

# Overtown, Miami: Developing a Community Archive through Digital Storytelling

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## Abstract

The pioneer history of enslaved peoples, Caribbean migrants, and the founding of a “city of runaways” is not what people consider when they think of Miami. Many Miami residents don’t know much about its founding or the significance of communities like Overtown. Once called *Coloredtown* due to the racial segregation of the Jim Crow South, this historic neighborhood is living proof of both the hardships endured and the culture cultivated by Miami’s Black community. In order to tell a comprehensive story about Miami, we focus on Overtown’s domestic workers in the heart of the city such as those who built the roads and railroads, taught students from all backgrounds, and sheltered celebrities like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Ella Fitzgerald. As part of Christell Victoria Roach’s dissertation research on descendant-led digital humanities, this project contributes research to the OTOWN digital archiving platform using its storytelling framework. Through the archival analysis of public narratives and civic media including news reports, articles, documentaries, and even obituaries, we gain insight into Overtown’s rich culture and impact. With the interdisciplinary, multimodal platform OTOWN, community members can engage with a visual exhibit built from residents’ photos and ephemera, which foregrounds the narratives of Miami’s pioneer descendants. Miami is a fast-changing city, so it’s important for history to be made accessible to those who live among and through it. **By developing this research and exhibition, we create a model for reckoning with history through our shared and personal archives.**

## Introduction

- Henry Flagler and Julia Tuttle brought in 162 Black railroad workers employed by Flagler to constitute half of the total votes needed to incorporate Miami, Florida as a city.
  - Due to the racial segregation of the Jim Crow South, those very men were permitted to live only in Overtown, then known as Coloredtown.
  - Overtown came to be regarded as the Harlem of the South, a bustling center of culture and community connection.
  - In 1968, Overtown was cast back into the shadows, literally, as I-95 was constructed through the middle of the town, causing the population to drop from about 40,000 to 8,000.
- By digging deeper into the contributions and lifestyles of Miami’s Black community, this project aims to promote accessibility, public storytelling, and community engagement through the creation of the neo-archival software application OTOWN.



