



IJIDI: Book Review

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In *Resurrecting the Black Body: Race and the Digital Afterlife*, Dr. Tonia Sutherland, PhD, calls attention to the commodification of Black people and their digital representations after death. As a counterpoint, Dr. Sutherland considers how through Black memory work practices, archivists, librarians, scholars, and cultural heritage researchers can memorialize and reclaim the humanity of Black people in the historical record. Sutherland, an associate professor of archival studies at the University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA), identifies as a Black feminist archival scholar. This book is the culmination of her previous research in Black digital culture and reparative archival practices. *Resurrecting the Black Body* engages with critical race theory, performance studies, archival studies, and digital cultural studies to examine Black representation in mass culture from the 19th century through the present day. In case studies on different information formats, including photographs, social media, DNA sequencing, and concert holograms, Sutherland interrogates traditional archival practices and seamlessly connects them with newer concepts like the right to be forgotten and data sovereignty.

Resurrecting the Black Body is organized into three sections, with the first section focusing on the impacts of historical visual records of the Black body from the Transatlantic Slave Trade to lynching postcards to the video of George Floyd's murder in 2020. In chapter one, Sutherland examines the harmful impact of digitizing historical photographs without regard for the legacies of enslaved people and their families. She reveals how when historical photographs are digitized, the images are given a new life on the internet, creating an added barrier of engagement that further removes human sensitivity and empathy from the violence and trauma of the past. In the case of the 1850 daguerreotypes of Renty Taylor and his daughter Delia, not only do their living descendants lack agency in how the digital surrogates appear online, but also in how the daguerreotypes are used. Case in point, Sutherland reports that Harvard University continues to possess, restrict access to, and profit from their use. Additionally, the author calls attention to the trend of mass digitizing historical records as a means for data mining and analysis, where harmful archival description is reproduced in databases rather than repaired. Chapter two focuses on the spectacle and exploitation of Black death on social media. Sutherland contextualizes this issue via the legacy of lynching photograph postcards and their profitable distribution. While the video of George Floyd's 2020 murder serves as a record of anti-Black



police violence, Sutherland posits that it is also a commodity for tech and social media companies that profit from advertising, as well as for brands that took advantage of the racial reckoning in their marketing.

Section two covers digital resurrection practices. In chapter three, Sutherland tells the story of Henrietta Lacks, whose cells were taken without her consent before she died from cervical cancer in 1951. Her cell line, called HeLa, was used by researchers and sold by a biotech company unbeknownst to her family for decades. Furthermore, Mrs. Lacks' genome and medical records were openly published. Sutherland frames Lacks' immortal cell line as an embodied record, and in discussing researcher fears around HeLa contaminating other cell repositories, she draws a connection to misogynoir and the one-drop rule. Chapter four critiques the 2012 Coachella concert that featured Tupac's posthumous hologram. Sutherland explains how the hologram evokes the performative nature of slave auctions, and because the dead cannot opt into having their likeness used, she describes this resurrection as digital incarceration.

The last section is on data rights, with chapter five exploring the concept of the right to be forgotten. Rather than focusing on the implementation of data privacy legislation, Sutherland attests that data privacy is not afforded to Black people. She delves into technologies that perform Blackness, à la digital blackface, with examples that include: 1) virtual Instagram model Shudu Gram, 2) AI chatbots that mimic the deceased, and 3) deepfake videos. Sutherland calls for Black data sovereignty, a concept familiar to Indigenous communities yet lacking attention in the archives profession. She also suggests that Black liberation encourages the practice of critical refusal in response to open access as a default. Sutherland does acknowledge there is a tension between the right to be forgotten and memorialization. Subsequently, chapter six is on the right to be remembered, where Sutherland situates the Dunham Technique, created by dancer and choreographer Katharine Dunham, as a Black memory technology and embodied way of knowing. Dunham is also relevant in that she donated her papers to the Library of Congress, and her recordings of sacred ritual dances were made open access without her permission. Sutherland emphasizes that institutions need to consult Black communities and identify appropriate access levels, as some have done for Indigenous materials.

Resurrecting the Black Body is a significant contribution to information science discourse that critically re-examines archival practices like mass digitization and custodianship, particularly in an age where an unprecedented volume of user-generated content and personal data is shared and commodified on digital platforms. While the book investigates current technologies, its takeaways for cultural heritage workers and consumers of digital culture are profoundly impactful. Sutherland advocates for practicing memory work with care and preserving records that not only document anti-Black injustice but also center and celebrate Black life. Although the book's focus is on the digital afterlife, with today's widespread adoption of generative AI tools, many of Sutherland's concerns around self-determination and digital representations easily extend to the living.

One drawback of the book I found, as a practitioner working with born-digital materials, was Sutherland's overemphasis on the permanence of images and data that circulate online. This argument illustrates how images can repeatedly serve as sources of trauma and re-instill anti-Black racism. However, there may be hope in recognizing the ephemeral quality of internet content. Most websites and social media posts do not persist over time (Chapekis et al., 2024), leading to link rot. Additionally, the landscape of social media platforms is ever-changing. These trends have posed a technical challenge to web archiving. While some images will endure longer

than others, especially when crawled and re-used, there is certainty that some online content has an ephemeral lifespan.

Resurrecting the Black Body is about Black embodiment and representation; it is essential reading for anyone working with digitized and born-digital collections that document historically oppressed populations. Sutherland's book is also relevant to scholars and students researching, for example, library and information science, digital media, visual culture, ethnic studies, and public history. *Resurrecting the Black Body* is a stellar scholarly contribution that should catalyze improvements in archival practices and inspire further research on repairing and uplifting the embodiment of digital legacy.

References

Chapekis, A., Bestvater, S., Remy, E., & Rivero, G. (2024, May 17). *When online content disappears*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/data-labs/2024/05/17/when-online-content-disappears>

Shelly Black (syblack@ncsu.edu) (she/her) is a Japanese Mexican American archivist. She is currently the Digital Archivist at North Carolina State University Libraries (USA), where she manages the processing of born-digital collections. Ms. Black is interested in examining biases embedded in technologies and improving the representation of historically excluded communities through the use of ethical tools and systems. Shelly was co-chair of the Society of American Archivists' Archives of Color Section Steering Committee (2021-2023) and, in 2023, was elected to the Executive Council of the BitCurator Consortium (<https://bitcuratorconsortium.org/>). Shelly Black holds a BFA in photography and an MLIS from the University of Arizona, where she was a Knowledge River Scholar.