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Beyond the Corner Sto: Why sharing of Black images and Blackness matters

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Abstract

What is the value of an image? Do we know? Can we even guess? In black communities, to see a visual representation of themselves is important to the growth of black identity. For centuries our existence and our experience has been negated. In this text, I invite the reader/viewer to experience the importance of representation to black communities. By choosing to look at specific examples of how black culture has been shared in the last century, I will contextualize the importance of my installation, Server, as well as discuss how it continues to document black culture.
Beyond the Corner Sto: Why sharing of black images and Blackness matters

“I think what you’re trying to ask is why am I so insistent upon giving out to them that blackness, that black power, that black—pushing them to identify with black culture, I think that’s what you’re asking. I have no choice over it in the first place. To me we are the most beautiful creatures in the whole world—black people…. My job is to somehow make them curious enough, persuade them by hook or crook, to get more aware of themselves and where they came from and what they are into and what is already there, just to bring it out. This is what compels me to compel them, and I will do it by whatever means necessary.”

- Nina Simone 2018 Beyonce Netflix: Homecoming

No one ever told me that there were black artists when I was younger. The crowd at the corner sto thought that artists were painters only. When I started to learn about art in school, all I ever learned was about the “Masters,” who were either European or male, or both. I was eleven when I encountered my first artist of color: Faith Ringgold. My third-period art teacher in middle school referenced her briefly when discussing the importance of narrative in art. Tar Beach became my first introduction to why representation is important in art. I spent years combing through books looking for artists that looked like me. I wanted to find a piece of me in the artworks that I was encountering in school and at museums. It wasn’t until my last two years of high school that I started to see more of these artists in the media being acknowledged for their blackness and their talents. Even then the list was short: David Hammons, Kara Walker, Hank Willis Thomas, and Adrian Piper.

In Elvan Zabunyan’s 2004 book, Black Is A Color (A History of African American Art), the author concludes the book by acknowledging that the building of African-American contemporary art is an experimental process because it is difficult to synthesize the brief documented history of

1 Haynes, Suyin. “Beyoncé's 'Homecoming' Is a Celebration of Black History.” Time, Time, 17 Apr. 2019
Black visual arts. Documentation of black art was not seen as a necessity to preserve culture. When something has been neglected to be accurately documented for centuries, it leads to suffering amongst those who need it most. From Lauren Halsey to Kevin Beasley there have been many black contemporary artists who discuss how their blackness exists in the world today. (Fig. 1) Glenn Ligon and (William) Pope.L also choose to discuss systems of oppression that are looming over the black many communities. These artists are taking moments to show how oppression influences our culture daily. Calling attention to these injustices artistically becomes a way to dive into how the political can influence a growing cultural aesthetic.

Over the centuries, people who identify as black have been told how to act, what to look like, how to be viewed, how to be heard, as well as how to be policed...

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Countries, political institutions, media, academia, and art have ignored blackness, and if it is not ignored outright, then it has been constricted or regulated. In my practice I examine, dissect, question, and ask more of what has been portrayed of black identity. I then chose to write how I experience the role of blackness and black culture based on its own merits. The goal of my artwork is to educate the viewer, specifically white viewers about a culture that they do not choose to acknowledge. By using various mediums to explore the realms of social injustice and cultural awareness I create works that applaud black identity. As if in an unspoken act of solidarity with the whole African diaspora, I encourage growth and knowledge through activism. (Fig. 2) In challenging the “facts” that have been used to describe black culture, I attempt to dismantle that culturally-generalized depiction of what it means to be black, of what it means to be US.

Figure 2 Ciara Elle Bryant, Struggle Meal, Digital Archival Inkjet Print, 24” x 36” 2020

3 Kayne West - Feedback
The message with which I began to wrestle, started with the representation that is then carried into a world of acceptance. I focus specifically on the lack of truths that represent in the portrayal of blackness. Artwork that carries a lasting impact, uses moments to confront and educate it’s viewer. Think Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*—dense and layered with information. (Fig. 3) By putting the viewer directly in front of what is blackness that is otherwise overlooked, I create a dialogue between the unknown and the viewer. My creative process evolved from traditional making, as well as the impassiveness of simply documenting the black experience within the world of white culture. I choose to document with photography and mixed media pieces that reflect the culture that I belong to. I lend the lens to specific items and objects that identify blackness as things that we have been taught to use and normalize within black culture. The weight of those items being taught to us though are framed as things that we need to stand out from white society. By documenting objects, I am calling attention to the narrative that lives behind each object making a culture a commodity.