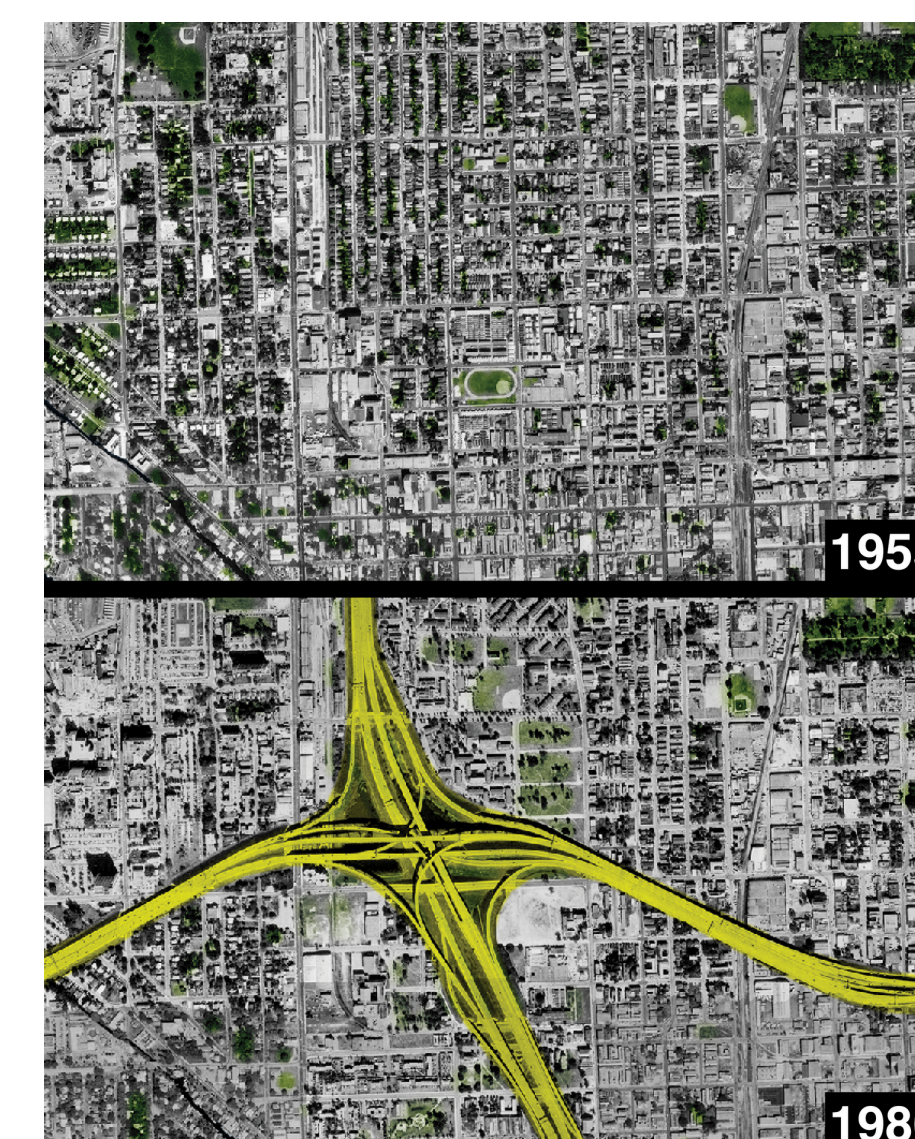
## Methods

Through archival research and a collaboration with Christell Victoria Roach’s *Ninth Street, My Street* exhibit, this research models a curatorial method of archival storytelling. This research applies the OTOWN digital humanities framework, which maps and embeds community memory through site-specific storytelling and geospatial archival practices. This results in a curated experience of *Ninth Street, My Street*, through the OTOWN digital humanities archive. The curatorial inquiry explored:

- Articles
- Videos
- Church records
- News reports
- Documentaries
- Obituaries

Searching through these different sources provided a strong grasp of the history of Overtown and insight on what makes the city special. Key aspects of the literature review are stated below:

- **Paul S. George’s** (1977) historical study, “Colored Town: Miami’s Black Community, 1896-1930,” provides an essential foundation for understanding the early development and systematic marginalization of Black Miamians.
- **Saidiya Hartman** challenges the archive’s limitations in “Venus in Two Acts” (2008). Hartman interrogates how enslaved women’s lives are reduced to fragments within official records, using the story of an unnamed girl, Venus, to highlight the violence of archival silence.
- **Erica L. Johnson’s** “Building the Neo-Archive” (2014) theorizes new forms of historical reconstruction that blend personal memory, geography, and cultural reflection. Johnson conceptualizes the “neo-archive” as a tool for understanding the cyclical, overlapping nature of time and Black history.
- The radio story “How I-95 Shattered the World of Miami’s Early Overtown Residents” by **Nadege Green** shared the personal feelings and reflections of Overtown residents whose homes seized by the government.
- The impact of awareness is seen through the tribute held for the 162 Black men who had been part of the vote for Miami to become an official city. Audience members both in the arena and watching **Jawan Strader’s** “Voices” on NBC at home were able to not only learn something new, but be moved by an impactful show of community.



- **Purvis Young’s** 1984 mural *Everyday Life*, pictured below, captures the daily lives, both the vibrance and struggle, of Overtown’s residents. This highlights Black subjectivity, the representation of the lived experiences of Black people past the confined Western or colonial framework.

## Results

**8-9%** of the **content taught in U.S. history** and social sciences in American schools in 2017 **reflects the experiences and histories of Black Americans**, according to the *National Council for the Social Studies*.

Yet, about—

**43%** of Black Americans **learn about Black history from their families and the community around them**, according to the Pew Research Center. This is why OTOWN, the digital humanities platform supporting site-based exhibits and archival storytelling, is so important — because it uses a mix of research and personal narratives to spread awareness on and make accessible the history of Overtown. While the software application continues to be coded and is set to release this July, a constructed timeline of significant people, places, and events in Overtown provides familiarity with the neighborhood’s history and development. It has been an honor to learn about Overtown’s unique contribution to Miami’s creation, entertainment culture, and society.



## References & Acknowledgments

I would like to thank and acknowledge the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, Christell Victoria Roach, and the Department of English for this valuable opportunity. To follow my research development and engage the visual landscape we’ve built – you can visit [www.cvrpoet.com/OTOWN](http://www.cvrpoet.com/OTOWN). There, you will find my curated list of educational materials, resources, and references. Or, you can scan this QR code to access: *Overtown’s Digital Landscape* – the foundation of the inaugural *Ninth Street, My Street* OTOWN exhibit.

