

Memoriam:

Legacy, Vibration and Mourning in Archival Technologies

By

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Introduction: Archives, Black Studies and Wake Work

When I began pursuing my master's at Brown University in the Fall of 2020, I couldn't have imagined that this thesis would come to exist, let alone that the contents of it would so perfectly arise from my lifelong and unconscious fascination with the architecture of information and communication systems. I enter this thesis through three primary and intermingling modes of thinking; as a practicing moving image archivist, an audiovisual artist, and scholar of Black arts and culture. In the coming pages, I will briefly discuss various archival technologies as I have perceived them in different registers; a vibratory network of information that persists in Black culture, the white supremacy of the archives of the nation and the rapid evolution of audiovisual technologies and their effects on what constitutes an archive. I attempt to think through new archival practices that might recuperate Black queer life from the distortion of traditional Western archives and create a space that honors the expansiveness of our histories and our lives, rather than fracturing them to fit into uniform graphic texts that leave us fragmented - both hypervisibilized and invisibilized.

There has been an abundance of scholarship in recent decades regarding the overwhelming violence that marginalized subjects face within traditional colonial archives, both within the documents that they hold and as visitors to archival sites. While archival practitioners have recently turned new attention to the fact that archives are not neutral repositories of information, but a space of multiple registers of violence for Black and other marginalized people, there has been little cross referencing between professional archival literature and the scholarship of the humanities¹.

¹ Jacobsen et al.

Archives have been the vertebrae of Western society, totally oriented towards the preservation of historical evidence, much of which is dominated by the materials of their wealthy white founders and donors. These materials therefore also largely hold the experiences of marginalized subjects that the elite class saw fit to document; those which see them in violent situations. As Marisa Fuentes put it in her book *Dispossessed Lives*, “violent systems and structures of white supremacy produced devastating images of enslaved female personhood” which “pervade the archive and govern what can be known about them.”² coming into direct contact with the legal apparatus, as experiments in scientific methodologies and exploited as visual spectacles. There they remain in stasis as traditional western archives typically make little room for impermanence.

This thesis, following Christina Sharpe, hopes to engage in archival wake work, standing firmly in the conviction that our current global reality has fundamentally arised out of the wake of the Transatlantic slave trade³. In taking up Alexander Weheliye’s call to Black studies to investigate the fundamental question of humanity upon which it was founded I look at one “figuration of humanity found in black cultures” that “forms an amalgamation of technologies - the application of knowledge [...]” which functions outside of and in opposition to the colonial archive and therefore has “[...] generally not been construed as central to, or even a part of, ” the category of the human⁴. Archives are the technology in which the history of Western humanity has been kept, stewarded, and reproduced in the public, constituted upon the principle of Black people as the extreme opposite of Man⁵. In the face of this, Black people developed other technologies with which to communicate with each other and archive our interior lives in

² Fuentes 6

³ Sharpe

⁴ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* 21

⁵ Wynter

necessarily ephemeral but distinctly crucial ways. Taking this as its object of knowledge, this thesis poses the question: how do Black archives function? What does it mean for an archive to shift from obsessive preservation and fetishization of historical objects, to instead honoring and illuminating the ephemeral, erotic feelings of historical moments which inform and vibrate the histories we carry within us?

I outline multiple registers of archival technologies as I see them moving concurrently and oppositional to one another. In doing so, it is not my intention to attempt to heal⁶ or reform the violently oppressive systems which traditional archives uphold and are upheld by. A small section of this thesis acknowledges the fact that white society is constantly seeking to appropriate Black culture and I recognize that this work will likely be employed toward reformation rather than the total termination of these systems. I have attempted to lay bare as little of the substance of interior Black life as possible, and focus rather on outlining a history of these technologies, that we might utilize them if we ever do get to the place *beyond, or to offer a new way of thinking about how we hold our histories, and therefore our present, so that we can move even a bit closer to that place.