Throughout history, it has been difficult for the black community to find its footing in the world, media, academia, art, etcetera because of slavery … and the lingering effects of displacement of black bodies during the time of advancement of the Americas. However, there have been many efforts in the last few centuries to build cohesive black communities in which things can be discussed, debated, and shared amongst each other. If you ever find yourself venturing to a corner sto you will probably hear this running joke about the “black card,”, and no it is not the American Express titanium joint. Just think, an invisible card that holds the power of what is all black...No limit on the Black Card, uh… (Jay-Z). Urban Dictionary defines it as such: “An imaginary card that all black people are born with and that mixed people have to earn that is constantly under threat of being revoked if said black person does not act black enough or in proper black ways”  

These notions contribute to your blackness and what it means to be black. It becomes a secret code, a code in which allows us to acknowledge each other with trust, love and support. The idea of the card itself is not perfect in any sense, but it sheds light on something greater, a unified sense of togetherness in many black communities. It can range from knowledge of lyrics to a song, quotes from black leaders, the affection for President Obama, and to the proper way to wear Nikes (And for God’s Sake stop wearing dirty Air force 1’s— it's just fucking disrespectful). There is a notion that you must know these things to keep your black card and to uphold the culture. Black movies, black television shows, black stories, black magazines, black fashion, black music, all fold into the curriculum needed to keep your black card. The continued sharing of these relics, films, songs and images begin to shape mainstream black identity, as well as create a lineage for the future of black communities. They become even more important when you begin to consider the history and cultural importance of blackness, and how these cultural markers translate in today’s world. These

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4 Jay-Z and Kayne West - Who Got Stop Me

5 Urban Dictionary is a peer edited cite use to define “slang”
cultural markers are indicative of a long tradition of what is “Black AF” (Black As Fuck)
6 in the black community. Items that are Black AF have a stake in the role of identifying influence in today's culture. They have been studied, stolen, copied and then mass produced for consumption because of black influence.

While the black card can be seen as the Holy Grail of how black you are, the question, Are you black enough?, also arises. Are you black enough to wear your Jordan 1 retros with a suit? Or are you black enough to write the lyrics to an N.W.A. track in your academic thesis paper? (well duh)

“...Cause some don't agree with how I do this...” 7 Questioning the merit of blackness can be seen as problematic as well as a look at what internalized racism feels like, which stems from a long history of being pushed out from white society as well as hatred for oneself. This idea of a black card is a glimpse of something that was created to indicate a need for oneness. Not saying this is perfect, but the idea alludes to the yearning that black people have to feel united in a way with one another. The continued sharing of black culture is essential in the preservation of historical identifiers of blackness. Without these moments to discuss or even reference black culture, we broaden a gap for one to understand their culture as their own. Black culture, or its politically correct term of African-American culture, rarely exists or is defined in the context of history. In the continued sharing of black identifiers through film, music, and images, black history is written. It may be Deborah Willis writing another anthology or it may not look like a traditional history book with an editor at all. However, this collection of blackness, is a vast recording of black culture in how it has existed in media and mass popular culture. The black card gives members of the black community a chance to feel included in the telling and sharing of their history in some way.

Over the last few decades, the exponential growth in tech and media, created a place where the sharing of black images can flourish. This has given a new avenue for creating, sharing, and

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6 Urban Dictionary defines Black AF as “super black” a constant state of Blackness

7 N.W.A. - Express Yourself
writing about blackness and Black art. There have been countless books, articles, documentaries, and even TED talks, that look at what it means to have specific representations of black culture. Kenya Barris, Lena Waithe, and Issa Rae have flooded current streaming services with great black TV content that shows a range of representation of the black community. The role of the internet has been vital to the process of sharing black images. It has allowed for representation to unpack controlled narratives important to the progress of understanding cultural identity. Social media has been a pivotal tool that shaped immediate access to this information. “Black Twitter” and Tumblr have been very instrumental in keeping a community for all things black. Meredith Clark defines “Black Twitter” as “…a network of culturally connected communicators using the platform to draw attention to issues of concern to black communities. It’s the culture that we grew up with.” Twitter and Tumblr have redefined how people share, talk, and discuss thoughts about images and videos that are currently being produced in the world by any- and everybody. Twitter has become a place where the black community can have a constant exchange with others and is essential in building an ecosystem in the digital space where blackness can thrive. It has also

Figure 4 Ciara Elle Bryant, *Server Scroll*, Screenshot from film, 2020

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produced some of the biggest cultural memes that influenced new ways of creating. Tumblr is a Holy grail of information in the digital age; Threads can reach millions with just one infinity scroll. (Fig. 4) This provides digital representation of blackness that can live on the internet forever. Because “...nothing ever gets deleted from the internet.”

