The Ephemeral Archive

Unstable Terrain in Times and Sites of Discord

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We must become undisciplined. The work we do now requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives.

—Christina Sharpe, In the Wake

In “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” Pierre Nora writes, “Modern memory is above all, archival. It relies on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image.” Memory, then, is ephemeral, dependent on a relationship to the tangible, the immediate, and the visible in order to be recognized, understood, and have meaning. Yet history is never really lost because these traces allude to the ways in which we might reconstruct history—through material objects that leave a “tangible, touchable inheritance for those seeking to understand the past.” In thinking through notions of the transience of modern memory and the ways in which we come to collect fragments that might help reclaim lost stories, I want to consider how digital creations by those in the Black diaspora in social media spaces—such as YouTube, SoundCloud, and Vimeo, primarily in the form of video and audio recordings and mash-ups—invite us to engage with the ways in which such works might allow us to enact “strategies of remembrance” and direct our attention to the ways that they are evidence of processes of “rememory” through which we reconstruct a route to a kind of historical truth. And as Elizabeth Alexander reminds us, these moments of recovery and rememory are also about love, Black love, as we attempt to tell the story of Black lives lost in order to reclaim Black life.

The search to reconstruct memory is also the search to reconstruct our histories: it is a “compulsion to narrativize [an] individual history and its collective context” as a means of avoiding a kind of amnesia. This avoidance of amnesia is
important, because, as Paul Gilroy contends, “residual traces” of Black expression, born out of the Black Atlantic experiences of racial terror, “still contribute to historical memories inscribed and incorporated into the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation.” Yet Gilroy’s framing of Black diasporic experiences through the notion of enslavement and terror serves as a kind of limit to thinking more broadly about the diaspora. Thus, memory—and the reconstruction of memory from multiple perspectives—becomes central not only as a means of remembering (past) and narrativizing (present) but also as a way to embark on the creation of Black futures. Importantly, it can help forge connections among Black diasporic groups.

For those in the African diaspora, creative engagement with the digital is not simply about using social media tools and resources. At its core, it is also about what Kim Gallon calls a “technology of recovery,” a set of practices by which Black people “bring forth the full humanity of marginalized peoples” into the digital realm. These digital creations invite us to consider the ways that their existence, even in the form of the trace, carries with it a set of ideas about Blackness and humanity. These practices and strategies, I contend, are not about reclaiming a lost Black humanity, because that was never lost; instead it was refused or unrecognized. These strategies are about reclaiming histories, revealing gaps and erasures in broader historical narratives. Yet, paradoxically, this chapter is in part about loss: how it instantiates memory and creates a way of reclaiming Black histories.

Digital creations as sites of memory force us to reckon with their transience. Collectively, they comprise what I call an ephemeral archive. This ephemeral archive, forged at the intersection of the “archival turn” and the “digital turn,” invites its own questions: about the relationship between Blackness and the digital, and between the desire for recognition and the reality of loss, and how we might “recover” that which has been lost through an engagement with that loss. I think of this as a kind of materialization of possibility, arriving at it via Tina Campt’s grammar of futurity, in that the idea of “that which will have had to happen” asks us to enact the future in the present. This is an active construction that looks to the ephemeral as a way of recognizing the imagined and the worked-toward in the now. A speculative vision and a refusal of temporal fixity are required to take what is the past, make it material in the present, and merge it with the future-now. Campt’s grammar of futurity helps us work through the ephemerality of the digital archive, framing it as an imperative, a “performance of a future that has not yet happened but must.”

This chapter, then, is less concerned with the continuing debates about the definitional boundaries of digital humanities and is more interested in how we might think about “what has already been done” in the context of loss and futurity: what has been made lost through misrecognition and refusal, which come about through narrow definitional boundaries (to riff on Gertrude Stein, what if the there has always been there?). Early works such as the Debates in the Digital Humanities series, Digital Humanities (Burdick, Drucker, et al.), The Emergence of the Digital Humanities (Jones), among several others, pointed to the evolution and to some central debates
in this new field of digital humanities. But as scholars of color have noted, the “central debates” were rarely inclusive and tended to ignore or exclude other voices. Recent nondigital humanities work, such as Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus* (2014), Tina Campt’s *Listening to Images* (2016), and Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* (2016), have opened up spaces for approaches to larger critical questions around Blackness, visuality, and the human that help knit together multidisciplinary and multigenre categories for analysis (textual, digital, visual, metatextual, performance, archival). In turn, these discourses extend the investigation of Black identity formation, as articulated by Paul Gilroy’s seminal work, *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Brent Hayes Edward’s *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003), and Michelle Wright’s *Becoming Black* (2004). Roopika Risam’s writing on global digital humanities from the perspective of Black feminism provides an important vision of what engaging intersectionality and difference as modes of theorizing offers to digital humanities both discursively and practically. In being attuned to the local contexts and specificities, Risam notes, we will begin to understand what digital humanities “looks like at the global scale.”