The first section gives a brief history of the first archives and historical societies of the U.S., an overview of what makes them such violent spaces for Black peoples and how their violence is reproduced in the aesthetic sensibilities of the nation. The second section introduces the idea of a choreosonic performance of Black life that must be felt in the body to be known. The third section turns to the consumption and popularity of Black expression in the cultural sphere despite its abjection from the traditional archive and observes the ways that Black culture functions in a way that resists appropriation. The fourth section supposes an origin and function of a vibratory network of information which, through the choreosonic performance forms an

⁶ Robinson 6

alternative archive to the traditional historical societies that I overview in the first section. In the fifth section I think about what an archive could be if it functioned like the vibratory network, allowing space for transition, death and mourning. In the end I hope that this thesis makes obvious the failures of traditional archives for those whom they were not intended for, demonstrates the ephemeral archival technologies that exist outside of them, and inspires new thinking about what an archive can be.

1. Sites of Legacy: Archives and the Nation

“The earliest archival repositories in the United States were the private historical societies and manuscript libraries of New England and the mid-Atlantic regions of the nascent nation. Their primary purpose was not to assemble an archive for the new idea of America, nor was it to be accessible to everyone. Instead, these institutions largely collected family papers of the wealthy merchants, enslavers, and politicians who mostly funded these operations.”

- Jarrett Drake

I have spent the last two years working as an intern at the nation’s fourth eldest historical society, the Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS). As I write this thesis RIHS is celebrating its 200th anniversary. At a recent fundraising event intended to give visitors the experience of the year 1822, with snacks and lager provided to visitors, I took note of a displayed newspaper article from the period. It was a call to the general public of Rhode Island to aid in the establishment of the founding collections, saying that the populations hearts would “warm” at the recollection of the efforts of the state’s elite founding families, the Brown family named among

them. That “the history of the state will be but an enlarged biography of their ancestors.”⁷ The state of Rhode Island, which was recently shortened from “Rhode Island and Providence Plantations”, held the single largest slave port in the United States in the 18th century; Newport singlehandedly comprising the top point of the triangle system. To this day, the state is largely bereft of memorials to the Black lives that built the wealth, the streets, the buildings which are littered with tributes to the merchant families who enslaved them.

While there is an abundance of glorification of the state’s role in colonization and the Revolutionary War, there is almost no acknowledgement of the history of enslavement and genocide. Toni Morrison once said that there was not a statue or a memorial or even a park bench where one could go to memorialize the lives lost to the slave trade⁸. The most robust answer to this call in Rhode Island was done by the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, who have installed a number of plaques at several key historical sites to Black history in the state. Many of the plaques are low to the ground, overlooked and unmaintained. Having worked at RIHS, and in the environment from which their placement would have been decided, I understand that it must have been a fight to get them made at all. A few years ago, as a result of the Slavery and Justice Report, Brown University commissioned a sculpture of a ball and chain arising out of the ground. The piece sits on the ground in front of University Hall, the school’s first building which was built by enslaved people. While this statue is a small memorial to the hands that built the school, the names of colonizers, merchants and slave traders litter streets, neighborhoods and schools bearing names like “Brown”, “Hopkins”, “Lippitt” and “Hazard”.

The narratives of archives are oversaturated with the narratives of the families who founded the nation, who built their wealth off of the backs of others, and who used that wealth to

