

Flowing Forms Pt. 1: Real Bodies

Maya Iverson, University of California, Santa Cruz

I remember the first time I watched a documentary from the 1960s about the Civil Rights Movement in graduate school. It was during my first year, and I was writing a paper for an introductory History of Visual Arts and Culture seminar. That experience changed the trajectory of my graduate career. As I sat watching the black and white footage of a civil rights activist describing the movement to the television audience, I realized that he could very well be talking to me. The space between 1960s America and the year 2012 was obliterated by how present his narration seemed. All I remember thinking was “I see you. I hear you. But, what does watching this mean when I know black Americans are still fighting against racial and social injustice?”

The paper I wrote lacked the language needed to properly analyze that moment, and I realize now it was because I didn't have a way to think about television and blackness in relation to archives and bodies. 6 years later, I now understand what made that moment so intense was the realization that I was watching black people attempt to overwrite the cultural markings that relegate their ideas about their own bodies to the margins of society. Their refusal to conform to social norms dictated by whiteness enabled television, newspapers, photographs, and other forms of media the ability to broadcast new ways of understanding where and how black bodies could exist across America's media landscape.

What made me pause then, and what makes me pause now, is that I can still engage with black media histories and know that black bodies are still “in formation”. What I mean by this is that we are still struggling to overwrite and annotate how our bodies are marked by the condition of social death that made our enslavement possible, the Jim Crow laws that said we were separate and unequal, the white progressivism that refuses to help us dismantle a power structure that upholds white privilege, and an All Lives Matter movement that would rather blame people who look like me for our own deaths than criticize a social structure that cannot sustain human life.

Nearly 400 years of racial and social oppression is not going to be undone in a few decades. Therefore, we understand that the process of annotating or overwriting the symbolism carried by our bodies is a multigenerational process that is going to take time. One of the ways black people have resisted these narratives is by producing media works. Novels, television shows, documentaries, films, paintings, sculptures (and so on) that rework what the black body does, and can mean, in social spaces. The power behind these works is their insistence that until white supremacy is replaced with a system that

knows how to let black people be free, our bodies will always be works in progress.

For this reason, when I think about archives, television, and the black body, I don't just think about collecting and archiving black representations. I consider how media archives allow us to critique and engage with the ways black people have sought to create meaning around our bodies that signal our right to claim space, peace, and life within America's social imagination. I think about how what media we collect will become the basis of how we discuss black life and the formation of black bodies in the future. And finally, I wonder if we are creating systems of care, access, and engagement that recognizes we are not just preserving or keeping images, but that our archival and collections spaces are holding remnants of black people's struggle for autonomy.