What I explore and propose in the case study in this chapter is a focus on granularity, an attention to specificities that imagines digital Blackness and Black digitality as the *there* that has managed to avoid the “willful erasures” of Black people’s creative expressions. I see digital Blackness as enactments of Black identity in the digital sphere, whereas Black digitality signals the processes and modes of interactions and constructions that create new contexts for Black identity formation. What I mean is that both are active sites of construction, engagement, and expression that have always existed and are always in process. In the case study I explore as well the tensions that arise as we attempt to make meaning from the ephemeral and lost.

**The Materiality of Memory**

The ideas of digital Blackness and Black digitality allow us to consider the role of the ephemeral and the ways such objects create spaces for us to consider the notion of the fixity of Blackness. Further, the ephemeral pushes us to move beyond an either/or proposition. Instead, we might consider the ways that digital Blackness and Black digitality are coconstitutive. In *Writing outside the Nation*, Azade Seyhan notes that memory “dwell at the crossroads of the past and present”; it is an act of “construction and reconstruction” that can “reveal as well as conceal.” Conceptualizing memory as both an intersection and an interdiction, Seyhan points to the ways that it demarcates boundaries and prevents access to the past, even as it directs us to the narrow possibilities that exist within the spaces of past and present. (A similar notion is at play in discussion of the video mash-up I examine later in the case study.) Within those spaces is the potential of enacting Black subjectivities, of refiguring the relationship to nation, and of articulating new forms of diasporic identities and relationships. But these possibilities, in Seyhan’s conception of memory, are limited to past/present, remembered/forgotten, public/private binaries that seem to
foreclose the possibility of futurity, presenting a kind of temporospatial constraint that marks the ways we frequently think of both digital ephemera and Blackness—as limited, rather than iterative, itinerant, and capacious. One could, in fact, argue that such constraints that are placed on memory through a binary understanding work similarly in the way that Blackness is frequently constructed as monolithic and constrained. Yet, there is an implied (Black) world that might be brought into being through our efforts at (re)construction using digital materials, whether mash-ups, original creations, or creative re-compositions.16

In the digital realm, our ability to construct and to re-member is made difficult by the objects themselves—by both their proliferation and their fragility. Barbara Craig asserts in her work on appraisal of archival material, “Records are part of our emotional life, our personal psychology, and our life with others as citizens.”17 Archival materials are important in that they function as “material memories,”18 the things that make tangible the lived experience of those individuals, groups, and events whose histories are seldom recorded. Craig’s notion of the archive as a site that reveals individual interiority and makes visible our relationship to a group and community makes an important point: these objects, themselves ephemeral as they move through and occupy multiple locales on the internet, nevertheless have the ability to make memories matter (or make material of memory) and thus make meaning of and in our lives. They engender possibilities for (re)constructing the material—that is Black diasporic histories—such that what has been made lost or what has been misrecognized as not mattering—Black lives, Black memories, Black histories—has the possibility for a future-now.

The relationship between Pierre Nora’s notion of memory as archival and the idea of the archive as a means of forging connections and individual identity allows us to consider how the omnipresence of particular video recordings, as well as their mutability and fragility, might suggest a way to understand their value in re/constructing diasporic histories and constructing Black subjectivities beyond (the racial) and within (the digital) the binaries. In our current moment, in which we find ourselves faced with the always available, the multiple, and the multiplicable, the loss of a digital object (video or audio) highlights the unstable terrain that is the digital space on which we attempt to create narratives, reconstruct histories, build archives, imagine, and create futures. Digital creations (such as videos, music, mash-ups, comedy sketches, beauty vlogs, commentary, performances, and so on), initially understood as temporally restricted—that is, fixed in their digital forms and located within singular digital spaces—can help us construct alternative histories and record different stories. As we know, they are not fixed but are rather mutable—highly mobile and capable of engendering many and varied meanings—depending on their spatial and discursive contexts. In other words, what a video creation looks like, sounds like, and reveals varies greatly depending on where it is located (YouTube, for example) and how it has been taken up by site users (comments, thumbs up or down vote, multiple visits, sharing, etc.), because users, too,
The Ephemeral Archive

are “active agents” in creating value and meaning. The iterative nature of such creations also means that, at any moment, what a particular video articulates and means is dependent on multiple factors largely beyond the creator’s control. So how do we develop research questions and practices around ephemera? What questions do we hope to answer, or what possibilities might be made material through an engagement with the ephemeral archive?