⁷ Fenner and Staples

⁸ Morrison

found the archives as testaments to their own legacies. Very little of the histories that are housed in traditional archival sites are authored by Black, or other marginalized people themselves. Having been denied access to literacy for centuries and having a fraught, to say the least, relationship to visuality, specific narratives of Blackness are created, reproduced and disseminated - as is the function of the archive. The zoological impulse to capture, pin down, categorize and hold objects of domination, evidence of power ad infinitum, is pornographic at best. In traditional archives objects of memory, remnants of life after death, are regulated, individualized, dated, marked, described, and shelved. This is an unnatural stasis, a freezing of time that reproduces the violences against the Black people held within them in perpetuity. The lives of the enslaved, or those in servitude to the wealthy class are fractured and misrepresented, the exterior view of them not allowed to pass. The gaze is fiercely invasive and permanent. It is a system which does not allow for death, let alone mourning, in order to continue a self-reinforcing performance of power. Kimberly Juanita-Brown has spoken about this zoological urge as it appeared in the incessant rape that occurred on slave plantations, stating that the enslaving class was “also looking to be ‘present in the bodies’ of their slaves for generations. In the white masculinist quest to imprint, there is that same desire that contributes to the shape and shade of nations, subjects, citizens, and families.”⁹ The founding of archives is yet another apparatus in which this white masculinist urge appears, the legacies of the wealthy class becoming the shade of the memorial landscape, woven into the official histories of cities, states and the nation.

The consequence of this has been to put in motion an increasingly violent sensibility in American media, largely pushed forward through increasingly graphic depictions of Black flesh in peril. The aesthetic of American entertainment has always been predicated upon and revolved around pornographic violence against Black queer bodies. We are the first line of

⁹ Brown 22

experimentation in the depiction of explicit violence or pushing the boundaries of crude humor. The canonical images of our society are not the portraits of influential white people that hang in university halls, nor historical landmarks or popular political iconographies. The most widely circulated visual exports of the U.S. are depictions of Black people, often in a scene of subjection.¹⁰ The ship hold, the scorched back, the supplicant slave alongside the countless minstrel depictions are the foundation of popular entertainment in the U.S.

Let's take the image of the Supplicant Slave as an example. The symbol was designed for Josiah Wedgwood's 1787 Anti-Slavery Medallion. Wedgwood, known for his widely circulated and highly regarded porcelain works, was one of the first modern business tycoons, building extreme wealth off his coining of multiple lasting consumer practices. The image, which depicts a Black man chained and on bended knee, his arms raised in a pleading position with the words "Am I Not A Man And A Brother?" inscribed above him, was immediately adopted by the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. Plastered on brooches, tobacco boxes and worn on hairpins, the image was one of the first viral images of the modernity and is a must have possession in the world of museums. This is the legacy that permeates and reverberates through the Western archive; the Black image as a tool used to signal within white society, to assuage guilt and to rest white civility upon. It is in archives where "Black Atlantic pain" first failed "to carry the same currency [...] as other bodies suffering under corporeal possession and subjection."¹¹ Scenes of disaster come to mind, as well as fictional and non-fictional depictions of Black flesh cut, exposed and in a state of violation where other bodies are respected, given privacy, shielded from public view. In the stubborn permanence of the Western archive, Black

¹⁰ Hartman

¹¹ Juanita-Brown 97

lives are held “stagnant within the realm of rigid memory - disallowing the necessary evolution of imagery.”¹²

This disallowance of the evolution of imagery has resulted in the continued re-use of the image of the supplicant slave, and the inscription “Am I Not A Brother And A Man?” not only by Black people seeking relief from oppression, but in various other social justice campaigns throughout the years. While we may not register it consciously in our day-to-day lives these campaigns are shadows of and still hold the memory of these original depictions. What does it mean that one of the most well known depictions of Blackness is one which begs white society for a recognition of humanity, and how does our continuing interest in it and use of its contemporary augmentations contribute to our thinking about race and representation?

2. An Erotic Grammar: The Choreosonic Performance of Black Life

“the white dancer attempts to express fully; the Negro is restrained, but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests.”

- Zora Neale Hurston

While Western archives completely rely upon graphic modes, written records specifically, Black people have forged other archival technologies which have persisted culturally and biologically outside of the archival sites of colonial society. In *Black Pentacostal Breath*, Ashon Crawley utilizes the term choreosonic performance to “underscore the fact that choreography and sonicity— movement and sound—are inextricably linked and have to be thought together.”¹³ The

¹² Juanita-Brown 102

¹³ Crawley 28

articulations of Black cultures are choreosonic performances that make up an erotic grammar which is known consciously, but understood and enacted primarily within the body. It is a constantly evolving embodiment of memorial to Black life, to those moments and people past, their words, their sounds, their gestures momentarily enlivened within us.

