

6 Care

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Prelude

Renty and Delia are too-well-known names in the visual history of African American slavery. Photographed by daguerreotypist Joseph T. Zealy in 1850, Congo-born Renty and his American-born daughter Delia feature in a series of fifteen images of enslaved women and men commissioned by the naturalist Louis Agassiz before the abolition of slavery. Discovered in the attic of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 1977, the daguerreotypes have since received extensive critical and scholarly attention. This series of images has been read as an example of the relation between race, nineteenth-century science, and early photographic technologies (Wallis 1995) and as cause to reflect upon the politics and ethics of engaging with slavery's archives (Azoulay 2012; Hartman 2011; Sharpe 2018). Most recently, these images have sparked a debate about property and restitution through the ongoing struggle of Tamara Lanier, a descendant of Renty and Delia who is suing Harvard for unlawfully possessing and profiting from the image of her ancestors.

Lanier's complaint recalls that Agassiz commissioned the photos as part of an effort to document physical evidence of polygenism, the long-debunked theory that different racial groups do not share a common biological origin. As archivist and scholar Jerrett M. Drake notes, Agassiz was trained in Paris under the tutelage of Georges Cuvier, the scientist who dissected the body of Sarah Baartman to showcase his racist ideas (Drake 2019; see also McKittrick 2010; Willis 2010). While Cuvier relied on the dissection of a body, Agassiz turned his attention to living bodies and the emergent visual technology of the time, the daguerreotype, to advance the project of polygeny.

In the suit, Lanier requests that the university turn the daguerreotypes over to her, give up all profits it has made from the photos, and pay punitive damages. She is also asking Harvard to acknowledge its complicity in perpetuating and justifying the institution of slavery. The complaint claims that Harvard charges a "hefty 'licensing' fee" for use of the photographs,

but a university spokesperson responded that the Peabody does not currently charge to use the images and that the photos “are in the public domain.” Tamara Lanier’s lawyer, civil rights attorney Benjamin L. Crump—who has represented the families of victims of police violence such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice—claims that Harvard, in rebutting Lanier’s claims, is implying that “Renty is still a slave, he still does not own his image” (quoted in Applewhaite and McCafferty 2019).

Tamara Lanier’s struggle to retrieve the daguerreotypes of her ancestors raises a series of questions whose stakes are amplified by the fact that these images now circulate under digitally unbounded conditions that are even more difficult to delimit and grasp. What are the implications of Harvard claiming ownership, or custodianship, of these images? What does it mean to claim that these images “are in the public domain” and thus available for consumption? And what does this public domain look like in times of digital commons?

Harvard’s response to Lanier’s suit testifies to the inadequacy of legal concepts such as “property” to delimit what and who belong in an archive. Critical race theorists have consistently shown how property is a racialized category that legitimizes colonial practices while racializing those deemed unfit to own property, be it land or their own bodies (Bhandar 2018; da Silva 2014; Harris 1993; Hartman 1997). According to critical legal theorist Brenna Bhandar (2018), the concept of property is premised on a “racial regime of ownership” forged through slavery and the colonization of Indigenous lands. In her work on digital remains, Tonia Sutherland demonstrates how digitality entrenches this racialized regime, whereby images of Black people circulate in digital environments in ways that continuously reinscribe death and trauma (Sutherland, chapter 46, this volume). By extension, even the notion of privacy, often invoked to protect the rights of digital subjects, proves insufficient to counter the “archival permanence of Black bodies” (Sutherland, chapter 46, this volume), fraught as it is by its origin in racial whiteness (Osucha 2009).

The history of these daguerreotypes can thus be seen as part of what Saidiya Hartman termed “the afterlife of property,” the enduring presence of slavery’s racialized violence and regimes of ownership in present times (Hartman 2008). Extending Hartman’s concept, this digital afterlife of property points not only to the deeply unequal conditions of digital existence but also to the need to redress the violence that produced these archival materials in the first place. Hartman pointedly describes the afterlife of property as “the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend” (Hartman 2008, 13). What this means in digitally mediated societies is that lives such as those of Renty and Delia resurface in new hypervisible conditions but remain to be properly acknowledged and valued.

