Resurrecting the Black Body: Race and the Digital Afterlife

by Tonia Sutherland (2023) Oakland, University of California Press, 232 pp.

Syahirah Rasheed
Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies/KITLV

The "Black body" has long been seen as a monolith, with harmful stereotypes and mythologies being projected onto individual Black bodies. Examples of such harmful images are the "strong and/or angry Black woman" and the "violent, dangerous Black brute" (p. 4). Over centuries, both images have been weaponised in the service of structural racism. At the same time, these mythical images serve to commodify the Black body in the form of various visual and digital archival records, echoing the physical exploitation of enslaved Black people.

In *Resurrecting the Black Body: Race and the Digital Afterlife*, Tonia Sutherland, a scholar of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, examines the way that through digital afterlives, Black people's lives are extended, continuing the historical lack of agency, commodification, and exploitation during historical slavery. *Resurrecting the Black Body* offers a critical analysis of how understandings of death in the past impact understandings of death in the present, especially for marginalised populations.

Throughout *Resurrecting the Black Body*, Sutherland uses ideas from critical race theory, performance studies, archival studies, digital culture studies, and media studies, as well as theoretical and empirical research. She situates her work in digital culture studies, which makes it a worthy basis for future scholars of science and technology studies (STS), especially those looking to further explore the intersections of race, identity, and digital technologies. While Sutherland explains that this was "the best kind of coincidence" (p. 162), the title of *Resurrecting the Black Body* can be juxtaposed with Dorothy Robert's (1998) book titled *Killing the Black Body* in which Roberts scrutinises the systemic abuse of Black women's bodies, justified by negative images of their fertility.

Sutherland uses Harvey Young's (2010) discussion of how Western societal ideas about the Black body are projected onto human Black bodies, resulting in their dehumanisation, to highlight how negative stereotypes are reified and reproduced in various forms of digital technology. Using the work of dancer-anthropologist Katherine Dunham (1941), viewing her Dunham Technique as a form of Black memory technology, Sutherland makes a brilliant connection between archival records, digital culture, and embodied movement.

Discussed thematically (Records, Resurrection, Rights), the case studies in the six chapters jump across time and geographies, making a strong argument for the persistence and

TECNOSCIENZA. Italian Journal of Science & Technology Studies
16(2) pp. 159-162 ISSN 2038-3460
DOI: 10.60923/issn.2038-3460/23983

prevalence of White supremacy. In taking a race-critical look at visual archival records of Black bodies, Sutherland carefully brings to life several slavery-era photographs that capture Black trauma in the first chapter: Gordon, whose photograph has been archived in the form of a postcard titled "The Scourged Back"; the father and daughter Renty and Delia Taylor, and a crying Afro-Caribbean child written about by art historian Temi Odumosu.

The second chapter analyses the creation and circulation of the visual records of Black men murdered a century apart: Jesse Washington who was lynched in 1916, and Trayvon Martin and George Floyd who were killed in 2012 and 2020 respectively. These cases show how racial violence continues across generations. The digital space not only facilitates the dehumanisation of Black bodies, but tech companies also actively profit from the circulation of their graphic photos and videos. These case studies of relatively well-known figures certainly help readers connect theory with their everyday lives.

In exploring the ethical complexities of biomedical research, Sutherland's elaboration of the second theme of Resurrection in the third chapter provides extensive contextualisation to the life of Henrietta Lacks. Her cancerous cervical cells were sampled without her consent and were developed into the HeLa cell line and used in biomedical research. Some contradictions arise: the unrecompensed use of her cells, the unconsented existence of a biomedical afterlife, and the perception of her cells as both "universal human cells" and yet with potential for "contamination" and "malignancy" (p. 72). The widespread extent to which HeLa cells have been and continue to be used in biomedical research raises questions about biological life and death in medicine, which Sutherland deals with in a nuanced and sensitive way.

The fourth chapter analyses the digital resurrection of North American rapper and actor Tupac Shakur in the form of a holographic projection, for the profit and "satisfaction of the spectacular white gaze" (p. 88). This case study highlights the complexity inherent in digital resurrection technologies. While some may view these positively as a way to "extend life and liberate humanity" from death, Sutherland views it as a "carceral" (p. 98) technology, forcing the dead to perform for the pleasure of the living. The ambivalent responses around both the grief of Shakur's death and the joy from his artistic work emphasise that there is no clear "right" or "wrong" in such technologies; rather, their values reflect those of the living using them.

