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Unveiling Private Histories: Ethical and Theoretical Implications of Transforming African American Home Movies from Personal Keepsakes to Public Artifacts

One summer afternoon, I had the privilege of conducting a dynamic and constructive phone interview with Ms. Williams, whose family's private home movies are a part of the Great Migration Home Movie Project at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).¹ The project is a public program for digitizing analog audiovisual media. Ms. Williams's collection comprises over thirty home movies, predominantly shot on 8mm and 16mm color film during the 1960s and 1970s. At first, she had

1. As requested, I am using a fictitious name to protect her and her family's privacy.

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approached the NMAAHC to digitize and preserve her fragile 16mm films to ensure their longevity. Many of the films offer a fascinating glimpse into spaces of leisure, relaxation, and celebration, providing a window into the African American experience during a time when segregated recreational spaces were prevalent. Since its founding in 2016, the NMAAHC has gathered and conserved a substantial number of these African American home movies. Donated by families to the NMAAHC, many of these films, like those of Ms. Williams, provide a valuable historical resource.

As one of many children featured in these moving reels, Ms. Williams deeply appreciated their emotional value. These films chronicled special occasions such as birthdays, holidays, and memorable family vacations to the beach. They represented more than individual memories; they depicted slices of African American life, offering insights into traditions and leisure activities rarely highlighted in mainstream narratives of the civil rights era. She also recognized their potential significance in shedding light on African American history. Initially, she was reluctant to donate the films because of privacy concerns; however, with careful consideration, she generously agreed to donate them to the Center for the Digitization and Curation of African American History at NMAAHC. There was one crucial condition. She wanted to limit their circulation by retaining the ability to grant permissions for their use in research or public display. As most of the adults depicted in the films were now deceased, she carried a mix of nostalgia and ethical concern—a desire to preserve their memory while also being conscientious about the implications of sharing their personal experiences with the world. Historical research and public exhibition, she believed, could open the potential for misinterpretation by researchers and public audiences. My initial conversation with Ms. Williams shifted my perspective on agency, privacy, and interpretation in using home movies as historical sources. Prior to considering this case, I had not considered the ethical tightrope I must walk as a media historian—respecting her family’s legacy while navigating the responsible use of these rare cinematic glimpses into African American history.

Ms. Williams’s home movie collection typifies the concept of orphan films—those cinematic materials that are often unwatched, undistributed, inaccessible, or lost.² In this essay, I consider the ethical and theoretical implications of viewing, understanding, and writing about content that is often undistributed, lost, or inaccessible to the public. These home movies, as intimate portrayals of life, are brought out of their original contexts, raising questions about the nature of personal memory, the production of history, and the role that home movies can play in bridging the gap between the two. On an ethical level, transforming private memories into public narratives brings to the fore ethical dilemmas relating to representation and interpretation.

2. For further discussion, see Dan Streible, “The State of Orphan Films: Editor’s Introduction,” *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2009): x; Library of Congress, *Redefining Film Preservation: A National Plan; Recommendations of the Librarian of Congress in Consultation with the National Film Preservation Board*, coordinated by Annette Melville and Scott Simmon (Washington, DC: NFPB/LOC, 1994); and Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience: An Introduction* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 391–398.

Despite their deeply personal and veiled nature, home movies “are shaped by the public conventions of the image” and “shared social and cultural understandings.”³ Despite shared understandings and representational conventions, publishing African American home movies originally intended for private consumption for public viewership and critique involves a complex process of transformation that “changes viewers into spectators who cannot participate in their original meaning and will see the films in a different light.”⁴

Consequently, media historians must consider their interpretative power over these sources. The context that originally framed these narratives might be lost or misunderstood, which can risk essentializing Black leisure culture through a lens influenced by dominant white narratives and perspectives. In the specific context of African American life, essentializing Black leisure culture can erase nuanced lived experiences and neglect the diverse cultural intricacies that these home movies often represent. One cannot fully appreciate the depth of these narratives if we do not question the “broader context of discourses on blackness and film that take the white gaze as the unquestioned and rigid norm.”⁵ This underscores the importance of approaching these films with a deep awareness of how historical biases and power dynamics can shape interpretation. Such misinterpretations, unintentional or otherwise, can contribute to an incomplete or skewed understanding of African American history, thereby reinforcing preconceptions and undermining the importance of these personal narratives in the broader historical discourse.

