Introduction

TROUBLE THESE WATERS

> Remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within.
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> Ruha Benjamin

In the late summer of 2005, I was enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. Busy and distracted, I was raising a toddler, working part-time at a local public library, and wrapping up an advanced archives course I had been taking one evening a week. As the summer heat cooled and preparations for the fall semester occupied my attention in Pennsylvania, I had little awareness of how much the world was about to change—and how much I would be changed by coming events. In late August I watched, horrified, as Hurricane Katrina slammed into the city of New Orleans and other parts of the US Gulf Coast. Having grown up in the Northeast, I had experienced hazardous weather conditions such as snow and blizzards. But as the first-generation child of Caribbean immigrants, I knew how devastating the Atlantic hurricane season could be. I had watched and worried many times with my parents as storms made their way toward the tiny islands that my family still called home.

When Katrina hit, it was a recognizable kind of pain, a familiar deep worry. The next day, I watched as the news media talked about flooding, about the waters that had broken through levees that had

been installed twenty years earlier under the supervision of the US Army Corps of Engineers. As the city flooded, I watched. Along with so many others, I was devastated. I watched as people became trapped inside their homes, *knowing* I was witnessing—that we were collectively bearing witness to—a significant loss-of-life event. As the disaster progressed and it became clear the federal government's response would be pallid at best, my feelings shifted from overwhelming despair and profound sadness to an ever-increasing sense of anger. I was incensed. Each day there was a new encounter with television and internet footage—a daily barrage of images. Rooftops damaged beyond repair. Houses in parts of the city deemed unsalvageable. Dead bodies floating in the overflowing waters of Lake Pontchartrain.

Those images stayed with me. They haunted me. They haunt me still, today. Months after the hurricane, still reeling, I wrote my final paper as part of my master's degree in library and information science. In it I recounted in painstaking detail the loss of cultural heritage in New York City and Washington, DC, during the September 11th attacks. Although I now know I wasn't ready, I also wrote about Katrina. It was my first attempt—somehow reckoning with the sheer volume of material loss—at coming to terms with the scale of the hurricane. It was also my first attempt to reckon with the cruel disregard for human life that I had seen from both the US government *and* that I had observed via internet and television media. As I wrote that paper, I grew even more troubled. I was concerned about my own approach to the work at hand, which by its very focus seemed to deem the loss of cultural property more important than the loss of life. I was concerned about the very act of doing that work against the backdrop of the ongoing Katrina coverage.

What kept sticking for me was the inescapable fact that as the media talked about the scope of Katrina's destruction and rebuilding the city of New Orleans, the images that accompanied their coverage weren't just damaged buildings or debris-strewn streets. Rather, the scale and scope of the city's damage was demonstrated by show-

ing the American public dead bodies—and the dead bodies were addressed (if at all) as an afterthought to the property. Animating an even deeper sense of horror and distress was the inescapable, visual, and visceral fact that the images of dead bodies on television and on the internet were almost *exclusively* Black people's bodies. I was sickened by the truth of it: Black people's bodies were being callously displayed on TV as part and parcel of signifying the scope of the hurricane's *property* damage.[1]

Years after Katrina, in another August and while I pursued another degree from the same university, Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown, who was only eighteen, was killed by police officer Darren Wilson. He was shot in the back, and when his lifeless body hit the ground, law enforcement left him there in the hot August sun in the middle of the street for four hours. While Brown's body lay uncovered in the streets of Ferguson, he was photographed, and those photographs were quickly published to and widely circulated on the internet. I was yanked back to the feelings that the media coverage of Katrina had evoked. Black people's bodies—under duress, in the throes of a trauma event, without the light of life—were still a sociocultural commodity almost a century and a half after the institution of slavery had been abolished in the United States. I learned then that to monetize the white savior complex, American society must valorize Black suffering. I also learned that to diminish the perceived impact of white suffering, white Americans must see and believe that Black people are suffering *more*.

Performance studies scholar Harvey Young has argued that in the United States societal ideas around "the Black Body" (defined as an imagined yet inescapable *myth* of Blackness) are too often projected onto the actual material bodies of Black people.[2] Ideas about the Black Body that mythologize Blackness also frequently render Black people targets of abuse. Thinking with Young, I argue that the devaluing of the Black Body, when viewed alongside its simultaneous commodification, is not a phenomenon that is particular to individual Black people. Rather, the Black Body is seen as a collective,

its pain "shared among the majority of recognizably 'Black' bodies . . . who live an objectified existence within the Western world."[3] I agree with this notion of the Black Body collective. But also, the misrecognition of individuated bodies as a monolithic "Black Body" recreates a functional dynamic that views Black people as a commodifiable aggregate. Societal ideas of the "Black Body" flatten individual Black experiences onto a blank palate upon which narratives can be projected and around which harmful mythologies can be formed, such as the myth of the strong and/or angry Black woman or the violent, dangerous Black brute.

