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BLACK (BRITISH) IDENTITY AND ARCHIVAL RITUALS

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Extended Abstract

On April 9th, 2021, just before noon, multiple major news outlets reported the death of Prince Philip, husband to the British monarch Queen Elizabeth II, aged 99. I received the news via a notification from the BBC news app, immediately stopped working and switched over to what was then still called Twitter.

I was heading to participate in a Black (British) Twitter archival ritual (Ishmael *et al.*, 2020), a ritualised and playful performance of community that enacts and affirms community membership (Massanari, 2015). Here Black British subjects, descendants of colonial subjugation, could subvert imperial hierarchy – for a time – and revel in the abandonment of respectability (Bakhtin, 1984; Mackay, 2021) by celebrating the death of a living symbol of oppression. Within 24 hours much of the evidence of this ritual of disrespect was gone: profile pictures that had been temporarily changed had reverted to normal; tweets had been deleted; the event firmly ensconced in Black British Twitter history.

Active participation in the digital, living archive codifies membership in the Black British public as content is communally remembered, contributed to, and (re)interpreted (Hall, 2001). Shared references become play events, in ways that co-construct maps of meaning and multi-layered, transplatform, hypernarrative webs (Wagener, 2019) of context for participants. van de Bildt describes ‘collective memory’ as ‘the way in which groups construct versions of an imagined shared past and employ them to buttress self-understanding and legitimisation in an ever-changing present’ (2017, p. 133). In this case, collective memory is deployed as archival tool, as ephemeral discursive acts within the temporally bounded play ritual become part of a Black cultural memory that is stored, saved, and transmitted between wider audiences ‘so that they may crystallise into a collective experience, be readopted across different generations, and contribute to the construction of personal as well as shared identities’ (van de Bildt, 2017, p. 133).

The focus on the mundane and libidinal (Brock, 2020) in Black archival rituals run counter to institutional, political, and social media-based archives (Florini, 2014), *rupturing* established precedents and prevailing national discourses of identity. In this

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case, the state-sanctioned narrative of public grief in response to Prince Philip's death was (briefly) loudly inverted in a public display by the Black British counterpublic (Squires, 2002).

In this paper I interpret the archive flexibly, as more than a physical place holding records of (inter-)national importance; where the narrativizing of such records functions as a tool of state control over national narratives and histories. Instead, I outline the function of the archive as Black insurgent practice and an infrastructure of communal memory, expanding on what is made possible through 'active physical and metaphysical cultural expressions of the archive' (Ishmael *et al.*, 2020, p. 211). Through this lens, ritual events become 'active repositories for continued traditions of the Caribbean' (Ishmael *et al.*, 2020, p. 211). This interpretive flexibility of the Black archive speaks to Jenny Sharpe's writing on the 'immaterial archive', the 'expanded understanding of what constitutes "the archive" in a movement from official records as the primary source […] to embodied memory forms, oral histories, and digitization in the subsequent ones' (Sharpe, 2020, p. 6).

Afro-diasporic ontologies are closely related to archival practices, as the project of articulating what Blackness is, is contingent on shared representations and histories. In this way, Blackness **itself** is an archive, a project and collection of shared representations (Walcott, 2023). On Twitter, the Black British public distinguished our type of Blackness from other Black Twitter*s* through a ritual process of remixing cultural touchpoints and significant events (Massanari, 2015; Sobande, 2019). This served to demarcate us as a public that is *adaptively appositional*: at once *Black*, in the ontological sense of belonging to a global community of shared diasporic experience, and *British*, i.e. physically, temporally, and culturally located within a specific imperial history. I draw attention to the ways that users oscillate between participation in a global performance of Blackness that is heavily determined by Black American cultural hegemony, and drawing discursive boundaries around regional rituals of play, thereby spatially locating (Schwartz and Halegoua, 2015) Black British digital communities.

Effectively capturing these ephemeral antics in writing, thereby making a temporally bounded event legible to an external audience, is logistically and ethically fraught, a capture of discourse intended to be fugitive. This work opens ethical challenges – if Black ritual archival practice is intentionally ephemeral, through this mode of capture and preservation for an academic audience am I replicating the 'capture, reification and privileged access' endemic to the Western archive (Ishmael *et al.*, 2020, p. 211)? In an aim to minimise an extractive researcher-researched relationship, I use a mixed-methods approach that is in keeping with in-group cultural practices.

I consider the act of making visible my own activity as a refusal of separation between researcher and site. As a participant myself in the ritual, I used my own experience of the event as origin point for data capture; 'following the medium' by using native archival affordances of Twitter such as likes and bookmarks to collate tweets for analysis (Rogers, 2013). My praxis also includes a Black mode of participation in 'receipts culture' through use of screenshots as data capture, a method that is not reliant on the capricious nature of API access to social networking service data (Clark, 2020). I supplemented my own captured data with what I call 'group chat as method', a

methodological intervention that centres collective knowledge production, where fellow participants in archival rituals contributed their own screenshots to mine, and that uses dialogue to assess and validating knowledge claims and reach group consensus of pivotal moments in the ritual. In themselves, these methods constitute a *rupture,* as insurgent practices that unsettle academic standards of what constitutes 'rigor' in data collection; that circumvents institutionalised access to APIs; and privileges the perspectives of the community under study in knowledge construction.

I follow this with my data analytical approach, which includes critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock, 2012, 2018, 2020) and Black feminist epistemology as a critical lens. CTDA allows for evaluation of Twitter's affordances as the container of discourse, the artifacts (tweets, memes, temporarily changed profile pictures and disrespectful mimicry/mockery of white Britons) themselves and the (counter-institutional, decolonial) beliefs that power their usage. This method demands familiarity with the contexts at play, with the research site, and either timeliness or access to others in the community who can narrativize the event if the researcher was not present. This work opens ethical considerations – if Black ritual archival practice is intentionally ephemeral, through this mode of capture and preservation for an academic audience am I replicating the 'capture, reification and privileged access' endemic to the Western archive (Ishmael *et al.*, 2020, p. 211)?

The creation, privileged access and maintenance of these digital archives is the provenance of an ever-decreasing number of white tech oligarchs. In this particular moment, where control of digital archives is so contingent on institutional power, this kind of counter-institutional archival practice is even more critical, a reminder that collective memory is not contingent on insecure platforms that we maintain and contribute to, but do not own (Walcott, 2024), but is in fact held in the memory, rituals, and embodied practices of the community's constituents.

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