

Archiving HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINA FRICAN?: Process Over Product

Curatorial Statement

Katherine Behar

The New Media Artspace presents *Archiving HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINA FRICAN?: Process Over Product*, an online exhibition that initiates a web-based digital archive of works by the collective HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINA FRICAN? (also known as the YAMS Collective). By emphasizing “process over product,” *Archiving HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINA FRICAN?* delves into the ongoing evolution of artworks in their collective making. The exhibition—which is being produced and conceived in a real-time collaboration with the New Media Artspace Student Docent Team and will evolve as the semester progresses—shows how both artworks and the archives they comprise are always negotiated in a constant flux of incompleteness and reinvention.

With 45 collaborators located around the world, HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINA FRICAN? makes work rife with emergent, cumulative process. This exhibition focuses on a single project, *Immortal Uterus* (2007–ongoing), a woven VHS tape installation by YAMS Collective member Jasmine Murrell. Indeed, the form of weaving itself evokes the braided and intertwined relationships that trace along all YAMS collaborations. *Archiving HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINA FRICAN?* documents how *Immortal Uterus* has evolved over the past decade, mapping its networks of collaborators and contributors, along with associated and kindred works that were created and exhibited in tandem. Having appeared in and alongside numerous works by HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINA FRICAN? and counting YAMS members among its many weavers, *Immortal Uterus* makes a fitting inception for a YAMS archive. Underscoring the significance of “process over product,” Murrell explains that the project is “immortal” because it is “never-ending.”

Murrell’s *Immortal Uterus* offers a microcosmic reflection on themes that resonate with the specificities of the YAMS Collective’s work, as well as the broader cultural moment of this initial instantiation of the YAMS archive in the autumn of 2020. In context, the world is now bracing against an ongoing global pandemic, which is disproportionately and lethally impacting people of color. Meanwhile, many in the United States are grappling with the intersectional atrocities of police violence against BIPOC communities, ongoing legacies of American slavery, and the white supremacist grip of racial capitalism. When set against this backdrop, Murrell’s installation seems to draw together such urgent matters, throwing them into relief through a historical framework of Black medicine.

The title *Immortal Uterus* references the “immortal cells” of Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman whose Black body was appropriated as medicine—with neither consent nor compensation. Lacks’ cervical cancer cells were harvested without her knowledge and developed into the HeLa cell line, the first so-called immortalized human cell line which continues to be widely used in contemporary medical research. Pointedly and in keeping with “process over product,” Murrell situates the installation as “paying homage to people, like slaves and like Lacks, who are invisible builders” but whose stories are left out of “master narratives [that promote] a white supremacist version of history.”

Chief among the master narratives Murrell condemns is the Hollywood mythology that portrays Blackness as a commodity: one that is caricatured alternately, either as grotesquely subhuman or else as a superhuman threat. Precisely this toxic Hollywood representation is recorded on the VHS tapes woven into *Immortal Uterus*. Murrell traces such Black caricatures to media propaganda events in history like the racist 1915 epic film *Birth of a Nation* (originally *The Clansman*) and the illegal overthrow of elected government in the 1898 Wilmington Insurrection. This little-known coup d’état in American history started when a white supremacist mob burned down a Black newspaper that published positive

representations of successful Blacks in government. Both events heavily influenced mass media imagery of Blacks. *Birth of a Nation* glorifies negative imagery, while the Wilmington Insurrection amounts to the inverse: the violent censorship of positive imagery. Recalling such histories, Murrell insists on understanding “toxic images” in broad terms, looking beyond the spectacle of Black death circulating in news media. She warns against a subtler toxicity found in narrative films like the VHS movies that are the raw material of *Immortal Uterus*. In her estimation, the latter are even more dangerous because they work psychologically, ensnaring our emotions and luring our intuitions.

Ultimately, this leads Murrell to refer to such films as “poison.” She describes finally resorting to wearing protective gloves during her prolonged intimate work with the toxic material of VHS tape. Yet the same process of weaving that exposed her to this poison also allowed her to alter the recording. By dismantling and disarming poisonous images, by getting her hands on the film, Murrell literally and figuratively imprinted a different vision. She explains this vision as including Black ancestors who are otherwise never written into history.

Returning to Henrietta Lacks avails a further interpretation of *Immortal Uterus*. Perhaps, as in Lacks’ story, Black people are already written into the archive. But if so, their presence in the archive is only material, that is to say without the imaginative, emotional fullness Murrell attributes to narrative, or what I might call the processual quality of human being-in-the-present. Certainly, this describes how Lacks is present in the HeLa cell line. Far from being written out, Lacks is ruthlessly written in. Indeed, the cruel utility of the cell line hinges on its universal applicability, which has nothing to do with the individual Henrietta Lacks. So Lacks enters the archive of HeLa not as a person but as a product, a universal material.