Outsiders to this erotic grammar may attempt to adopt these expressions amongst themselves, but they are things that cannot simply be imitated; they must be felt. It is not the performance of a single action, by a single body, but an archive which reverberates in multiplicities through generations of communal spaces. It is collective memory embodied, a way of being in memorial with memories of moments and people passed. Largely arising out of the ecstatic moments¹⁴ in Black life, they are necessarily improvisational, collaborative, and rooted in the present moment. The “dynamic suggestion”¹⁵ that Hurston describes above is what makes Black culture so difficult to fully appropriate. The codes of the choreosonic performance are always changing as a suggestion is made and uploaded by one, downloaded and changed by another, then re-uploaded and sent out again. The information flows in this way, person to person, city to city, region to region, back and forth, across geographic and generational boundaries of diasporic communities. It is an ecstatic frequency of fugitivity that sustains the sensations and the moods of quotidian Black life. As Hurston put it - it is never the same twice¹⁶. Being totally oriented toward the capture and preservation of historical evidence that upholds white supremacist and patriarchal narratives, the use of an erotic grammar is uncontrollable and therefore disruptive, despite the entanglement of Black performance and Western sensibilities.

¹⁴ Abdur-Rahman

¹⁵ Hurston et al.

¹⁶ Brooks 125-160

3. 502 - Errors in Appropriation

“Few outside the circle understood the deep sources of this hue and cry. The aesthetic inheritance of ‘jargon and nonsense’ was nothing if not a philosophy of freedom that reached back to slave songs and circle dances - the gifts of struggle and flight, death and refusal, became music or moanin’ or joyful noise or discordant sound [...] for within this circle, every groan and cry, curse and shout insisted that slavery time was over.”

- Saidiya Hartman

While the depictions of Black people held within archival sites have reinforced and reproduced the violences that they depict, outside of their walls Black expression has had an undeniable and commanding impact on the culture of the larger society. Born from the same denial of literacy and access to power that has left us mangled in the hands of archives, Black peoples utilized other mediums to communicate that operated outside of the purview of white society. As Fred Moten has written, “The emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates Black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production.”¹⁷ This freedom drive is, of course, appealing to those outside of Blackness, and has been a central element in the building of a national American identity. Time and time again we see the trend of white youths going through a coming of age ritual in the form of rebellion against society by taking on Black identities. Time and time again emerging Black expressions are vilified, only to later be widely appropriated by white society. The most obvious scenario is

¹⁷ Moten 7

in the case of Black music; with the blues, jazz, rock and roll, punk, pop, and Hip Hop, all of which emerged as Black sonic practices which were seen as disruptive and uncivil noise until white people took notice and began trying to produce it themselves. Now with the exponential development of audiovisual technologies and the intimate voyeurism of the internet, there is a new speed and vigor with which Black music, language, dance, fashion and all aspects of expression are being taken up by white youths. Essentially, mimicry of Black culture is and has been the engine with which Americans define and redefine themselves as American.

While these attempts at mimicry have often been the U.S.' most successful global exports, their origins left to the wayside, they have never been successful at embodying Blackness. The ecstatic moments in Black life are necessarily improvisational, collaborative, and rooted in the present moment, all of which white society has been largely estranged from due to the proliferation of colonial, pornographic modes of engagement. It is the attempt to "express fully", another attestation of the destructive impulse to pin down and classify, which makes it impossible for white people to fully appropriate Black culture. Not only this but it has led to the ever mounting pornographic violence, a lack of ability to connect through empathy in American entertainment which is largely experimented and played out on Black bodies.