At the same time, the continued presence of these daguerreotypes prompts us to rearticulate questions about the relation between race and technology. Given how early visual technologies like the daguerreotype were mobilized to uphold racist ideas passing for science,

how do digital regimes compel us to think about the ways in which new and emerging technologies reentrench racialized regimes of visibility and extraction? What are the implications of a format like the daguerreotype—characterized by “miniaturization, infinitesimal precision and detail” (Wallis 1995, 48)—entering the scale of big data? In a reading of the Agassiz daguerreotypes, Hartman urged us to consider how these images “train us to look and determine how we see and what we see,” given their wide circulation and the continued fascination they elicit (Hartman 2011, 522). Hartman’s phrasing acquires new and daunting implications, as images today are no longer seen by humans alone but by machines as well. Algorithms are also being “trained” to look by visual material accrued on digital spaces. These algorithms and their multiple and dangerous applications, such as facial recognition, are already replicating the racist modes of seeing upheld through early visual technologies (Agostinho 2018; Hassein 2017; Samudzi 2019). What these questions point to is how a new archival ethics needs to reckon with this digital afterlife.

In this entry I would like to consider care ethics as a framework for thinking about the digital afterlives of the colonial archive. Such a framework, I shall argue, can be mobilized beyond the scope of colonial archives to conceptually intervene in emerging datafied environments. Growing concerns about the harmful effects of algorithmic extraction and analysis of data have brought ethics to the center of public discourses on big data. Yet researchers and critics increasingly regard emerging data ethics discourses with suspicion, worrying that the corporatization and legislation of ethics have resulted in an impoverished understanding that centers on the individual responsibility of users (and corporate liability) rather than confronting structural discrimination. Within such ethical frameworks, concepts like bias, fairness, and accountability have come under scrutiny for locating the source of discrimination in individual behavior or technical systems rather than identifying and upending the social inequities that subtend those systems (Bennett and Keyes 2019; Dave 2019; Hoffmann 2019; see also Lentin, chapter 4, this volume). Critics also increasingly point to how appeals to ethics and rights-based discourses fail to contend with the systemic violence immanent to those very ethical frameworks, premised as they are on structural exclusions (see Morrison, chapter 25, this volume). Scholars and activists thus increasingly advocate for grounding sociotechnical systems in concepts of social justice in order to more pointedly confront the interlocking systems of oppression that technologies perpetuate (Benjamin 2019a, 2019b; Costanza-Chock 2020). While I do not dispute these claims, I do worry that these appeals can make us lose sight of the feminist conceptions of ethics that may help us move forward. My aim with this entry is to suggest how care ethics can complicate and enrich current debates that tend to—perhaps too easily—dismiss ethics as a framework for thinking about digitization and datafication. Drawing on debates in critical archival science as well as decolonial and Black feminist theories of care, I will make the case for how care ethics can be

imagined as a radical mode of engagement in times of big data—one that is firmly aligned with, rather than antithetical to, claims to social justice and collective liberation.

