

Black Archives: A Photographic Celebration of Black Life

By Renata Cherlise. Ten Speed Press/Penguin Random House, 2023.
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Black Archives: A Photographic Celebration of Black Life by Renata Cherlise is a stunning representation of the multidimensionality and fullness of Blackness. Through the sacred family photo album, Cherlise “explores familial archiving practices and how we experience kinship and recognize one another through a visual language of the Black experience” (p. 10). Although the author is not what some might consider a “professional” archivist, she is part of a long, rich Black tradition of personal archiving and memory keeping. Armed with a Nikon, her father was the family photographer who meticulously curated the family’s photo album, while her maternal grandmother used a Polaroid to record family events and memories. Archivist Dorothy Berry tells us that our parents, grandparents, church mothers, and “thousands of others” are Black archivists.¹ Like those who came before her, Cherlise feels “urgently compelled to take care of the stories—to preserve them, to hold on to them, and to give them back to the community” (p. 17).

Black Archives is an extension of the author’s previous work. Around 2011, Cherlise—a multidisciplinary visual artist and memory worker—began using Tumblr to liberate digitized materials related to the Black experience. Too often, these materials are inaccessible and undiscoverable, locked away in university library collections and disconnected from the diverse communities they document.² Black Archives, a multimedia platform, was born in 2015 from these transformational archival encounters.³ The book is the physical manifestation of this work. Between 2019 and 2021, Cherlise issued an open call for submissions, and hundreds of Black people from across the African diaspora contributed family photographs, making this independent project a “collective family album” (p. 10). The author also sourced images from her private collection and numerous institutional archives, libraries, and museums. After a lengthy process that involved printing each photograph and arranging them into common themes, Cherlise selected more than 300 images for this marvelous book.

The book is organized into three main parts: “The Foundation: Keeper of Stories”; “Interiors: Holding Space and Keeping Time”; and “Exteriors: To Be Witnessed.” Except for short introductory essays, the book is made up primarily of photographs that stretch across the twentieth century. In fact, the beautiful images throughout the book are a testament to the many ways ordinary Black people “have made a small path through the wake.”⁴ In the face of structural racism and gratuitous violence, African Americans “[hold] joy, love, and tenderness” (p. 90). For example, in a subtheme called “Moments of Rest and Leisure,” Black vacationers enjoy the waters of segregated Bay Shore Beach in Hampton, Virginia. Elsewhere

in the book, two lovers embrace, a mother helps her daughter get ready for prom, and the author and her family celebrate her fifteenth birthday. For Cherlise, these ordinary moments are exceptional and illustrate how Black people have shaped their historical narratives by keeping memories and stories. Additionally, these images complicate the ways in which Blackness is often preserved in archives.

Archivists and curators alike will undoubtedly find the lush pages of *Black Archives* refreshing for its celebration of everyday Black life and its assault against what Michelle Caswell describes as “symbolic annihilation.”⁵ Through her work, Cherlise has amassed a huge following on social media. On Instagram alone, Black Archives has 554,000 followers as of April 2024. This work’s popularity is in part because of the joy many Black people experience from suddenly seeing themselves represented in archives. Archives, especially mainstream archives, rarely capture Black joy, or what Imani Perry calls “the everyday poetry of our experience.”⁶ As a researcher, librarian, and archivist, I know firsthand how libraries and archives represent African Americans and reproduce violence through anti-Black information infrastructures and harmful archival practices. Black communities globally have experienced loss and erasure. If we’re being honest, professionals in museums and institutional archives continue to fail historically marginalized and minoritized people.⁷

Cherlise’s work is thought-provoking and instructive and contributes to archival studies, specifically to the discourse on community-based archives and Black archival practice.⁸ We rarely turn to Black communities, especially those in the rural South, to study Black archives and familial archiving practices. The images in *Black Archives* are familiar, immediately transporting me to my paternal grandmother’s home in rural Caswell County, North Carolina, where she carefully maintained our family archives. When I was young, I spent summers in Granny’s living room, admiring the black-and-white photographs of our ancestors and family celebrations and the framed high school diplomas.

Perhaps too much of archival discourse about Black people centers loss and absence, which are both real, but only part of the story. Cherlise encourages us to tend to and to draw inspiration from the archives we have. Cherlise writes:

It is imperative that we collectively (re)imagine the archive as more than just a register holding the accounts of dead things. We must make space for the multidimensional lives of Black folks—beyond just the metadata. We must view the archive as a living extension of ourselves and listen for the breaths while counting the heartbeats beyond the unknown, the unnamed, and the unspecified.⁹

Our profession will benefit greatly from engaging with *Black Archives*, which invites us to imagine new ways to preserve memories and broadens our definitions of archivists and community-based archives.

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NOTES

- ¹ Dorothy Berry, "Dorothy Berry Collection of What Are Black Archives, 2023," <https://syllabusproject.org/what-are-black-archives>.
- ² Dorothy Berry, "Digitizing and Enhancing Description Across Collections to Make African American Materials More Discoverable on Umbra Search African American History," Northeastern University Library, The Design for Diversity Learning Toolkit, August 2, 2018, <https://des4div.library.northeastern.edu/digitizing-and-enhancing-description-across-collections-to-make-african-american-materials-more-discoverable-on-umbra-search-african-american-history>; Dorothy Berry, "The House Archives Built," *up//root*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.uproot.space/features/the-house-archives-built>.
- ³ Black Archives, "About Us," <https://www.blackarchives.co/about-us-and-faqs>.
- ⁴ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.
- ⁵ Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation," *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 26–37, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26>.
- ⁶ Imani Perry, "Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not," *The Atlantic*, June 15, 2020, <https://aas.princeton.edu/news/racism-terrible-blackness-not>.
- ⁷ See Jarrett Martin Drake, "Blood at the Root," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 8, article 6 (2021), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol8/iss1/6>.
- ⁸ For a discussion and theorization of Black archival practice, see Tonia Sutherland and Zakiya Collier, "Introduction: The Promise and Possibility of Black Archival Practice," *The Black Scholar* 52, no. 2 (2022): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2022.2043722>.
- ⁹ Renata Cherlise, "No New Thing," *Magazine*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/690>.