The fifth and sixth chapters explain the theme of Rights, particularly the right to be forgotten and/or remembered. In the fifth chapter, Sutherland argues that artificial intelligence technologies facilitate new ways of commodifying Black bodies. Taking a closer look at digital remains and digital afterlife technologies, Sutherland engages with the tension between memorialisation and data sovereignty (p. 108), especially where data brokers like social media companies and commercial search engines are involved. Engaging with Black liberation epistemology, Sutherland advocates for critical refusal as a form of resistance and disengagement from harmful data practices. An example of critical refusal is the decision to "stop collecting data that does not support the rights of communities to represent themselves" (p. 126) or disengage from social media platforms that exploit their data.

Alongside such refusal is the need for ways of remembrance. The sixth chapter uses the case study of dancer-anthropologist Katherine Dunham to make a brilliant, interdisciplinary argument for "reparative memory work" (p. 239) and the creation of corrective pedagogies.

This chapter exquisitely illustrates her interdisciplinary methodology. However, the posthumous scepticism of Dunham's decision to allow her work to be "open for research" or open access to "the same internet that wantonly circulates images of Black death for profit" (p. 144) leans rather heavily into pessimism. This undermines Sutherland's nuanced acknowledgment that while Western archives should consult "Black memory workers", the latter is not a monolith and there may very well be many situations where Black people will decide "different access", "different times, for different communities" (p. 145).

In the conclusion, Sutherland draws from Black mourning and deathcare practices to imagine Black memory work that can "honour Black people's right to be remembered" using technology in ways that "embrace care and are respectful of our dead" (p. 151). Recognising that this is a complex and collective work, one can imagine that a heterogenous Black community must struggle with the very human experiences of "love and care and pain" (p. 160), which can manifest in different ways depending on individual histories, practices, and emotional responses to loss. This struggle includes reconciling different perspectives on mourning and memory, as community members may differ on how they wish to honour their loved ones while also addressing the collective trauma of systemic racism.

For a book mentioning so many visual records, some readers may wonder why there are no images included of the subjects discussed, especially those unfamiliar with this topic and the various people mentioned therein. In fact, Sutherland begins the book by explaining her choice to not reproduce these contested images in the book to avoid the "ongoing commodification of Black people and their bodies" (p. *ix*) as these subjects can no longer provide consent to their visual reproduction – a thoughtful intervention and response. Furthermore, most of the visual records mentioned are in the public domain and easily accessible with a Google search.

In *Resurrecting the Black Body*, Sutherland gives a perspective of digital technology as perpetuating pre-existing racial discrimination and thus not only continuing but creating new ways of oppression and abuse against marginalised communities. Intentionally thinking alongside Black thinkers like Harvey Young, Katherine Dunham, Saidiya Hartman (2022), Christina Sharpe (2016) and Temi Odumosu (2020), Sutherland elevates marginalised voices of Black scholars and activists. However, this may unintentionally suggest that these scholars' voices are distinct from other critical perspectives in the field. Yet, they could be enriched by non-Black voices and case studies like for example, Michelle Caswell's (2014) work on archives as "liberatory memory work" in Cambodia, Katherine Hayles' (2012) exploration of the influence of digital media on cognition and culture, or most recently Yasmin Ibrahim's (2023) similar decolonial approach to digital technologies as both tools of surveillance and platforms for resistance. Nevertheless, this focus on Black discourses is a vital contribution for STS researchers to critically examine how technologies are deeply intertwined with social injustices and power dynamics.

The links between historical and contemporary examples is a major strength of the book, giving crucial context for the study of race-critical digital culture and helping readers make linkages between the past and the present state of discrimination. The book's greatest asset lies in Sutherland's use of distinct examples from different time periods, geographies, and disciplines, which challenge the notion of records as neutral and equitable, thereby making White racial hegemony impossible to overlook.

This book is particularly useful for an STS audience because its analysis lies at the intersection between technology with critical race theory, focusing on how digital systems are not merely technical tools but are also deeply embedded in power relations. By examining how data and racism shape each other, Sutherland provides STS researchers with insights into the ethical implications of technology in contemporary society, making it a vital resource for researchers interested in the social dimensions of science and technology. *Resurrecting the Black Body* sits among other books pioneering race-critical technology studies, such as Safiya Noble's (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression*, Ruha Benjamin's (2019) *Race after Technology*, and Yasmin Ibrahim's (2023) *Digital Racial*. Sutherland's use of the phrase "the right to be remembered" in juxtaposition to "the right to be forgotten" is a concise, useful way to think about the possibilities of life and remembrance in the fight against erasure.

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