Feminist Ethics of Care and Archival Practice

The field of archival science has long dealt with the stakes of preserving contested and ethically sensitive material. Discussions within the field have recently begun to foreground the need for a feminist ethics of care within archival practice, particularly when dealing with archives of colonialism, slavery, and other violent histories (Mattson 2016; Moore 2012). Digitization plays a crucial role in these debates, given that digitization projects raise the question of how to contend with the pernicious effects of open access to contested and hateful records. Recent examples include the collection of Ku Klux Klan (KKK) newspapers *Hate in America: The Rise and Fall of the KKK in the 1920s*, developed by digital publisher Reveal Digital (Rowell and Cooksey 2019). Such digital records certainly offer opportunities to confront difficult and violent pasts. But they can also be easily appropriated as tools of white supremacy and find new avenues of circulation within right-wing online and off-line spaces. Another example is the digitization of colonial archives documenting Danish colonial rule in the US Virgin Islands, formerly known as the Danish West Indies. The mass digitization of these archives by Danish cultural heritage institutions has opened up important conversations on Denmark's colonial past and its enduring presence. But it has also raised numerous questions, including those related to unequal access to these materials (for instance, due to language or unequal digital infrastructures) as well as the nature of what can be traced, remembered, and imagined through archives that so often document the lives of colonial subjects through the lens of the ruling classes (Agostinho 2019; Dirckinck-Holmfeld, chapter 47, this volume; Meyer 2019; Odumosu 2019). As scholars such as Simone Browne (2015), Jessica Marie Johnson (2018), Jacqueline Wernimont (2019), and Kara Keeling (2019) have pointed out, the notion of data itself is deeply embedded in colonial histories of quantification that have a defining moment in the accounting of the enslaved. If left unaddressed, the violence of these colonial modes of organizing knowledge can be reinscribed in digital archiving processes.

In response to such concerns, scholars and archivists increasingly advocate a shift from liberal ideas of open access as inherently positive and democratizing toward a practice of care centered on acknowledging, honoring, and redressing (not only legally) record subjects and communities of descendants. In their article "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (2016) propose a shift in the theoretical model archivists and archival studies scholars use to address social justice concerns—from a model based on legalistic understandings of individual rights to one based

on a feminist ethics of care. Within such an approach, they propose, “archivists are seen as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility” (Caswell and Cifor 2016, 24). In particular, they suggest that archivists have “ethical responsibilities” based on “affective relationships” that transcend space and time, which include the subjects documented by the archives as well as communities of descendants with legitimate claims to records:

The archivist has an affective relationship to those about whom records are created, often unwittingly and unwillingly. Such stakeholders include Indigenous and colonial subjects counted, classified, studied, enslaved, traded as property and/or murdered. In dealing with such records—and virtually every archivist has dealt with such records—a feminist approach guides the archivist to an affective responsibility to empathize with the subjects of the records and, in so doing, to consider their perspectives in making archival decisions. This is in contrast to the dominant Western mode of archival practice, in which archivists solely consider the legal rights of records creators, too often ignoring the record subject and the sometimes fuzzy line between creator and subject. In the feminist approach, *the archivist cares about and for and with subjects* (Caswell and Cifor 2016, 36; emphasis added).

This “affective orientation” toward the documented subjects represents a radical shift in the archival encounter, premised as it is on ethical responsibility rather than liberal modes of access and legal rights that tend to drive digitization (with Harvard’s Peabody Museum being a case in point). However, I believe the notion of archivists as caregivers deserves further attention. In what follows, I would like to take up Caswell and Cifor’s call for further conceptualization of how a feminist ethics of care may cause us to reconceive archival thinking and practice in digital times. Building on their proposed affective reorientation and its commitment to social justice, I would like to point to some tensions between a feminist ethics of care and postcolonial critiques of power, which are useful when thinking about the digitization of colonial and slavery archives. With these reflections, my aim is to draw attention to the colonial underpinnings of care so that the feminist ethics of care being called forth remains attentive to, and committed to redress, the unequal power structures that continue to impose neglect and dispossession. Ultimately, by unpacking the tensions inherent to the notion of care, I wish to emphasize the critical and imaginative possibilities that an ethics of care for digital times may help to foster.