By their nature, ephemera are temporary: here today, gone tomorrow. I mean this not in the sense of total disappearance but rather in the ways that multiple iterations, edited and shortened versions, mash-ups, and copyright and take-down notices mean that such creations do not and, indeed, cannot exist in a “pure” form. Thus, the histories that those in the diaspora construct from ephemera are based on fragments (among them memories and metadata) and blank spaces that must then be brought together and filled in as best as possible to tell a story/stories of Black lives. These fragments and blank spaces reveal loss, yes; yet they leave traces of their existence in several forms, which allows for the work of recovery to take place. In the following case study, I consider what happens when the ephemeral comes to represent the material—and what happens when something that one perceives as tangible and lasting is lost.

Case Study: Digital Dispossessions

So, what happens to a digital object disappeared? What might we gain by considering digital materials created by those in the African diaspora as archives of knowledge—and what does it mean that these archival materials are themselves ephemeral, subject to the vagaries of ownership, copyright, access, and resources? What methods might we employ as models of curation, preservation, and interpretation of such archives? These are some of the questions I wrestle with as I navigate the digital sphere to cull video and sound performances in my attempt to make meaning of these materials and their relationship to discourses on race, performance, and nation.

I want to turn to an episode that highlights my idea about how digital recordings and the ways we conceive of them as material memory might get us somewhere (the future-now), as well as answer some of the questions I just posed. In 2013, I began gathering and curating videos from YouTube for my Omeka project, “Singing the Nation into Being: Anthems and the Politics of Performance,” as part of a research project that I began the year before. The site is a collection of video and audio performances of James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” with a particular focus on Black women’s singing. During my research, I encountered a remarkable recording: a mash-up that featured a brief excerpt from an interview with African American opera singer Leontyne Price that then segued into an audio performance, a soaring rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” also known as the “Black National Anthem.” The video featured a static image of Price’s album cover,
Sonya Donaldson

The Essential Leontyne Price: Spirituals, Hymns & Sacred Song, from which the performance of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is taken. There was no video recorded of Price—only of the album art, the interview, and her singing. On the user-created YouTube video (and here, unfortunately, I am forced to write from my own site of ephemerality, my memory), Price was passionate; one can hear notes of anger in her voice as she speaks about racial barriers that African Americans faced in the arts. It was this combination of an impassioned Price arguing that one’s race “has and should have absolutely nothing to do with ability” (my rememory), alongside a song that articulated the difficult struggle for Black freedom and the cautious hope for Black Americans and their claim to the nation, that struck me as remarkable in its juxtaposition of sonically and temporally distinct ephemera. In the interview with Price, one hears not just passion but also a carefully articulated rage. A typically eloquent woman who considers her words judiciously and speaks with clarity and precision of language, Price nearly sputters in this recording. Her voice rises and rises, and just before the anticipated crescendo of rage, the music begins. To my mind, this was a carefully crafted mash-up, which relied not on video performance but on speech and music (the voice without a body for us to read). This was Price’s and the mash-up creator’s “spirited dissent and dissonance,” a necessary commentary, it seemed to me, in that Obama-era moment.

This mash-up, what I consider both material memory and evidence of an archaeological endeavor in the way of Toni Morrison’s project of rememory, allowed me to “journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply.” In other words, this YouTube user’s creative juxtaposition of speech and song allowed me to construct a narrative, to reconsider Price as performer, and to contend with her as a distant voice made present and real that was articulating a passionate demand for the recognition of Black creativity. The video’s creator (an African American man) had traveled to two distinct temporalities to affix speech to sonic articulation. He had created a new text, one that relied on the reconstitution of fragments into an artistic and political whole: Price’s art and her voice combined with this creator’s political sensibilities to create a context by which we might conceive of the artist’s work as explicitly political. Over the course of several months, I played the song repeatedly from the YouTube playlist that I had created for my collection. One day, however, I returned to the site and discovered a black screen and a note that the video had been removed. This tangible object, a construction of Black memory made material, had been removed, presumably for copyright infringement.

