

Ruptures in the (Racist) Archive: What Video Essays Can Teach Us About Scholarly Practice

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I am likely not the only media scholar who has, in the face of a pandemic, ongoing racial injustice, climate change, and increasing divestment in education, asked myself “what is the point of scholarship, at all?” This question repeats itself every time I sit down to do anything that falls under the rubric of “research.” So, when posed with the query “what constitutes a scholarly video essay?” I have to begin by asking first, *why media scholarship* at all?

Scholarly research typically aims to communicate original thought, whether through primary research or synthesis, that presents a unique perspective on previous research. In theory, having access to scholarly research means one does not have to think all of the thoughts that have ever been thought and is not left to think in isolation. Scholarly debates exist across time and space, from quilled parchment to a database behind a pay-wall. One may enter the “conversation” at any point and learn from and potentially contribute from there. When practicing scholarship, it is critical to acknowledge the broader, existing conversation at hand. Citation is what we pay to play; if we fail to reference and cite the ongoing conversation and its interlocutors, we play as if we are constructing knowledge all on our own. By these rules, we might indeed be quarantined at home with a good internet connection and a computer and remain actively engaged in many forms of scholarship,

which may broaden our thinking and enrich our lives. If one is a media educator and scholar, now might even be a good time to try out video essays in the classroom or on one's own for the first time.

Since most video essays rely on archives of existing material rather than raw footage, the video essay appears to be a mode especially suited for the current moment. As video essays move more comfortably into academic institutions and begin to find a place in classrooms and conferences, the question of what makes a video essay worthy of being considered *scholarly* is certainly an important and timely point of distinction. Yet, in this period of crisis in which scholarship and teaching is being necessarily reimagined, we are also poised to interrogate the ways in which (media) scholarship has been operating to this point and where we hope it will go.

As scholars such as Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks have argued,¹ there are crucial ways in which the practice and institutional histories of scholarship work to reinforce and reify social inequities that fall along race, class, and linguistic lines. At first blush the video essay appears to have the potential to circumvent some of the problematic pitfalls of scholarly writing, such as ventriloquizing vestigial language and positions that are inaccessible and esoteric at best, and offensive at worst. What's more, the video essay's inclusion of a wide range of media texts and types of sources in analysis appears more democratic and liberatory because it visibly foregrounds multi-vocality and has the potential to critique and de-center institutions like the ivory tower and Hollywood. Its source texts are the media we have lived alongside within popular and art cultures—unlike written scholarly texts, media texts typically feel more like a familiar part of everyday life. For the most part, they appear to be more legible, and perhaps, inherently resistant to the white supremacy and misogyny at the foundation of the academic institutions that have historically privileged written texts over the oral and visual.

But there's a catch. Each time we encounter media archives from which we assemble, remix, and annotate, we must confront the racism and misogyny of the canon. I am not simply referring to blatant examples such as D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*,² but the pervasiveness of white supremacy that exists across most popular media. That is not to say that all media is overtly racist, but rather that white supremacy permeates the majority of existing media institutions and their functionalities and, in its continued circulation, even for use in analysis, mimetically perpetuates it. In other words, white supremacy is encoded in popular media texts and is therefore inflected in the video essays, even when those archival excerpts are used for the purposes of critique (and even when

intentionally drawing attention to white supremacy). The viewer cannot completely escape the power of the initial artifact, even if the essayist explicitly aims to detract from it.

As champions of the video essay, we are left with a quagmire. How do we enact citationality without automatically resurrecting problematic features of the original text? If we are working with archives, how might we engage with them without reifying their initial context and purpose or simply regurgitating the same problematic histories? What's more, how do we teach new students and makers how to work with media archives without it requiring a deep dive into hegemonic and predominantly white-centered thought and representation? Even if one is watching and making as a form of resistance, one must first confront the material, and that confrontation risks harming Black, Indigenous, and other makers of color while reinforcing white supremacy and legacies of colonialism. Again, you might be reading this and asking yourself how this conundrum is any different than what one encounters when engaging written scholarship. Are we to throw up our hands at the thought of the video essay taking on the mantle (and burden) of written scholarship? Is the video essay simply the academy articulating itself in the same old ways, with new techniques? Rather than differentiating written and video scholarship, we might change what we are asking of these modes of production. By this I mean, what if, instead of asking "what can scholarship do for/to the video essay" we ask instead "what can the video essay do for/to scholarship"? How might the video essay, in its utilization of archival texts that have a very different economy of scale, circulation, profit, and visceral renderings than written scholarship, possibly draw our attention to the inescapability of the potential violence of scholarly practice? Video essays help make visible and audible the persistent problem of colonial citation and recirculation of racist structures, images, language, and ideas.³

If the accessibility, pleasure, familiarity, evocativeness, and perceived proximity of the video essay makes it easier for us to *see* the archive and understand its indelible trace, then perhaps one of the greatest contributions of the video essay to scholarly practice can be its ability to bring us, our students, and our colleagues closer to recognizing the burden of the archive in the practice of written scholarly citation as well. Our desire to determine what makes the video essay scholarly compels us to confront the history of textual academic practice and recognize the centrality of colonialism and white supremacy. Video essayists can help steer the academy towards thinking meta-cognitively about how and why we use archives to build our arguments while articulating our ethics of

appropriation and spectatorship in ways that buttress nascent formations that seek to decolonize academia.

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1. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Culture* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 201); Toni Morrison, *Playing the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

2. *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1915; Los Angeles, CA: Triangle Film Corp.).

3. Here I am relying on Susan Harewood's critical reflections on teaching and making video essays. My analysis here draws directly from her insights.