Creating in 2020 means that I have a constant abundance of information at my fingertips, access to almost anything. Over the last two decades I have accumulated relics of blackness and black culture in the virtual world as well as the real, in hopes of creating an encyclopedia of blackness that represents me. By doing this, I created what I wish I could have seen in the past, and I'm giving that moment to those who are looking for it now.

You walk through the threshold. Confused, overwhelmed. You are confronted. Many senses are bombarded all at once there’s no one thing to fixate on. The space begins to consume you within seconds of entering. You don’t know whether to look up or down, whether to listen or to watch. You look up and you see Sandra Bland, You look to the left and you see a meme from Twitter. Kendrick Lamar echoes through space.

“...Tell me somethin'
You motherfuckas can't tell me nothin'
I'd rather die than to listen to you
My DNA not for imitation …”

\[\text{Server}\] serves as a space where identity, culture, and self-actualization can occupy a current sliver of time, all at once and [Server] exists as an origin story that contains a visual bibliography to my art practice. [Server] is a mixed media installation that incorporates collage, photographs, audio, moving image, objects, and relics. (Fig. 5) When brought together, the installation becomes a life-sized view of this bibliography in a physical space and not hosted in the virtual realm.

\[\text{Reddit is a collection of forums, that discuss various topics via their users. The Forum specially referenced is “What Does the Saying That ‘Nothing Ever Gets Deleted on the Internet’ Mean?”}\]

\[\text{Kendrick Lamar - DNA.}\]
From objects to relics to images to audio to video, I have collected most of the materials throughout my lifetime, and they exist in my immediate surroundings. The process of gathering imagery starts from the inventory of data collection that I have been accumulating over the last twelve years via the internet. I have been saving most of these images from Pinterest, Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram. With these images, I created thirteen posters that are a tiny sample of the data I was collecting. The audio manifested itself from a YouTube visual playlist that I compiled over the last few years. The specific mixtapes were created through a collaboration with a local DJ; Starting from a visual playlist that encompassed over 400 YouTube videos, the audio reflected moments from political speeches to music videos shot by Hype Williams. The video playing on loop is a recording of scrolling through the last year of my Tumblr feed for twenty-six minutes. My Tumblr has become a host for short clips and .gifs that I have been mining over the last ten years.

Figure 5 Ciara Elle Bryant, *Server*, Installation view, 2020
All of the objects and relics found in Server comes from my personal archive of items. Server puts on display notebooks from my childhood as well as VHS tapes that I have cherished. (Fig. 6)

The photographic images that are carefully placed around the room are a combination of snapshots from my adolescence and imagery that has come from the inspiration of my digital archive of images. Each photograph in Server references directly to an image or an object placed in the space.
“Nothing without intention, do nothing without intention…” Server is a roadmap to understanding the vital influences in my practice. It shows how important it is for creators to have an abundance of cultural representation. Specific decisions were made about what I wanted to allow to happen in that space. Server, needed to just exist, and it needed to be a whole damn room. With the installation being a full room, I chose to stage myself, others, and objects in this space to inform the viewer of my visual bibliography.

In Malcolm X’s FAMOUS 1964 SPEECH, *Who taught you how to hate yourself*, He asks:

“...Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind? Who taught you to hate the race that you belong to so much so that you don’t want to be around each other? …”

Malcolm X specifically takes the time to mention passive psychological traits that shed light on how black people are conditioned to hate themselves. These words lend to internal hatred toward oneself that many black people have faced. The speech makes the correlation that black people hate themselves because many aren’t given respect in this world by others and even themselves. It’s hard to value yourself if you are conditioned to be unseen and negated for centuries. Without positive and accurate representation—in art, in media, in academia, in life—you are challenged to exist within spaces that negate your existence as a human.

Since the manifestation of Server, I have had countless moments with people that identify as black tell me they felt seen. Server gave them a moment to exist as they are, as they are known. From spiritual transcendence to healing, Server provided blackness to be felt by many in a space. I took that

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11 Solange - Nothing Without Intention (Interlude)

12 Malcolm X. “Who Taught You to Hate Yourself”
generalized depiction of what it means to be black, of what it means to be us and made into something that can last beyond the space it has been given. Zabunyan was not wrong when she discussed how complex the history of Black art is, but she was absolutely right in acknowledging that “... Black art is significant... A greater visibility brings at the same time a greater theoretical confidence.” Without it would the world ever know the importance of a DuRag? (Fig. 7)

Figure 7 Ciara Elle Bryant, *Waves*, Archival Inkjet print, 24”x 36”, 2019

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