

Archiving HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?: Process Over Product
**Opens October 12 at New Media Artspace,
Baruch College, CUNY**



Photo: Sienna Shields, 2013.
Image courtesy of the artist.

NEW YORK, NY - October 12, 2020 – [The New Media Artspace](#) presents *Archiving HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?: Process Over Product*, an online exhibition that initiates a web-based digital archive of works by the collective HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN? (also known as the YAMS Collective). By emphasizing “process over product,” *Archiving HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?* 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 caught up in a constant flux of incompleteness and reinvention.

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With 45 collaborators located around the world, HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN? makes work rife with emergent, cumulative process. As the first link in an interlocking constellation, this exhibition focuses on a single project, *Immortal Uterus*, a woven VHS tape structure and installation by YAMS Collective member Jasmine Murrell. *Archiving HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?* 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 YAMINAFRICAN? 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.” Indeed, the form of weaving itself evokes the braided and intertwined relationships that trace along all YAMS collaborations.

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.

For instance, 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 is linked to mass media imagery of blacks; it started when a white supremacist mob burned down a black newspaper that published positive representations of successful blacks in government. Recalling this history, Murrell insists on understanding “toxic images” 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 films as “poison.” She describes 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.

However, 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 intuition or 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 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 reinstantiated. 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 “Yes And” 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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Artist Bio

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.

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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 generously sponsored by the Sandra Kahn Wasserman Jewish Studies Center under the directorship of Professor Jessica Lang. The exhibition is made possible 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.

Gallery Location: New Media Artspace at Baruch College, Library and Information Building, 151 E. 25th Street, New York, NY 10010

Gallery Hours: The New Media Artspace is open to the CUNY community during regular library hours. Members of the public may request access to the New Media Artspace at the security desk at the second floor entrance to the library. For this week's public hours, please check the gallery website: www.newmediartspace.info or dial a docent at 646-312-1664.

The New Media Artspace is a teaching exhibition space in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts at Baruch College, CUNY. Housed in the Newman Library, the New Media Artspace showcases curated experimental media and interdisciplinary artworks by international artists, students, alumni, and faculty.

About Baruch College:

[Baruch College](http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/) is a senior college in the [City University of New York \(CUNY\)](http://www.cuny.edu/) with a total enrollment of more than 17,000 students, who represent 160 countries and speak more than 100 languages. Ranked among the top 15% of U.S. colleges and the No. 4 public regional university, Baruch College is regularly recognized as among the most ethnically diverse colleges in the country. As a public institution with a tradition of academic excellence, Baruch College offers accessibility and opportunity for students from every corner of New York City and from around the world. For more about Baruch College, go to <http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/>.

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