The Colonial Lives of Care

A photograph from the colonial archives of the US Virgin Islands offers an example through which to discuss these tensions. In 2017, when Denmark commemorated the centennial of the sale of the former Danish West Indies to the US, a daguerreotype portraying a white

Danish girl, Louisa Bauditz, and her Black wet nurse, Charlotte Hodge, acquired prominent visibility. The portrait was chosen to illustrate the exhibition *Blind Spots: Images of the Danish West Indies Colony* at the Royal Danish Library, therefore appearing in many public places throughout Copenhagen, as well as online. This daguerreotype speaks volumes to the entanglement of care work and colonialism: a portrait of a Black woman whose life is barely documented in the archives, whose image appears to us through the archives of the ruling classes, and whose labor and skills were vital to sustaining the colonial project (Meyer 2019). Yet, despite all the implicit violence contained in the image, this form of care work often occluded the violence of colonialism since the depiction of feminized and racialized care labor came across (to white audiences) as benign, ultimately overshadowing the traumatic experience of the Black women who labored under slavery and bondage. While such labor sustained the colonial structure, the maternal connotations of care work read into the image decentered the experience of the woman known as Charlotte to center the benevolence of Danish colonialism.

The benevolent readings of this image and the innocence through which the image was circulated are indicative of the troubled relationship between colonialism and care. As post-colonial feminists have noted, care discourse can function ideologically to justify or conceal relationships of power and domination. Care labor itself was a crucial sphere through which colonialist structures were maintained (Narayan 1995). Such benevolent readings often overdetermine the afterlife of this image (and others like it) in ways that can reproduce the dichotomy that insulates the private sphere—where care happens—from the politics that structure the public sphere, which is thought to be unconnected to the personal and interpersonal dynamics of caregiving.

These readings often minimize the labor of care that women of color performed and continue to perform. As many Black feminist thinkers have argued, Black women's experience of care profoundly challenges Western feminists' conceptualization of care, even if these Western conceptualizations are critical of essentialized and gendered conceptions of care under capitalism and patriarchy. Often denied the possibility of caring for their own families, Black women read care not as an unpaid and devalued private activity in the home (as traditionally seen by white feminism) but as labor they and other racialized women had to perform outside the sphere of their own family, where the needs of others took precedence over those of their own kin (Graham 2007; hooks 1999). This sphere was never considered private to begin with.

The racial, gendered, and colonial histories of care make it a difficult concept to think and work with. It becomes difficult to locate and mobilize its political possibilities when care is rendered complicit with structures of political and economic domination. At the same time, care also runs the risk of being depoliticized and becoming "a placeholder for a shared desire

for comfort and protection” (Duclos and Criado 2019). Projects of care, as feminist science and technology scholar Michelle Murphy (2015, 725) argues, are often embedded in “romantic temptations” of caregiving that “disconnect acts that feel good from their geopolitical implications.” Mobilizations of care, she cautions, tend “to avoid addressing the ongoing, painful, and extensive forces of racism or colonialism that do not disappear with good intentions or by constructing spaces where such forces are not keenly felt by privileged subjects” (Murphy 2015, 720). In order to unravel this entanglement, Murphy proposes to “unsettle care,” not to foreclose the potential of feminist mobilizations of care but to invite “ways to situate affection, attention, attachment, intimacy, feelings, healing, and responsibility as non-innocent orientations circulating within larger formations” (2015, 722).

How do these critiques of care help us conceive an ethics of care in archival practice and engagements with digital and data archives more broadly? Acknowledging the entanglement of care and colonialism can be a step toward a political understanding of care—that is, toward understanding the politics that shape acts of care. Rather than conceiving care as an exclusively positive and redressing affect immune to power differentials, such critiques point to how care already circulates within “non-innocent histories” (Murphy 2015), given the centrality of care to operations of colonialism, empire, and capital (Narayan 1995; Ticktin 2011). This can help us align acts of care, and “reparative” modes of engaging with archival and digital material, with more explicit commitments to social, racial, and gender justice.

