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Review

Tonia Sutherland, Resurrecting the Black Body: Race and the Digital Afterlife

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Resurrecting the Black Body: Race and the Digital Afterlife. Tonia Sutherland. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023. 232 pp. 9780520383876

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In *Resurrecting the Black Body*, Tonia Sutherland investigates information systems designed within the frameworks of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy. Sutherland is an associate professor of information studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. In this book, she draws from critical race studies, Black feminist thought, and her lived experience as a Black American woman. This book is an important contribution to a growing body of literature that critically examines how oppression is perpetuated by information technologies, which includes *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* by Safiya Noble and *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* by Ruha Benjamin. *Resurrecting the Black Body* pays particular attention to the ways that Black people's bodies are digitally resurrected and used as records. The foundational questions that ground the text are: "What happens to the digital documentation and (re)presentation of Black people after they die, . . . who gets a say in how Black bodies are treated, and . . . who benefits from enduring practices around the 'Black Body' as digital archival record" (p. 5). Notions of the Black Body are a central theme in this book. Drawing from performance studies scholar Harvey Young, the "Black Body" is defined as the imagined ideas about Black people that mythologize Blackness. This myth is separate from the actual lived experiences of Black human beings. Sutherland's book traces the Black Body from enslavement to the present day.

Sutherland divides the book into a three-part exploration, with parts titled "Records," "Resurrection," and "Rights." In the first part, "Records," she

addresses the legacy of Atlantic slavery and racial commodification. Sutherland critiques the presence of the archives of Atlantic slavery and records of Black death and suffering in online environments, arguing that violence, ownership, and othering are reproduced through archival practices. Descriptive practices reproduce structures of power by organizing information in ways that prioritize the enslavers who created the records. Images of the enslaved, much like their bodies, are claimed and owned by powerful white institutions (p. 31). The afterlives of the enslaved are shaped by digitization, where records are removed from their historical contexts and face their own forms of remembrance. Images of Black death in our contemporary digital culture are made profitable and permanent as digital records. In our capitalist society, the body is the data – we are the product. Images of police shootings and racial attacks appear as spectacle on the Internet. Every post, share, comment, and view enhances the social media platforms' profits. The violence against Black bodies, then, becomes further ingrained in public consciousness. Sutherland argues that when Black death and suffering is recorded and reproduced digitally, we are not remembered for who we are but, instead, for what was done to us.

In the second part, "Resurrection," Sutherland raises issues with using technologies for "resurrection practices" (p. 88). Here, Sutherland offers two case studies: the use of Henrietta Lacks's body to produce HeLa cells for cancer research, and the use of a hologram to digitally resurrect Tupac at Coachella. In 1951, Lacks went to Johns Hopkins Hospital for treatment. She was diagnosed with malignant cervical carcinoma. Samples were taken from Lacks' body, without her knowledge or consent, to be used in research. Sutherland connects this to the control of Black women's bodies in slavery and the resulting generations of Black women who were "reduced to cogwheels in systems of reproduction" (p. 67). Lacks' body *became* data, and the information stored in her cells was used for the scientific purpose of cellular resurrection. The theme of resurrection is continued with an examination of the digital raising of Tupac in 2012. Tupac was reanimated through the use of digital technologies to produce a holographic posthumous performance. This renders the Black body as an object, a spectacle, and a commodity. Tupac is not given permission to rest in peace, but, rather, he is forced to live on to perform for the white gaze. Sutherland reminds us that the white imagination has built systems and hierarchies where "the white body is a site of reverence and desire while the Black body is, instead, a site of pleasure" (p. 101).

The book continues with the third part, "Rights," which juxtaposes the right to be forgotten with the right to be remembered. In the digital era, our social media, our texts, and our emails all become our "digital remains" (p. 114). Sutherland draws attention to our lack of agency over this data. She notes a tension between memorializing and forgetting. Sutherland explores a number of technologies that are built for digital immortality practices. She emphasizes how these complicate mourning rituals and our understanding of humanity. Digital afterlife technologies like Replika allow anyone to build digital versions of themselves. Powered by artificial intelligence, this technology represents a new way to commodify Black bodies. Users can digitally embody Black people and perform their ideas of Blackness. Sutherland calls for an intervention through "critical refusal" (p. 126). Rooted in Black radical tradition, the practice of refusal helps us to understand when we must stop designing, using, and training systems that can cause harm. Sutherland argues that refusal is central to Black digital and data sovereignty. Sutherland proposes the use of "memory technologies" (p. 130) as a corrective. In particular, she explains that *Black memory technologies* can create sacred spaces to hold Black memories and honour Black lives. Black memory technologies represent a departure from the white imagination. They refuse colonial ways of knowing and attend to Black humanity. The development of these technologies is Black memory work. As she elaborates, this is the work of Black archivists and cultural heritage workers: to heal, restore, honour, and care for Black lives and heritage. Sutherland connects the liberation of the Black body to Black memory work.

Resurrecting the Black Body is a powerful read that demonstrates the need to critically examine how information systems document, represent, and memorialize human beings in life and death. The issues so carefully considered in this text represent a continuation of colonial ways of doing. These technologies cannot be used ethically as they were not designed with ethics at their core. Information systems need to be built *with and for* communities who have been placed at the margins. As a society, we cannot remove ourselves from colonial systems and structures if we continue to build from *within*. Archives are complicit in these structures and the making of afterlives. Thinking alongside Sutherland, we must imagine anew using ways of thinking and knowing that are rooted in care and relationality. As archives grapple with information systems and move toward new models, it is important to question who and what is being centred. Traditionally, archives have centred objects. Information systems and

descriptive standards focus on ownership and control. As Sutherland indicates, using Black memory work as a reparative framework shifts the focus from the objects to the lives of the subjects. *Resurrecting the Black Body* is an urgent call to radically re-envision our information systems and recognize our mutual responsibility for archival care. We are living in the white colonial imagination. We need to free our imaginings to create a free society.