

Maya S. Cade

On Building Black Film Archive, a Digital Archive that Responds to a Movement

The first seed of what would become Black Film Archive was planted during the Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020. Across the country, Black Americans gathered in the streets to question their relationship to death, whiteness, policing, and memorialization. As this visible refusal of the status quo gained exposure, Black Americans began reconsidering memorialization and representation in every facet of American life. Suddenly, there was a renewed collective energy for reassessing the history of Black imagery in the media. Many Black Americans began asking ourselves and one another, How does media, especially film, represent our history, and can it ever accurately memorialize our experiences?

This moment of reckoning positioned streaming platforms such as Netflix to launch Black Lives Matter tribute categories that collect existing Black films while also putting Black moviegoers, critics, and artists in prime position to question the role of these Black-driven collections. That positioning, combined with my lifetime of dedication to Black film scholarship, brought out my desire to create something that directly addressed Black Americans wanting to engage more deeply with Black cinematic history.

The most pressing impetus for Black Film Archive's birth was an ongoing conversation in the Black community regarding Black trauma in film. In June 2020, the discourse surrounding Black screen representation generalized

Maya S. Cade, "On Building Black Film Archive, a Digital Archive That Responds to a Movement," *JCMS* 62, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 167–169.

Black films as being mostly traumatic. I hoped that I could develop a register that would help people reframe and better understand Black cinematic history, something that would reckon the total weight of the past and allow people to consider the radical ideas and expression found in Black film's past.

The fight for Black visibility on-screen is as old as the motion picture industry itself. The moving image portrays the reflections of a society's attitudes and expressions. Cinema has always been a space where we share, develop, and reflect our belief systems. Shared identity and knowledge are grown through expansive temporal and spatial visions of remembrance in cinema.¹ These shared visions shape collective imagination.

Black Film Archive, which began as a Twitter thread in June 2020, developed beyond its roots when I asked myself, "How does making Black cinematic history readily accessible shift collective imagination?" With this question in mind, it became abundantly clear that a Twitter thread that gathered currently streaming Black films made before 1960 was not enough. With only a link and photo, this thread could never realize my intentions, could not shift the collective imagination as I set out to do.²

The fully fleshed out Black Film Archive is a digital resource providing history and context for over two hundred currently streaming Black films made from 1915 to 1979. Each film page has a trailer or embedded video and provides a synopsis written with Black viewers in mind. Black films are defined on Black Film Archive as films that have something significant to say about the Black experience; speak to Black audiences; or have a Black star, writer, producer, or director. The criteria for selection are as inclusive as possible, allowing the site to cover the broadest range of what a Black film can be.³ The films collected in Black Film Archive are visions of Black being across time.

When confronted with the demands of archiving, curators often embark on a quest for objectivity and neutrality while zeroing in on a narrative of "forgotten" or "overlooked" works. But archives, by nature, are not neutral.⁴ In order to be effective for the community it is longing to serve, every archive must be built with continual self-examination and accountability. The quest for neutrality also begs the question "Forgotten to whom?" when the overlooked framing is one of the only considered entry points for embarking on archival work. With my earliest archival efforts while studying at Howard University, it became clear to me that when it came to film history, this quest for objectivity was a journey that had long minimized the contributions of Black performers, directors, and film workers. The moment of mass reckoning that demanded Black Film Archive's creation meant I had the mental freedom to

1 Astrid Erll, "Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 389–398.

2 See Maya Cade (@mayascade), "here's an ongoing thread of all the black films before 1959 i [sic] can find publicly available (streaming / public domain / rentals)," Twitter, June 10, 2020, 1:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/mayascade/status/1270763607354224642?s=21>. This thread continued through March 24, 2021.

3 See Maya Cade, "Introducing blackfilmarchive.com," Black Film Archive, August 26, 2021, <https://blackfilmarchive.substack.com/p/introducing-blackfilmarchivecom>.

4 The phrase "archives are not neutral" is often credited to a social media campaign initiated by archivist Ashley D. Stevens.

imagine building a platform that spoke directly to Black people's needs. My website would expose the myth of objectivity in archive curation by addressing the creators and audiences excluded by white collectors and collections.

In building Black Film Archive, I started by contending with the hurdles to create order out of the chaos. Before I uploaded any film or designed any page, I knew it would be imperative to challenge the way whiteness is centered in how Black films are seen, discussed, and heard. To avoid reproducing such oppressions, I researched and wrote all the descriptions of films collected in the Archive, using "What does this mean to a Black person?" as a guideline. I spent a lot of time thinking through what the resource I wanted to build should look like, interrogating how visual design cues I was ruminating upon would make Black people feel. I spent a great deal of time rearranging the relation of the films to one another on the site, ensuring the foundation I was building would be inviting and have the potential to evolve. Creating any archive is an act of community care, but centering Black people in that archive requires you to dethrone the status quo.

The demands of varied curatorial standards across streaming platforms means that classic Black films are dispersed across and within various services and were largely buried outside of Black History Month commemorations (if they were promoted at all).⁵ Despite curators' present-day interest in reengaging with Black cinema, it is my firmest belief that building and collating Black films on Black Film Archive is an act of transforming collective memory. Black Film Archive is a foundation that will withstand the tides of curatorial fascination changing.

To intentionally preserve is to remember and to reimagine what the future could hold. From the countless correspondence I have received, it has become clear that Black people treasure Black Film Archive because it honors the social contract we have long held ourselves to and because it challenges default narratives about cinema history and builds critical awareness of African American contributions. In Black American culture, primarily Black American southern culture, family preservation is a task for everyone. Everyone carries the precious burden of recording, carrying, and sharing ancestral mementos to preserve the legacy of those who came before them. I feel in kinship with the actors, writers, directors, and producers legacies deserve continued examination and celebration. Because that is so, I will always carry the task of preserving their legacy.

Maya S. Cade is the creator and curator of Black Film Archive, a living register of Black films from 1915 to 1979. Her work has been awarded notable distinctions by the New York Film Critics Circle and the National Society of Film Critics. She was the Fall 2021 Research Fellow at Indiana University's Black Film Center & Archive and she is now Scholar-in-Residence at the Library of Congress.

5 As on Black Film Archive, "classic Black films" are defined here as films before 1979.