reputable journalism / specialist secondary

1. **Smithsonian Magazine.** "How the Smithsonian Is Helping Black Americans Trace Their Roots" (Tracy Scott Forson, Feb. 6, 2024). https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-the-smithsonian-is-helping-black-americans-trace-their-roots-180983727/ — Reports 2022 Pew genealogy figures; profiles a 50+-year reunion family.
2. **AAIHS (African American Intellectual History Society).** "Dorothy Height, NCNW, and the National Black Family Reunion." https://www.aaihs.org/dorothy-height-ncnw-and-the-national-black-family-reunion/ — Scholarly-society publication; documents the 1986 National Mall event.

Video (illustrative only — never sole evidence)

1. **WUSA9.** "'Black Family Reunion' aims to fill gaps in documented history of Alexandria's black families." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC4wt0W1cVc — News segment on Alexandria Library's community scanning project.
2. **The Phillips Collection.** "Real World History & The Second Wave of the Great Migration." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G728j-EPPA — Museum + student oral histories of South-to-DC migration.
3. **Shimer College Chicago.** "History of Chicago and The Great Migration: Carol Adams & Timuel Black — Shimer College Ideas Series." https://youtube.com/watch?v=oy1U08ECjKE — Chicago-rooted migration discussion.
4. **PBS Michiana – WNIT.** "Echoes of the Great Migration: Family Stories of Resilience." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXTqVAsrEm8 — Public-television documentary; migration oral histories and family traditions in Northern cities.

Sources consulted and NOT used as evidence

- Generic web image results (Carnegie Museum of Art / Teenie Harris Archive; University of Kansas exhibits; Internet Archive genealogy texts): not rights-cleared or not relevant; excluded per visual-provenance rules.
- "Black family reunions" (Aggressive Intelligence, YouTube): unverified channel, no provenance; excluded.
- LOC photographs of white church picnics/family reunions (Bardstown KY, Lawrenceburg KY, Mayodan NC): not depicting Black families; excluded.
- Wikipedia ("National Black Family Reunion"): consulted for orientation only; claims sourced instead to AAIHS and the Congressional Record.