So, what happens to a digital object disappeared? Does it linger in the crevices of the internet, waiting to be scraped, grabbed, and re-membered? Does it leave only faint traces of its existence, twisted skeins of thread to be untangled? Or is it forever gone? “On the basis of some information and a little bit of guess work,” I embarked on a project of reconstruction, seeking to rebuild history from a
Over the next several months, I listened to numerous interviews and snippets of interviews with Price that I found online in other locations. (Through various means, I had determined that the excerpt used on the mash-up was from an interview.) I tracked down the original poster and sent him messages, which went unanswered. Of course, I knew the interview and the song were not gone, that they existed in their whole and separate forms somewhere. I also knew that resources such as the Internet Archive might allow me to access the missing content. But, significant to my project, it would not be the same work. It would be another iteration, absent the contextualization of its locale, the corporate space that is YouTube. Another fragment, another memory. This loss made me keenly aware of the location in which I had “found” my material memory and the tenuousness of such spaces for Black digital creations. But this was not simply a matter of an object disappeared. What it articulated was not only Price’s political dissent but also that of the original poster, who had crafted the mash-up and uploaded it to YouTube.

The video’s content, along with other similar creations, invites us to consider the ways that discourses that surround notions of “artistry” and “merit” operate as another set of codes that locate African Americans outside the context of nation/national memory. The mash-up placed Price in a context of Black protest and presented her as an active creative and critical agent by aligning her speech act with her singing of the “Black National Anthem.” Its location, YouTube, allowed for Price’s assertion of Black excellence, alongside a critique of erasure through dehumanization and deliberate misrecognition, to be spread more broadly—to incorporate agreement and critique—and to make visible/audible such discourses. The mash-up also served as a tangible manifestation of James Weldon Johnson’s desire for “Lift Every Voice and Sing” to enact a “diasporic imperative,” to articulate a broader notion of Black community, one that moves beyond the physical and discursive boundaries of nation. Yet, the mash-up had been removed. What is left of this object is a hole, a trace, and my imperfect memory of what I now believe had to have existed in this space. A visit to my YouTube playlist reveals other gaps as well—such as what happens, for example, when a creator adjusts the settings from public to private, instantiating loss in another way. These ephemeral objects create a tension within the archive as they exist but in a ghostly form, inaccessible to us (immaterial) yet visible and ever present. They (are) matter; they exist as a kind of promise. They haunt us because we know that they are still there, but we are locked out of that particular site of memory, left to contend with our own memories of it to forge meaning.

The recording of Price was so powerful to me and resonated so deeply with my developing project that it became, in fact, a defining moment for my digital humanities work and my book project (Irreconcilable Differences? Memory, History, and the Echoes of Diaspora). It reoriented me to the politics of the performances by Black women as they sang both “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The loss and my own attempt at recuperation alerted me to the ways in
which Black women, when called on to perform, infuse these performances with their own politics of refusal and rememory. The mash-up of Price's performance and interview made this visible to me in the moment that I needed it. It also made visible the ways in which such creative endeavors attune us to moments of refusal and the potential for recuperation of memory that exists in Black women's work, even when their politics are not immediately transparent—and even when the spaces in which they are located are or appear to be constrained. In other words, the YouTube video creator recognized the there in both Price's performance and her interview and used the digital tools and spaces at his disposal to assert a set of Black politics through the active reconstruction of Price's discourse of refusal. His creation in this social media space highlights both the vulnerability of such materials and the ways that we are offered the opportunity to think deeply about how we attend to the archive as we attempt to reconstruct our own histories. My own efforts of recuperation were initially frustrated, because I understood the YouTube video creator's work as an object fixed in space and time; yet, the video had in fact moved beyond spatial and temporal boundaries.

**The Challenge of the Ephemeral**

In my engagement with digital materials, I hope to better understand the ways that the concept of an ephemeral archive might be a useful focus for how we come to understand the construction of culture and identity in an increasingly globalized context. Yet, the loss of an ephemeral object, signaled by YouTube's “black screen” and other disappearances forced me to reckon with my own limited understanding of both archival practices and of the mutability of the digital. Further, despite my many years of experience as a technology journalist, during which I set up a small lab to test hardware and software and wrote about technological developments, I made several missteps. First, I assumed that the video, because of its very nature as a noncommercial creation, made it immune to removal. I did not realize that the politics of the mash-up also made it vulnerable, because it aligned a corporate entity’s “product” with a particular set of Black politics. It made the song political in ways that, perhaps, the “owners” (record labels, producers, and publishers) did not intend or even desire. Thus, the spaces in which digital material are housed also present a challenge to our ability to access those very objects that might help us construct narratives of refusal and resistance.