Seen from this angle, we may ask, might this archiving of Lacks pose a divergent media prehistory for Murrell’s work? Could Lacks represent a different kind of archival practice in which Blackness imprints itself despite (even through) the erasure of Blackness? Insofar as Lacks is Black medicine and materially so, this implies a mode of Black medicine (or Blackness as medicine, or Blackness as erasure as medicine) that we might take up against the ills of poisonous images. In this sense, *Immortal Uterus* is itself an alternative archive with a curious relation to time. Woven in and of and as medicine for the present, it augurs a time when Black people can exist as people—a time that’s not yet here.

In this way, *Archiving HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?* is no conventional archive. Although a typical archival approach might appear to be primarily concerned with the past, preservation of the past is also a technique to guarantee futurity. Specifically, archival preservation ensures a certain kind of future: one marked by continuity, not rupture. Even so, the real possibility of rupture—of a future that isn’t merely the inheritance of the past—motivates the archival impulse.

In contrast, *HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?* transforms archiving into a present practice: a process. For example, this exhibition has taken shape through a process involving many group discussions, calls, emails, and Zoom meetings. Remarkably, in their collective process *HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?* affirms everything so that all ideas are absorbed and nothing and no one is turned away. This means that with the inclusion of every contributor the project is restated. And so reinstated. In the present. This mode of insistent re-present-ing is how Murrell’s installation—a project that first began in 2007 and is in no way “about” current events in 2020—nevertheless feels ever so painfully now.

Consistent with this value of affirmative inclusivity, *Archiving HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?* envisions an archive as a living document shaped by contributors. The website design draws inspiration from marginalia, commentary, and annotation. This archive intentionally contravenes fixed histories and concrete artifacts, instead revealing how artworks surface out of layered relationships, mutual influences, and shared encounters.

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This exhibition is generously sponsored by the Sandra Kahn Wasserman Jewish Studies Center under the co-directorship of Professors Jessica Lang and Andrew Sloin.

The Wasserman Jewish Studies center is proud to co-sponsor the Yams Collective with Baruch's New Media Artspace. The HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN artistic collective transforms critical questions about the historical production of race into contemporary performative art that challenges aesthetically and politically. In posing questions about the relationship between capitalist modernity, medical science, and the construction of biologized ideas of race, the exhibit evokes fundamental questions about the origins and legacies of racial domination in modern America. As such, the exhibit resonates fully with the intellectual concerns, values, and ethical mission of the Wasserman Jewish Studies Center.

Archiving HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN: Process Over Product is curated by Katherine Behar, Associate Professor in the Fine and Performing Arts Department in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, CUNY. The exhibition is made possible further by support from the Baruch Computing and Technology Center (BCTC), the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, and the Newman Library. All images appear courtesy of the artists.

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Artists Bios

HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?

HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN? is a multidisciplinary collective of 45 African diasporic artists who have lived and worked together, in various iterations, for the past twenty years. The collective identifies as a primarily Black, mostly queer group that consists of visual artists, writers, poets, composers, academics, filmmakers and performers from around the world who collaborate across disciplines and cities. Projects conceived and created by the collective ultimately function as laboratories for investigation, production and discourse around race, embodiment, restorative justice, institutional apartheid, and global creative culture.

The collective's name, which spells out "How Do You Say Yam In African?", playfully acknowledges that there is no such language as "African" — and signifies the yam as a common root in African diasporic cuisines and cosmologies. Collective members embrace the multifaceted moniker because of its irony and symbolism.

HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN? gained critical recognition as a formal artist collective with their film debut of *Good Stock on the Dimension Floor: An Opera*, at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Their work has been presented in solo exhibitions including "Pot Liquor Medicine Women" (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago), "No Humans Involved," (Witte de With in Rotterdam, The Netherlands), and "Post-Speculation 1 & 2" (P! Gallery in New York and Jacob Lawrence Gallery and The New Foundation in Seattle); and numerous in group exhibitions, performances, and screenings at institutions including ICA Boston, UMMA (Ann Arbor), ICP (New York), Roulette (Brooklyn), Town Hall Seattle, Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, The New School, and the "Black Portraitures II" conference (Florence, Italy).

Jasmine Murrell

Jasmine Murrell is a New York-based, interdisciplinary visual artist who employs several different mediums to create sculptures, painting, photography, performance, installations, and films that blur the line between history and mythology. Her works have been exhibited nationally and internationally for the past decade, in venues such as the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Bronx Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Whitney Museum, African-American Museum of Art, and International Museum of Photography, and untraditional institutions. Works have been included in the book *MFON: Women Photographers of the African Diaspora* and in *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, *Hyperallergic*, *The Detroit Times*, and several other publications.