Sukhai Rawlins

Archival Interventions: Instagram and Black Interiority

Long before I began my research on Black studies and new media, my first encounter with a Black archive was in my second-grade classroom during Black History Month. Sitting cross-legged among a cluster of students, I waited to hold one of the worn artifacts my teacher was circulating to supplement her lesson. The item was a photograph: an image of a bright burning cross flanked by big men in white sheets. Clutching the photo between my fingers, I listened to my teacher explain that in 1963, men like this had bombed a Birmingham church, killing four young Black girls.1 Her words created an impenetrable shadow. In that darkness, my conception of temporality became increasingly unstable. Time began to seep out from the clock’s careful confines, both expanding and elongating and contracting around my small body, threatening to turn me to ash just like the Black girls in that church basement.

Although white men were the ones dressed up like ghosts, within the academic archives I encountered, it was Blackness that was spectral, legible only through death, generalizations, and perceived offenses. In Black studies, canonical historiographers such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson consistently reflect upon the hierarchical circumscription that constitutes


historical production.\textsuperscript{2} Much of the work of Black archivists likewise seeks to address a system of valuation in which anti-Black violence subsumes Black humanity.\textsuperscript{3} While Black archives chart the Black experience, though, we must be careful to expose the multitude of complex power relations hidden under the surface of Black representation. In this regard, Black texts with traditional archival purchase feel deeply conversant with my encounters with contemporary digital archives. In an effort to interrogate the crosscurrents of power, this essay briefly traces the form and function of traditional Black historiographical methods alongside the “alternative” Black and queer repositories of Instagram.

As Lauren McLeod Cramer argues, in the face of political economies that attempt to repress Black life and imagination, scholars need to ask research questions that expose the ethics and ideological commitments of the archives they study and also open up new ways of visualizing Blackness.\textsuperscript{4} Following their lead, I analyze the relationship between Blackness, queerness, pleasure, and value production on Instagram. Specifically, my research on the profiles of Black queer people shows how this community configures queer horizons through the circulation of photographs, captions, and videos, as well as a variety of other media.

Black people in the United States have participated in various forms of archival production since the onset of slavery. From authoring hymns that recounted the brutality of captivity to the Harlem Renaissance and the construction of jazz, performative expressions of Black social life have long constituted a critical modality of Black historiography.\textsuperscript{5} Although Black communities have integrated writing practices into these archival processes, the majority of the Black people who survived the transatlantic slave trade emerge from the oral and improvisational shibboleth of the Yoruba people.\textsuperscript{6} Demonstrative customs such as music, poetry, and theater thus inform past and present modes of Black record-keeping.\textsuperscript{7} In many ways, the legacy of Black archival production reflects a dominant form of Black historiography that refuses to divorce education and ethics from the personal and performative.

While a large part of Black historiography is grounded in a genealogy of performance, written text has accompanied the Black demonstrative tradition from as early as the 1800s, with formally established Black historiographic method taking shape in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{8} Du Bois and


\textsuperscript{8} See Monica Weis, “Olaudah Equiano at Sea: Adrift in White Culture,” \textit{CEA Critic} 63, no. 1 (2000): 21–26; and “Historians and Historiography, African American,” in \textit{Ency-
Woodson spearheaded systematic Black archival theory; they proposed an intimate archival intervention that emerged from the genealogy of Yoruba record-keeping and Black demonstrative tradition, wherein historiography is inextricable from personal and cultural contingencies. In Black schoolhouses across the United States, Woodson helped to institutionalize Negro History Week, an annual holiday akin to Black History Month. During these seven-day celebrations, students of all ages explored their cultural heritage through the performance of folklore, Negro spirituals, and canonical Black poetry; they were also given the opportunity to showcase original works of art. For Woodson, enacting personal and political expressions of Blackness was ancillary to historical production, a sentiment that reverberates with the intellectual offerings of Du Bois, who mines the space of the personal for movement into the space of the public. In the words of the literary historian Arnold Rampersad, Du Bois’s cultural and aesthetic work “gave voice to his private thoughts,” emphasizing “the depth of his soul-searching and the dignity of his motives.”