One contemporary example of white people's attempt and failure to hack the codes of the choreosonic performance was their recent attempt at appropriating the word, "chile". It is well known that there is an internet subculture of people who "Blackfish", essentially an online version of Black face, in which people who are not Black pretend to be Black online for various reasons. They are usually fairly easy to spot, their butchering of AAVE typically being a dead giveaway. When a number of these Black fishers and other white people began to try to employ the word "chile" in their speech - a word which they had likely read through the enlarged

voyeurism of Black Twitter - they took to TikTok videos pronouncing the word like the country “Chil-LAY”. When the Black internet caught wind of this we erupted with jokes, and dragged them clean across social media. Once again, non-Black people attempt to copy us, to take what is ours as their own, and fail miserably. Of course, hundreds of think-pieces followed in the form of TikToks, Twitter threads, and Instagram posts. The Blackest response however was the adoption of this new, mangled pronunciation of the term directly back into the culture. For the next few months Black people could be heard replacing their own use of “Chile” with the “Chil-LAY” pronunciation. The appropriation of the term became re-encoded as a satirical gesture toward the desperation of white people to be us while simultaneously attempting to erase us, and their constant failure at both. Where white people want to “express fully”, to totally inhabit a category, the Black choreosonic performance continues moving, continues changing, and continues to outpace appropriation.

The archive of Black life is always found in the space between one person’s use of a word and another’s. In the space between me and you, the codes of the vibrational network of information are always shifting, evolving and finding relief in transition. Without an understanding of an erotic grammar, without the ability to feel meaning in ones body, white people will never be able to fully appropriate us, even as they take on pieces of our cultures as trends of their own. This is the intergenerational muscle memory, the nervous system of communal Black experience which is born from the spaces where Black people are free to be, unsurveilled.

4. Ecstatic Frequencies: The Vibrational Network of Information

“[...] they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out - if not in the word, in the sound - and as frequently in one as in the other.”

- Frederick Douglass

If we were to trace the genesis of the Black Diaspora to the middle passage we would have to know that the diaspora was not that of a single people dispersed throughout the globe, but many different peoples brought together for a period, and then re-dispersed. It is in this transitional space, no longer connected to their home communities, and not yet at their next destination that a diasporic community may have been forged. These people were from many different groups with different languages, cultures, and customs. In such a predicament enemies become friends and that which was foreign becomes familiar. In such a predicament a new way to communicate, an erotic grammar, must arise.

When our sense of hearing is activated, soundwaves hit microscopic hairs in our ears which vibrate the eardrum which are then converted into neurons. In our brains neurons are chemo-electrical signals that carry information to different parts of the brain and destinations throughout our body via the central nervous system. It is through this system that our bodies communicate and hold memory. This gives us muscle memory, pain stimulus, fight or flight response, regulation of breathing and more. The information is sent to parts of the body through the use of synapses which are two chemical receptors between which there is a space called a

cleft. In the cleft the neural signal jumps, transitions from one side of the synapse to the other, to continue its path through the nervous system. The more we perform an action, the stronger the synapses become, the easier it is for us to do. The less we use them, the weaker they become, the harder it is to perform an action. It is a system that is at once entirely subconscious and totally voluntary. When I think about the cleft, the space of transition, I think about a playlist. Imagine with me for a moment that where one song ends is one side of a synapse, and where the next begins is the other. The space between them is the cleft, the break, the transitional space. This space of transition creates room for another realm to open within which we become attuned to our own mood, our own interpretation of the sound we just heard and the anticipation of the next sound we are going to hear. While short, this space is capacious¹⁸. Not empty, but full of dynamic suggestion where something else is illuminated. This fleeting space then, where mood can change and new expression becomes possible, may serve as an axis upon which a vibratory network of information can be transiently sustained.