These multiple understandings of the Black Body are a central theme in this book. I argue that the separation of the "Black Body" imaginary from the lived experiences of Black people is dangerous because it creates the conditions necessary for the severing of idea from corpus. Too often, we have seen that the *idea* of the Black Body is easily separated from the actual life of a Black human being; it was exactly this severing that motivated Mamie Till Mobley to demand that America visually confront the brutal reality of her son's 1955 lynching. In choosing an open casket for her son, Emmett Till, Mobley was firm in her assertion that the world should see what America's racist hatred had wrought under cover of darkness—not the suppression of some societal idea of a dangerous Black brute but rather the cold-blooded murder of a living, breathing, laughing, playful, beloved fourteen-year-old boy.

This separation of the "Black Body" imaginary from the lived experiences of Black people manifests in even more pronounced ways in digital spaces, particularly when pain, trauma, joy, and other embodied experiences fail to connect—or, stated differently, when there is a failure to translate the virtual image to the experience of the physical flesh. Too often when a person sees visual pain on a screen, even if that screen is a handled technology, there is a failure to connect that pain to actual human suffering. I assert again and again what Zellie Imani articulated in June 2020 after the murder of

George Floyd: "You shouldn't have to see footage of murdered Black people to be convinced of their humanity."[4]

This book was birthed in the pain of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, forged in the collective grief of Michael Brown's death in 2014, and is offered with the hope of a new way forward. Tracing the commodification of the deaths of Black people in the United States from the analog era through the digital era and, using cases that represent both historical archival and contemporary data practices, this book addresses the ways that our cultural understandings of death have been changed by the affordances of digital technologies. I seek to articulate the intensity of the brutal disposability and precarity of Black life, while also celebrating the spirit and sensibilities of Black lived experiences. I take up questions about what happens to Black people's bodies postmortem using the critical and analytical frameworks of archival studies, performance studies, and digital culture studies. I began this work as a Black feminist archival scholar by asking questions such as: What does it mean for someone who thinks about Black people as "the Other" to create, maintain, use, and share records of deceased Black people? How have these archival and digital practices normalized the deaths of Black people? What narratives—and *counternarratives*—emerge from the historical record, and how might these counter/narratives contribute to our understandings of issues around Black death in the present? I began this work in the service of critical resistance. I began this work because it was, for me, a matter of life and death.

Resurrecting the Black Body represents the cohesion of more than fifteen years of thinking about what happens to the digital documentation and (re)presentation of Black people after they die, about who gets a say in how Black bodies are treated, and about who benefits from enduring practices around the "Black Body" as digital archival record. Taking as its foundation questions and concerns about records, representation, embodiment, ritual, memorialization, and oblivion in digital technologies and in digital spaces, this book pays

particular attention to the ways Black people's bodies are used as records and as evidence in the interplay between the permanence of the digital sphere and the concept of the *right to be forgotten*. It is now (and has long been) my contention that in the United States, even after their deaths Black people's lives are extended, prolonged, and ultimately changed in the present, future, and in history through new circulations, repetitions, and recontextualizations to various publics. For Black Americans these changes and extensions tend to not include the ability to construct our own agency, realities, and representations.[5]

I use the term *digital culture* to define this work because it simultaneously references an array of digital technologies and related practices that span a host of fields and disciplines. This term distinguishes my engagement with these interdisciplinary sites of inquiry from earlier turns in both cultural studies and media studies. Methodologically, this book engages critical race theory, performance studies, archival studies, and digital culture studies, asking how existing technologies (analog and digital) reflect the wider social world offline, how they create new cultural interactions, and how those new interactions in turn reshape our understandings of the world. It has been my goal to articulate some contemporary conceptions of what it means to be Black and dead in digital culture without reverting to simplistic or socioculturally invested notions of the coherent, bounded, and stable body. Instead, I draw from Harvey Young's theorizations about the Black Body and Katherine Dunham's ideas around Black embodied culture. I think alongside Saidiya Hartman and others, such as Christina Sharpe and Temi Odumosu.[6] I conceive of Black memory work as a process that combines and multiplies possibilities rather than Western archival notions that might replace the materiality of bodies and people. Importantly, I reject the tendency to associate virtual experiences and digital technologies with an escape from the body, challenging the notion that the digital sphere is any less "real" than our analog lives. Threaded throughout this book are stories that center Black

lives as both individually and collectively lived and valued, and I have intentionally sought out Black thinkers, scholars, and memory workers in the crafting of these narratives and arguments.