My point, then, is not to discredit ethics of care for its entanglement with colonial and non-innocent histories but rather to harness this entanglement to reorient ethics of care more firmly toward the contestation of colonial legacies that continue to produce harm and neglect (as well as privilege and rewards) in the present. These lessons can prompt us to ask different questions about care within archival and digital engagements: Who decides who cares, and what is deserving of care? Who defines these contested terms? Can care be harnessed toward a consequent acknowledgment and redress of historical and present injustices? And what is the purchase of care as a mode of political intervention?

Care Ethics in Times of Big Data

I return to the digital afterlife of property and “the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend” (Hartman 2008, 13). How does care translate into an ethics and politics that help us reckon with these afterlives? In these final remarks, I would like to point to some of the possible implications of staying with care as a framework for thinking about life and livability under digital and datafied conditions.

One of the implications concerns care ethics in dealing with digitized archives. Paying attention to the history and material conditions of care labor can shed light on how care

always already circulates within non-innocent histories. This can help us avoid thinking about care as an inherently beneficial and exclusively positive affect and rather prompt us to consider the potentially harmful effects of caregiving gestures. Rather than adopting care ethics as a normative framework, guideline, or “best practice,” what is called for is a consideration of the politics and power differentials within which care is always already implicated. These considerations can help us complicate the notion of archivists as caregivers by acknowledging the colonial underpinnings of care, which are often translated into possessive understandings of archival custody. As Nalinie Mooten cautions: “Despite the best intentions, the caregiver is always in the position to dictate the ways in which care is given; more so, care is frequently defined as a heart-giving, selfless act” that leaves “little room for care recipients to voice the ways in which they want to receive care” (2015, 8). This is a call for questioning how the archives always position subjects differently and how subjects position themselves in relation to these archives.

Paying attention to the material conditions of care labor also calls for rethinking which lives, experiences, skills, and knowledges are valued within and outside archival contexts. As Kellee E. Warren (2016) notes, the way Black women are misrepresented or not represented in the archives needs to be connected to the low presence of Black women and women of color in the management and interpretation of archival materials. A similar point can be made about emerging media environments and technologies: Whose experiences, skills, labor, and knowledge are shaping our media environments and the digital infrastructures that increasingly permeate our lives? Whose lives are valued in these environments?

My proposition is that, in order to effectively respond to such material conditions, care ethics needs to be conceived as a reconstructive, dismantling, and imaginative ethos and praxis: reconstructive because the harms to past lives require “critical reparative” interventions (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, chapter 47, this volume) to “claim the lost ones back” (Odumosu 2019); dismantling because these reparative interventions need to be grounded in an ethics focused not only on repairing a broken world (a world that is broken by design) but also on aiming at “the end of the world as we know it” (da Silva, 2014; Morrison, chapter 25, this volume). In other words, it is no longer enough to fix the existing structures of social coexistence for the digital times. Rather, an imaginative ethos needs to be nurtured, because new worlds and modes of coexistence need to be imagined and brought into being. As Bonnie Honig suggests, to care is “to cultivate anticipation of another world and to live now dedicated to the task of turning this world into a better one” (Honig, quoted in Sharpe 2019, 172).

A final implication about staying with care as a framework for thinking thus concerns the political purchase of care labor. In her reflections on Black women’s labors, Saidiya Hartman notes how despite the centrality of these women’s reproductive capacities to the realization of profit, their labors do not translate easily into existing political vocabularies. This labor

remains marginal, neglected, and mostly unacknowledged in the grander narratives of revolution, general strike, fugitivity, and refusal (Hartman 2016). But these labors of endurance and subsistence are precisely the ones that sustain, nourish, and enable those recognizable modes of political action. These quotidian gestures of sustenance that cultivate life and livability are what constitute the reconstructive, dismantling, and imaginative work that may bring into view new modes of existence. Put differently, an ethics of care for digital times will only be meaningful if care labor is recognized as a structuring social force. Staying with care as a framework invites us to attune to—and take seriously—the different political possibilities that such labors can instantiate.

Note

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