In the space of the middle passage, in this cleft between there and here, the specific languages being spoken may not have been understood but there were common intonations or grammars, regional words and gestures and ways of being which would have vibrated the eardrum and the body in a way that was at least more familiar than those which came from their captors. It is through this vibration, in the transitional space between the synapses that meaning could be made. While this is not a perfectly clear translation, the intention or the mood at least, could be understood. Perhaps not enough for an everyday conversation but enough to express anger, to express sadness, to plot rebellion. Enough to remember, to forge and sustain an enduring and overflowing communal identity that could endure through and beyond the apprehension of the enslaving society. When we witness someone performing an action that we

¹⁸ Ellis

are familiar with, such as cooking a meal, riding a bike or doing a dance, the same neurons fire through our synapses as if we were doing the action ourselves. It is through these empathetic synaptic pathways, these “mirror neurons,” that we are able to feel one another. This is how the vibratory network of information functions. Vibration is not only felt in the ears, but throughout our entire bodies, it links with our hearts. Sound and movement and feeling are felt throughout the nervous system, coded into the synapses. There is data coded into the various patterns of bass and 808s, in vocal intonation and inflection, in the movements and gestures of choreosonic performance. The archive exists where the vibration meets our bodies and it is felt when you have the codes if you were raised inside of it’s erotic grammar.

Last year I made a film, *Entering the *Beyond*, from which much of the theory in this thesis would be extrapolated. Inspired by the *Moving Archives* project by artist and computer programmer Brian Foo, the film was intended to demonstrate that the transitions between the synapses, the choreosonic performance of Black life, is an embodied archive that could be invoked through the maintaining of an ecstatic frequency. The film surveyed various communal Black spaces, which I first searched for in archival repositories with words like “Praise dance”, “Juke”, “Stepping”, “shouting”, all of which turned up no results. I then turned to my usual repository, YouTube, but realized quickly that although I could find many interior scenes of Black life uploaded there, I would have to use my own erotic ability as a Black queer person to locate those moments which vibrated at a specific ecstatic frequency. The information encoded into the vibrations, purposefully loud and chaotic, both in the moments depicted and the speed and rhythm of the editing itself, would activate the Black nervous system and bring about traces of the histories held within.

In a screening of the film in a course in the Modern Culture and Media department at Brown, I watched this unfold as two Black students squirmed in their seats, pointing and poking at one another. Afterwards one of them, David, approached me to tell me how much he loved and was excited by the film. He also expressed frustration in experiencing it in a classroom setting, a white space despite the majority of students in the class appearing to be queer Black people and people of color. He had felt a physiological need to respond to the ecstatic moments before him; to shout, to jump up, to stroll as he himself is an active member of a Black fraternity which is one of the groups shown in the film. This disturbed me, because the film was doing exactly what it was intended - to demonstrate that there is an archive held in ephemeral, ecstatic moments of communal Black life which is felt by those who have the codes, who know it's erotic grammar. Seen outside of a communal Black space however, the film becomes a heavy reminder of the inescapable repression we face in white spaces. Immediately I thought of Nina Simone's performance of "Feelings" at the 1976 Montreal Jazz festival. Here, she comes from the tradition of the call and response of the Black church, one of many Black habitus' with ecstatic codes, and one with which I am personally familiar. She speaks to the audience, they do not speak back. She frustratedly asks, "Well come on, clap damn it, what's the matter with you?"¹⁹. She goes on to have a clearly emotional moment within the song, and as she ushered the audience to sing along with her, she begged "feed me, feed me, feed me". They replied with confused silence.

In the call and response tradition of the Black church, from which much of Black American culture (and, inescapably, American culture) has emerged, people do not sit politely observing a performance. We are called on to participate, to respond with coded gestures and sounds, encouraging the performer and feeling with them. In the hundreds of times I have watched the clip of Nina Simone perform this song, I can't help but feel the estrangement from

¹⁹ Nina Simone Stars/Feelings

one another, and therefore from oneself, that is required in white spaces. This lack of nourishment, of having the other side of the cleft left unanswered, is a feeling familiar to any Black person who has been in a predominantly white space. Instead of being held in the moment of transition, we are met with minstrel laughter and applause, the fear of monstrosity or a zoological gaze. While *Entering the *Beyond* may have served its purpose as evidence that these ecstatic moments are archivable, or are an archive all their own, outside the limitations of what can comprise a traditional colonial archive, it failed to hold up as a space where Black people could properly engage with and respond to these moments among a white space.