Positioned within this lineage, my research on Instagram turns to the performative and personal as key factors in Black knowledge transmission and social change. The interiority of archival interventions such as Du Bois’s and Woodson’s contrasts constructively with the apparent sterility of the dominant archive. Implicitly alluding to the benefit of this disjunction, Woodson explains how modern education processes may seem untainted by personal bias but are, in actuality, underwritten by white supremacy: “[M]odern education . . . does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed [Negro] peoples. . . . the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching.” When I consider the system Woodson describes, I can’t help but think of my younger self, ushered toward the vast sea of Black subsistence only to be handed a picture of men who wanted me dead.

My work on Black-authored social media spaces understands individually crafted social media archives as critically subversive. While mainstream Western historiographers may claim objective methods for archival production, I follow Woodson’s analysis and argue that examining personal Instagram profiles continues a tradition of Black historiography that understands objectivity as a regulatory fiction underlining white supremacy. The vernacular archi-
val production potentiated by Instagram can be positioned within a greater genealogy of the academic Black archive, in an attempt to shed light on the politico-cultural formations constituting the very concept of historiography.

Contravening the necropolitical visual imaginary of Blackness, wherein the Black body doubles as a potential corpse, Instagram functions as an archive for the self-authored exhibition of pleasure by Black queer people. Observing Black queer users’ Instagram feeds evidences instantiations of what Jafari S. Allen terms “erotic subjectivity” and helps address the way performing pleasure on social media can “construct... new kinds of publics based on deeper understandings and compulsions of the body and soul.” These posts enact erotic subjectivity within the contexts of Black American digital reality, Black American resistance, trans* feminism, and African American culture and politics. They suggest that Instagram provides marginalized subjects with the means to work out their position in the shadow of slavery and social death, to construct “their racial, gendered, and sexual subjectivities according to deep longings” for a future of living beyond survival, a self-crafted future composed of queer utopianism, belonging, and community.15

In contrast, and as Woodson suggests, one can see “regulatory norms” instantiated through mainstream archival imaginaries that circumscribe Black history to brutalization and bondage. While Judith Butler explains performativity as coercively reproducing these norms, she also argues that performance holds a radical potential for reimagining.16 From this perspective, Black queer Instagram users’ exhibition of pleasure and identitarian alterity can be seen as a practice with the potential to bend time and reshape our ideas of attainable realities. By performing and documenting moments of sexual pleasure and interiority, Black queer Instagrammers labor to decenter white heteronormativity in archival production while helping to visualize Black freedoms.

Instagram operates as an interstitial archive. Because its profiles are always in the process of being cultivated, the archives Instagram assembles are permanently ongoing, unfinished, and open-ended.17 As a citational visual economy with boundless circularity, Instagram endows pictures with a “social life.”18 By offering the possibility for ever-liminal archival construction, Instagram profiles contravene what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as “straight time,” or the assumed reproduction of the same repressive structures of gender, class, and race, which can also be understood as the temporal expansion of the present’s repression.19 In contrast, the queer profiles on


15 Lane, “Bringing Flesh,” 635.


Instagram are never finished and therefore permanently gesture toward a future of unknown possibilities. By chronicling submerged histories and conversing with imminent futures, the performances circulated on Instagram may be employed by users to push up against traditional history’s chrononormative continuum and push toward queer utopian futures.20

A brief analysis of the Instagram account of the Black genderqueer barista and self-proclaimed “butch bottom” Sasha (@sasha_in_newmexico) from the years 2016 to 2019 foregrounds the erotic subjectivities and alternative temporalities afforded by the archives of Black and queer Instagrammers. Sasha’s Instagram profile is a litany of discordant visuals. In one photo, Sasha’s partner chokes them sensually while licking their outstretched tongue.21 In another, Sasha is featured sitting on a bed with their father next to them; he is holding their foot the way a mother might cradle her newborn baby. In his hands are a pair of tweezers. The picture is captioned, “my father getting a splinter out my foot ~ I’m his little bull dyke.”22 On Sasha’s Instagram, image sequences like these are commonplace, such that salacious imagery consistently ensconces their pictures of familial intimacy.