Home movies are vital for filling the gaps and absences in African American history, especially concerning leisure spaces and practices. Historically, the experiences and contributions of Black communities have often been marginalized, overlooked, or belittled in official historical records. As a result, the history of African American leisure is sparsely documented or largely absent from institutional archives. In the absence of historical records, such as newspapers, advertisements, postcards, and travelogues, media historians can draw on these moving images to gain insights into the dynamics of leisure spaces and practices. Furthermore, home movies contribute to the broader narrative of African American history by showcasing agency and resilience. Home movies demonstrate how in the face of adversity and marginalization Black people actively created and sustained spaces of leisure, fostering a sense of identity, unity, and cultural pride.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans began establishing vacation communities, hotels, and boarding houses in places such as Martha’s Vineyard, enclaves which still exist today. The less-known narrative of Black resorts in New York State’s Catskills coexists with the region’s widely recognized history as a hub for Jewish resorts, famously known as the Borscht Belt. Among the early Black boarding houses was

3. Patricia Holland, “Introduction: History, Memory in the Family Album,” in *Family Snapshots: The Meaning of Domestic Photography*, ed. Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (London: Virago Press, 1991), 3.
4. Julia J. Noordegraaf and Elvira Pouw, “Extended Family Films: Home Movies in the State-Sponsored Archive,” *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 93.
5. Racquel Gates, “Baby Mine: *Dumbo* and Black Resonance,” *Film Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2023): 38–47, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2023.76.3.38>.

Jessie's Manna Farms, located in Roxbury, New York, and owned by acclaimed Black baritone and Broadway artist Jules Bledsoe, who also appeared in the 1929 film version of *Show Boat* (Harry A. Pollard). Bledsoe announced the opening of Jessie's Manna Farms as a summer resort in a 1930 *New York Amsterdam News* advertisement.⁶ Two decades later, in 1952, the Peg Leg Bates Country Club in Kerhonkson, New York, was opened by Black entertainer Clayton "Peg Leg" Bates. It grew to be one of the best-known Black resorts in the Catskills, accommodating three hundred guests and offering a variety of recreational facilities, including a casino with top-tier entertainment, two swimming pools, a roller-skating rink, tennis courts, and a miniature golf course.⁷

Despite their vibrant past, these resorts no longer exist today. Many have become abandoned buildings, and the land where they once flourished is up for sale. Remnants of this vibrant era are scarce, making it challenging to piece together their histories. Traditional archival evidence of these resorts is sparse, often limited to a few newspaper clippings and postcards. However, home movies—like Ms. Williams's collection that documents similar places—can offer valuable insights into these historical spaces, serving as a form of visual archaeology. These personal films can fill in gaps left by conventional archival resources, providing intimate glimpses into everyday life at these resorts and illuminating this crucial yet underappreciated aspect of middle-class African American leisure history.

Drawing on Nadia Allyson Field's insights into the value of affective viewing and informed speculation, it is clear that home movies, despite their potential limitations, hold substantial value in historical research and narrative construction when faced with gaps in archival records.⁸ As repositories of memory, home movies elicit affective responses. As articulated by Marita Sturken, modern media such as home movies function as "technologies of memory."⁹ They are "not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides" so much as they are "objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning."¹⁰ While home movies can stimulate recall and give memories meaning, they are often limited by their very nature. Home movies are subjective portrayals of personal experiences shaped by the perspectives and choices of those behind the camera and may not present a comprehensive account of events or accurate depiction of everyday life. Therefore, the true power of these films lies not just in the events and places they depict but also in the emotions and narratives they facilitate and invoke. Consequently, media historians who study home movies must contextualize