The choreosonic performance, the vibratory network of information, are part of an erotic grammar that allow for feeling in all of it's capacities. The space of transition, the space between the synapses, is a place which allows for birth, life, and death - it follows the cycle of life. The electrical signal, the neurons, jump across the synapse with a speed that cannot be captured but which leaves behind chemical memory which is only strengthened with use. Many of the choreosonic performances of Black life function the same way, recycling through diasporic communities if they remain useful, dying out if they are not. More importantly, choreosonic performances of Black life allow for memories to flow organically, to not be suspended in time - that certain moment in history that we wish to revisit exactly as it was. It is always changing and we mark it with our own selves everytime we engage with it. In this way we are able to remember and commune with the dead, not as specific static memories, but as parts of ourselves that have been passed down from those who came before.

5. Memoriam: Transitional Archives

“Archives are a type of death management work [...] Archival repositories represent the documentary final resting places of a person’s lived experiences. [...] Archives manage lives after death.”

- Jarrett Drake

Jarrett Drake has written at length about the parallels between archives and prisons, focusing on the structure of archives as one of surveillance, the reading room as a panopticon which holds certain items in, while keeping certain people out.²⁰ My concern in this section is with the objects, the shadows of lives past, that archives have selectively wielded as tools to craft the white supremacist, nationalist narratives that uphold the Western history of what is and is not Human. These archives are sites that are built upon the impulse of white masculinist anxiety, to hold items of history, and history itself in a stasis. To “rescue” their own histories from the certain change and disappearance they would face if left to the test of time. For those who exist in society as marginalized subjects, this translates to being estranged from their home communities, from a proper praxis of care and forever held in a state of violation. Objects of memory, remnants of life after death, shadows of people are regulated, individualized, dated, marked, described and shelved.

Archival sites, crammed with the histories of their wealthiest founders and donors, are urgently in need of new infrastructure if they wish to continue collecting and holding all of these items forever. The brick and mortar museums and archives are quite literally full, as are the warehouses and basements where hundreds of thousands of magnetic tapes hold the data that

²⁰ Drake

makes up our “cloud”. The shift to born-digital material has brought about an archival crisis never imagined by the historical workers of centuries past. Traditional archives do not have the staff, the funding, nor the infrastructure to process collections that are one hundred years old, let alone even think of trying to keep up with the ever-accelerating accumulation of media in the twenty first century. Environmentally, there is simply nowhere left to store this data. Data scientists are now turning to synthetic DNA where information will be able to be stored in volumes previously unseen. What can be held in an archive if the archive is alive?

The attempt to keep their legacies, their narratives of conquest and domination, unchanged in the official public memory shows again the ways that capitalist patriarchy in the West has contributed to the devastation of not only people, but places. This urgent impulse to have and control information litters the Earth with the playthings of a very small portion of the population in the name of education and discovery. Most people never amass nearly the amount of material items that those who have given to archives do, and millions of precious and beloved items are lost on a daily basis, never to be seen by those endeared to them again. These items may fall into the hands of another, for whom it may become beloved in a different way. Just as the vibratory network follows the cycle of life, so should the materials that we love, and especially those that we want to honor.