I was asked many times as I crafted this manuscript why I am so concerned about Black digital afterlives. The answer—while complex enough to fill a book—is, I think, easily conveyed. When we die, we leave behind our bodies and belongings as our ancestors have for millennia, but unlike our ancestors, today we also leave behind unique footprints and a trail of digital litter scattered across our online environments. Such material—digital and digitized photos, our social media posts, our gaming worlds, our email, our text and chat exchanges—all of this detritus, from full digital records to the most miniscule of digital traces, can be thought of as our digital remains. These digital remains are not only what we create but also what is created about and for us. As each of us generates gigabytes of data daily, our online movements are increasingly tracked for machine learning and data analytics; at the same time, our analog traces are increasingly moved to digital environments—such as documentation about our health, education, work, and travel. Although the concept of digital remains as a potential problem space has only existed throughout the relatively short history of the internet, as we age in the era of big data, what to do with a person's digital remains after they die—*the digital afterlife*—has increasingly become a significant social, cultural, and economic issue.

While in theory we may—as wealthy, white performers like Carrie Fisher did—stipulate how and if our digital afterlives are crafted, in the case of Michael Brown, neither he nor his loved ones ever had agency over the posthumous photographs that were taken on August 9, 2014. Neither did the family of George Floyd have agency over the 2020 video documenting his violent murder in real time. This lack of personal agency regarding the digital evidence that documents both Black life and Black death—the lack of *agency* over our digital remains—is one of the central concerns of this book. These pages offer examples of what evidence I have found and some of the con-

cerns I have identified in interrogating this intersection where race, records, and the digital afterlife converge. I track the historical social interactions between humans and their data alongside the development of data technologies, offering critical interventions about the scale and speed of personal data creation, capture, collection, and reuse, drawing on a wide range of disciplinary perspectives as well as theoretical and empirical research. At its heart, *Resurrecting the Black Body* challenges the narrative that Black people's lives are disposable.

The chapters in *Resurrecting the Black Body* call our attention to several concomitant and interrelated concerns: the relationships between the digital public display of visual memory objects and the emotional agency of images; the ways that Black people's bodies are commodified and weaponized through widespread circulation of documentary evidence from cell phones, dashcams, bodycams, and media outlets that depicts the violent deaths of Black men, women, and children; the impulses, consequences, and ethics that accompany acts of digitally raising the dead; the digital engagements that constitute culturally significant acts of ritual remembering and memorialization; the rights and desires of humans to be forgotten in a time when the internet is understood to be an expression of "forever"; and the unique ways that Black cultures have fought against the silence and erasure of oblivion.[7] Paying particular attention to the relationships between and among documentary practices around the violent deaths of Black Americans from slavery through the present, these pages also explore marked tensions and liminal spaces. I deepen my study of the spaces between memorialization and commodification and between digital permanence and historical oblivion, building and shaping my arguments from a deep exploration and examination of Black digital afterlives.

Arranged in three parts (Records, Resurrection, and Rights), this book first considers the question of records, asking how the archival record has been (re)animated in digital environments and what

the implications of this digital afterlife are for records that represent Black bodies specifically. Particular attention is paid to visual records and the emotional agency of images, especially where visual representations that conjure emotional trauma and hate are involved. In the second part I take up two digital resurrection case studies, challenging notions of the desirability of a digital afterlife and examining the role race—and to a lesser extent gender—plays in digital resurrection practices. The third part addresses rights, considering both the right to be forgotten and the right to be remembered, teasing out arguments for and against each and searching for a balance between the two that allows Black life to be honored and celebrated—while also being respected and valued.[8] Finally, the book concludes with a celebration of Black memory work, honoring the Black funerary tradition known as *homegoing*.

Challenging both the implied simplicity of digitization and problematizing how records created during the era of chattel slavery in the United States have moved to online environments, chapter 1 explores the digital afterlives of the archives of Atlantic slavery. This chapter speaks to slavery's afterlife and how it is documented in the historical archival record. I argue that the digitization of slavery-era archives deeply complicates present-day experiences of historical Black trauma. Because the affordances of digital technologies allow us to elide the temporal gap between the violence of past and the visual (and visceral) experience of the present, records created during the era of expansive colonial power and chattel slavery circulate and appear in different contexts. This simultaneously decontextualizes and removes the immediacy of trauma and gives archives of trauma new afterlife. Whether the environment is analog or digital, archives as sites of racialized exploitation and capital accumulation are both ongoing and mutually reinforcing. Complicating the lens through which we view these records, the chapter also addresses legacies of commodification and other economies of Atlantic slavery's enduring afterlife. Deep engagement with the records created during this era allows us to examine how our uses and understandings