



ARCHIVING AS A TOOL FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE POTENTIALITIES: ON BLACK TRANS WOMEN AND WOMEN OF COLOR AUTONOMY

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“Ballroom has helped in expressing myself in ways I was not capable of as a child singer and dancer, because femininity was not normal. Gaining access to this side [of myself] through archiving is a gift.”

Within this multilayered statement made by Noelle Deleon, interdisciplinary artist, archivist, writer and voguer from Houston, Texas, in reference to her practice, we see similar characteristics reproductive justice has demanded, and must continue to uphold: community, refusal of cisgenderism (designing and enforcing aspects of gender, faulting those who do not within the binary), and trans autonomy. Starting off as a virgin, a term connoting first-time walkers or performers in September 2020 to now blossoming or transitioning into femme queen, a trans woman specific category, as of May 2022, archiving allowed Deleon to think with and through ballroom, a space she is now able to dominate and receive her flowers. All the while, she shapes history that is authentic to her genealogy of other Black trans women in ballroom while simultaneously creating an archive of herself for others to access. In the intentional self-inclusion, we are able to see the expansivity of archiving, as a tool that demands the insertion of oneself in normative histories that exclude us, or even in histories of our own that do not include us.

Precisely, archiving makes visible a bridge between the past, present, and future as a means of building a life that is sustainable for herself and those she holds in community. Archiving, and its intentional and riching possibilities, therefore allow marginalized trans identifying folks, to bring in our queer futures or “queer utopias,” thinking with queer performer theorist, Jose Esteban Munoz, in the present, a simultaneous conversation and distortion of normative historical linearity that allows us to see the fabulosity and fierceness of our lived experience.¹ In the intentional re(membering), visibility, and future making of trans women of color, a life of care, respect, and love is front and center. Black Trans and trans women of color archiving must, then, be seen as a symbolic characteristic and practice within Reproductive Justice mobilization. Especially in the context of SPARK! RJ Now, we are reminded that “reproductive justice is the ability for Georgia and the South to continuously cultivate

¹ Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising utopia: the then and there of queer futurity*.

communities where we can all make sustainable and liberatory decisions about our bodies, genders, sexualities, families, and lives holistically and without shame or fear of policing.”² To live without fear and build realities for ourselves that recognizes agency is aligned with trans archiving.

I entered this conversation with both certainty and curiosity of archival potentiality, primarily as an intentional practice of locating and centering trans joy, care, and love. I therefore see fit to bring my experience with archiving to the forefront and alongside that of Deleon, to amplify the potentialities of archival practices. My arrival to archiving was necessary to believe, recognize, and see myself as someone who can experience joy, care, love, and hope. Summer 2021 was defined by uneasy, energetic, and contradictory moments that were filled with grief, excitement, fear, isolation, and joy, a reflection of the beginning stages of my identity exploration. Given the sociopolitical climate that was animated by pain due to state terror, it heightened these emotions as I was forced to invest myself into cisgender politics that craft the ideology of “passing.” To not pass was a result of the violence enacted upon other trans Central American women displaced from their respective home countries given the “migrant crisis” as of 2018,³ continual language animating trans death circulating women of color by academics and the media, and re-emphasized by everyday people, that these are inaccessible emotions or experiences shared with others. While my attempt is to not generalize trans or gender non-conforming experiences, these have been sentiments those I have been in community with articulate for reasons concerning safety, respect, and all around “normal life.” These logics soon became highly problematic as it carved out a singular trans experience that did not allow me to ask what joy, care, rest, aid, etc. looked like outside of pleasing others.

Such contradictions to myself and my community demanded and asked what a life otherwise would look like. Unexpectedly, I came across Fatima Jamal #TransLash interview where she talked about the relevance of building an archive for herself — one that allows her to imagine a life otherwise where trans decision making and testing the limits of one's own body is integral.⁴ Enamored by her coming-to-archive, I began to see how this best fit my life and honored a life otherwise where I began to test the limits of my body, but precisely my emotions, and see myself in the same regard I hold in my chosen community. To archive, then, in the act of documenting, but also in practice of “testing the limits of my body” through ways I address myself, not living in fear or believing my life must be of isolation, and lack of others building community with me became highly crucial.

² <http://www.sparkrj.org/about/>

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/displacement-in-central-america.html>

⁴ “Fatima Jamal: On Making A Personal Archive.” <https://youtu.be/4N8axp4uoQg>

Such life-changing possibilities through the myriad forms of archiving allowed me to understand the vitality of Deleon's way of living that has granted her residency in the Kiki House of Mulan, to the House of Marciano in December 2020, to the Kiki House of Juicy in June 2021, and now as of January 2022, the House of Lanvin. Such careful attention to the archives of previous Black trans ballroom performers allowed her to reorient herself within her practice of archiving and test the limits of her body by reaching out in 2019 to those in ballroom and learn how to vogue. It also spoke to that depth of her 2019 as she also began transitioning, choosing a life that felt most authentic and lending herself to a life otherwise that was crucial for her well-being. This intentional act of asking and doing granted her space to find community, disrupt knowledge production through her continual engagement with academia and writing, and construct a portal where others can learn from. As Deleon asserts, "In archiving myself, I want to look back and see my growth and evolution. In this world, we are the gatekeepers and directors of our own lives." Highlighting trans autonomy is vital, especially social constraints that many experience. To see her personal growth is an homage to her continual work that began in 2017, but also a point of personal inspiration as Deleon shares that in archiving, the power invested in it is to "Reimagine for what life can look like for you. Pushing limitations of what are existence is." Black trans self-preservation vis-a-vis archiving is evidently leading to a life of comfort, in which Noelle shares with me is "being able to meet all my essential needs. being able to pay my bills. being able to enjoy life."

I end this piece with the same spark I began it, that being the fugitive practices within a trans take of archiving that illuminates a life of self-sufficiency. As Fatima Jamal reminds us, this encourages others to push the limitations of their existence and live a life sufficient enough for oneself. These understandings of preservation and maintaining archives allows Deleon to be excited for a comfortable life, while building spaces where "Black trans-women and their reality in and outside of the ballroom community" are central, which is work she is doing in the establishment of F.E.M.M.E. It also excites her to finish her degree and continue performing, a way in which she can continually engage in archives/ing. Whereas for me, I hope to live a life where I can continue to do the asking and answering of what my individual needs, desires, pleasures, and cares are. These practices are still in the making as needs change, but a commitment to a life where I can learn from, be in dialogue with, and honor the legacies of other trans archivists is central. I see this through my continual academic endeavors of locating trans Salvadoran pleasure through my experimental project that intends to redefine trans experience through my investment in pleasure philosophies, as informed by Black feminist such as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Maree Brown, rather than add to the lengthy lexicon of trans death that exists within trans Latin/x American studies. Through my own commitment of reaching genuine pleasure and acting from in it, I choose to actively do so alongside and the illumination of community; without community, without shared pleasures, and without our ability to illuminate our beautiful and complex experiences through the power of archive, reproductive justice will remain stagnant.

I would like to thank Kae Goode at SPARK RJ NOW! for putting me into contact with Noelle Deleon and think about the importance of and potentialities of trans autonomy in archiving. Please be sure to support and follow the work of Noelle Deleon via social media, @noellearchives and @femmeisfuture on Instagram. As well as amplifying the pressing work SPARK RJ NOW! has and continues to do in the South. You can follow their work on Instagram @sparkrjnow.