From posting a picture of their pubic hair to performing semi-naked foreplay with their partner, Sasha’s profile consistently pushes at the limits of Instagram community guidelines, which prohibit sex and nudity.23 Intermittent posts remind Sasha’s followers that most of their family members are blocked from viewing their profile. One screenshot of a text from their mother reads, “Wowww, I am absolutely amazed at your lifestyle.” Responding to the screenshot, a follower of Sasha’s comments, “omg, your mom is so sweet, I’m jealous!” and Sasha responds to their follower by clarifying, “don’t be jealous, she’s saying this with the utmost disdain [sad emoji face,] that’s why shes blockt.”24 In these cases, Sasha makes it clear that their family is “amazed” at their life choices but not in a good way.

Nevertheless, Sasha remains intractable in their depiction of a lifestyle that bucks the guidelines of respectable subsistence; on their profile, there is no splitting the sexual, the somatic, and the platonically sentimental. On Sasha’s Instagram profile page, photos of them hugging and caressing their partner’s bare body sit between smiling pictures of their unperturbed

21 Sasha (@sasha_in_newmexico), “y’all niggas better report this since apparently y’all can’t have nice things,” Instagram, April 4, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BhJs6I2B216/?igshid=1nvk593gj7hao.
23 See, for example, @sasha_in_newmexico’s posts of January 15, 2018, and October 21, 2016. See also Gretchen Faust, “Hair, Blood and the Nipple: Instagram Censorship and the Female Body,” in Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces, ed. Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, and Mike Terry (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 159–170.
24 Sasha (@sasha_in_newmexico), Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/BP34LK8Dv3P/. (photo has since been deleted.)
parents. Within this context, queer sexual precocity and familial kinship are not bifurcated but overlap in referentiality; both allude to a future when the erotic subjectivity is smiled upon.

With its nearly conterminous picture borders, Sasha’s Instagram feed gestures toward a critical confluence between the brash “butch bottom” who wraps their fingers around the throat of their partner and the “little bull dyke” who needs their father to remove a splinter from their foot. On their social media playground, Sasha invokes a future replete with familial acceptance and care that is inextricable from sexual and somatic freedom. Even if Sasha must block their blood relatives from engaging with their images, their Instagram imagines a utopia where their nuclear family stand as beaming spectators. Sasha’s Instagram assembles what Muñoz refers to as “the field of utopian possibility,” where “multiple forms of belongings in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity.” By challenging the limits of their present and enacting a virtual reality of collective belonging, Sasha gestures to a queer dynamism that is not quite here, but could be.

When describing the status of Blackness in archival production, Frederick Douglass reflects, “The slave is a subject, subjected by others; the slaveholder is a subject, but he is the author of his own subjection.” Given this social condition, the modus operandi of traditional Black historiography asks how the Black subject enters into conversations about themselves—their whole selves—in a fragmented and hierarchical anti-Black social order. Since the transatlantic slave trade, traditional Black historiography has engaged intimate forms of performativity toward a gestalt switch on the dominant archival valuation of Black life. Throughout this essay, I argue that Black and queer Instagrammers further Black demonstrative traditions that use the personal to illuminate Black subjects as multiply determined and regimented by racial-sexual-ecological enclosures. I argue that by engendering various forms of erotic subjectivity on the platform of Instagram, Black and queer Instagrammers push against linear and teleological notions of time, illuminating a critical temporal structure that looks backward while also imagining salient forms of Black futurity.

Although social media platforms such as Instagram provide a raft of critical performance capacities and queer utopias, at the same time, it is important to acknowledge the insidious processes of value extraction I observe unfolding within this sphere. Instagram is not only an archive but also a corporation fueled by the drive toward extraction that constitutes late capitalism. The radical Black gestures circulated by queer Black Instagrammers are simultaneously reterritorialized and commodified by this platform, since Instagram is made for interminable user expenditure. Furthermore,

25 Sasha (@sasha_in_newmexico), Instagram, April 22, 2018. (Photo has since been deleted.)
26 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 453.
by obfuscating its for-profit agenda, Instagram obscures how the limitless mobility and creative freedom it advertises work to uphold racialized and capitalist logics of commodity fetishism. If, as Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers argues, Black is vestibular to culture, then the abounding aesthetic content trafficked by Instagram can be largely seen as the fetishized product of Black cultural labor.

Sukhai Rawlins is a PhD student and teaching assistant in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at Emory University. Their research interests include new media, posthumanisms, pleasure activism, and Black trans feminism.

29 Mukherjee, 340.