We pass down clothing, jewelry, bibles, and after so many generations these objects are depleted or lost. Objects, like life, like moods, are not meant to last forever. They are made to serve their function and then disappear into dust like the rest of us. We pass down recipes, songs, and stories. These are allowed to evolve over time and be changed as they pass from person to person and generation to generation - they are enduring. In thinking about Black women’s musical archives Daphne Brooks stresses the importance of mood and the ways it has been

wielded by musicians and activists, such as Abbey Lincoln, to not only clearly convey the affective realities of living inside a relentlessly oppressive system, but also to express an ability to change the mood. To “exert agency on our own singular and collective affective lives”²¹ through the changing of mood is to momentarily rupture the affective reality of existing within such a system. The change of mood, the transition, allows space for the ecstatic and it makes room for mourning. It is the fugitivity that allows grief to be felt when the burden of continuous devastation would otherwise be unbearably heavy. What does it mean to archive in a perpetual state of grief? What could it mean to transition from collecting and attempting to hold items in a stasis to instead accession and deaccession organically, to allow materials to flow between institutions? What would it mean for archives to shift from collecting documents to instead insisting on holding a mood and then changing it?

To be an archivist is to be a steward and a caretaker, to honor the materials of our past and what they meant to our ancestors. It does not have to mean to classify and sort, to store and keep away from grubby fingers. For Black archives, specifically ephemeral archives, it means to illuminate those moments, those moods, those people who have passed. In the choreosonic performance, in those ecstatic moments, we are bringing forth memories and people we may have never known ourselves. When I am engaged in a communal Black space, when we are dancing or laughing, I am remembering my aunts and my cousins, my grandparents and friends, and those around me who are doing the same. When we are in communal Black space and those ecstatic, transitory moments arise, we are also communing with our loved ones, those who are far and those who are gone.

²¹ Brookes 106

Conclusion

“Mood, for Hurston, is also a performance technique, an interpretive modality; it is a question of versioning, repetition with a signal difference, the insistence that the song will, in fact, not remain the same (‘It won’t be the same next Sunday)’”

-Daphne Brookes

I have personally felt a sort of archival anxiety all of my life. I remember asking my parents as a preschooler, what country our ancestors were from for a class project and being stunned by their ambivalence about the fact that they didn’t have an answer. I also remember genuinely trying to remember all the stories my grandmother told me about herself as a very small child, and being especially crushed about not having been able to write it down after she passed a few years later. In elementary school I used to stop my classmates from throwing their trash away, having them give them to me for safe-keeping instead. As a teenager, cleaning out my room, I would professionally photograph every trivial item, keychains and colored pencils, before I got rid of them. Although I now recognize this as a symptom of multiple anxieties, I am still very familiar with the overwhelming urge to keep even a trace of the most inconsequential things. As I worked on this thesis, I have been reflecting on this anxiety within myself. As an example that certainly demonstrates how we can and should shift the ways we think about archival technologies and how we regard our memories.

Last winter I had an incredibly big crush on someone and I decided to make them a playlist. I worked on it for weeks and really finalized it before I decided to share it with them. About a week later, I found myself wanting to make some small changes and was immediately

seized with anxiety. Being in the beginning stages of thinking through this thesis, I realized I needed to confront that feeling and came up with two scenarios to prove to myself that change is actually a possible and powerful way to think about memory. In the first scenario, someone shares with their grandchildren that their other grandparent made a playlist as a tribute to their love fifty years ago, and they continue to listen to it now that their loved one is gone. In the other scenario, a grandparent made a playlist and updated it with new music every year for 50 years until they passed, and now the living grandparent still updates it as a tribute to their love.

While both of these are sweet and endearing ideas, the second is a more dynamic way to think about holding memory. Rather than trying to preserve the memory of falling in love exactly as it was known in a moment 50 years ago, the second scenario honors the ways that love, like life, grows and changes overtime. If we begin to think of archives this way, as spaces not to hold items as factual evidence of times past, but as spaces to remember and honor the ever-changing impact that those times past have had on our affective lives, I believe we can move closer to a place **beyond*.

**: The asterisk placed before the word beyond is meant to gesture toward the chaos which is always attendant to Black life, and which the space created beyond still lies on the premise of.*

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