Second, who “owns” the ephemeral? By this, I mean, how do notions of copyright infringement, individual creativity, the artist's politics (implied and expressed), and YouTube's corporate model come to bear on the right or desire of this YouTube user—or anyone else—to create such compositions from archival materials? My assumption that this video would always be there in that particular form and my misreading of YouTube as a site of permanence and freedom made me susceptible to loss. These corporatized spaces provide the platform to create, augment, and
disseminate creative work and material memories. Yet digital creators are also vulnerable to terms of service rules, copyright laws, the Cloud, market conditions that affect corporate business decisions, expired domains, shifts in business models, failed companies (for example, the once-looming threat of the closing of SoundCloud), and a host of other restrictions and challenges that make palpable the vulnerability of such materials and the “danger” of the political work they undertake—because I view this, the mash-up, as an explicitly political act.

Third, I had not developed a practical method for collecting and organizing these materials, and this failure affected how I came to understand the significance of the video only after I had lost it. Its removal from the space, signified by a black hole, forced me to recognize that disappearance, loss, is not just about the missing object but also about how we construct narratives—perhaps our own identities—around such works. For when an object disappears, so do the attendant discourses; that is, the comments also disappear. My ability to understand these negotiations is further hampered not just by the missing object (the video mash-up) but also by the missing metadata (the comments, responses, measurements, up and down votes, and so on). Yet this loss, absence, missing piece/peace also comes to shape the work as well. How do we construct our histories in the wake of the ephemeral? What kinds of memories do we (can we) reconstruct?

For me, this process has been one of learning difficult lessons that required inhabiting the space of the undisciplined, as Christina Sharpe suggests in the epigraph, while at the same time disciplining my approach to an ephemeral archive. First, it required recognizing and contending with the temporalities of digital material created and stored in corporate sites while understanding that meaning-making in the context of the digital is a complicated process. Second, I recognized that I needed to learn and develop better archival practices in navigating the digital. Finally, the lessons of traditional archival work translate into the digital and require, I believe, a greater degree of vigilance and labor than we might at first assume. This means careful annotation, screenshotting, downloading, storage and backup, and, importantly, communicating with the source creators and developing responsible, ethical approaches to those practices of capturing (such as developing permissions protocols for using the creative works of others). These lessons learned form the basis of not just the “doing” of digital humanities but also thinking through the notion of the diasporic imperative: a demand that the cultural work become unbound from nation as a means of recovery of memory and the creation of meaningful diasporic connections through the medium of the ephemeral archive.

In my quest to do this work of “recovery” of an “original” artifact, I return to Nora’s view on the archival nature of memory, via Jerome McGann, who reminds us, “Like the concept of origin itself, original documents are fictions we practice in order to manage their losses and our limits.”25 To the extent that loss and recovery structure our orientation to Black digital humanities work, my efforts were, in many ways futile. For what I sought in the “lost” video mash-up, was already there, had
always been there, not in the sense of its archival materiality, which proved ephemeral, but in its traces.

Notes

8. Wright, Becoming Black, 134.
14. I am borrowing Nicholas Negroponte’s idea of digitality, which he used in Being Digital to describe how technologies create new texts, processes, and ways of interacting that have the ability to transform the ways in which we interact with each other (6–7). In Negroponte’s conception, boundaries of time, space, and objects shift not just because of technologies but also because of how we engage with them. This is turn creates new ways of conceiving of ourselves in relation to these processes of change. Further, as Anna Everett notes in Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace, African diasporic peoples have long engaged in the processes of digitality through “significant Black technomastery and new media activism,” despite the “overdetermined signifying power of the “digital divide” (149).
15. Seyhan, Writing outside the Nation, 31, 38.
22. R&B singer Sal Houdini’s mash-ups of songs by artists such as Rihanna, Beyonce, and Drake also fall into the category of creative re-compositions that perform a kind of recovery work. Many thanks to Tzarina Prater whose work on Houdini and other creative composers helped me think through this particular form.
Bibliography