6. "Public Opening of Jessie's Manna Farms," advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, July 16, 1930.
7. Laura A. Miller, "All-American Vacationland: African American, Puerto Rican, and Italian Resorts in the Catskill Mountains, 1920–1980" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2014), 245, <https://doi.org/10.7275/5996119.0>.
8. Allyson Nadia Field, "Archival Rediscovery and the Production of History: Solving the Mystery of *Something Good—Negro Kiss* (1898)," *Film History: An International Journal* 33, no. 2 (2021): 1–33, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/799504>.
9. Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 9.
10. Sturken, 9.

their subjective interpretations, draw connections to the broader historical and sociocultural landscape, and collaborate with community members, when possible, to gain deeper insights. Interviewing community and family members—as I have—and incorporating their narratives can offer a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the leisure spaces and activities represented in the films.

The ethical considerations involved in making these films public must extend beyond legalities such as copyright and consent. As interpreters and presenters of these home movies, media historians should strive to engage with these materials with a sensitivity that upholds the privacy and acknowledges the subjectivity and agency of the individuals within these films—a task made more critical given the historical marginalization and misrepresentation of Black narratives. Studying Ms. Williams’s home movies has allowed me to establish deep connections with individuals who have become collaborators in our shared mission to document the history of these influential spaces of African American leisure. Ms. Williams was initially hesitant to participate in an interview, but an archivist at the NMAAHC helped forge a connection between us, affirming my sincere interest and vouching for my ability to research and write on this topic. In communications with Ms. Williams, I emphasized my commitment to a respectful collaboration on her terms, especially when using family home movies to examine the experience of African Americans vacationing during a time of *de facto* segregation in the North.

Striving for transparency in all our interactions, I made sure to communicate openly about my intentions and research goals, ensuring that Ms. Williams felt informed and involved at every stage. As our relationship developed, it became clear that building trust was a reciprocal process. While I made sure to prioritize her voice and agency, she provided valuable insights and feedback that enriched my understanding and approach. She shared her memories while watching the films, provided personal documents, and answered probing questions, clarifying the absences within the archive. Respecting her privacy, I agreed not to identify her family or publish any images from the home movies. Also, per her wishes, I will not disclose any identifiable details about the films I had the privilege of viewing in any publication. Instead, I will share Ms. Williams’s perceptions and opinions on the significance of the films along with my own reflections on watching these films as an outsider. Holding to these terms hasn’t hampered my research. It has made me strive to contextualize the limited historical documents I’ve managed to uncover, thereby explaining the significance of these historical leisure spaces and practices.

For example, one intriguing question I sought to understand was why Ms. Williams’s family chose to document their time in the Catskills. Beyond the fact that her family owned a camera and desired to preserve memories for personal and familial recollections, what was the aim here? As we watched the home movies together, Ms. Williams shared that her parents believed that documenting leisure experiences through moving images held a profound significance for Black families. First, it was a means of asserting their presence, humanity, and middle-class status during a time when society often

denied these attributes. Second, her parents believed that the home movies themselves were a powerful testament to their resilience and pursuit of joy and rest in the face of systemic racism. These films showcased their ability to carve out spaces of relaxation, enjoyment, and community-building even in oppressive times. By documenting their leisure experiences, families like the Williams left an invaluable visual record not only for future generations of their family but also for scholars to research and learn about this significant period of American history.

The Great Migration Home Movie Project at the NMAAHC includes over 825 home movies and oral histories from 1940 to the early 2000s. The mission is to preserve and provide public access to African American personal narratives, offering unique insights into African American history and culture. While a portion of the collection has been digitized and made available to the public online, access to the full archive is open to registered researchers. The possibilities for scholarship rooted in this collection are extensive, such as the evolution of amateur filmmaking techniques, media history, the intersections of media and place, and the role of media in everyday life. But beyond merely utilizing this material for scholarship, I urge researchers to engage with this collection to foster ethical practices toward the archive. An unwavering commitment to transparency, a thoughtful respect for privacy, and a focus on promoting agency and active collaboration are essential. Rather than acting as detached observers, let's forge genuine partnerships with the institutions and families whose histories we chronicle and represent. By doing so, we can collectively contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of African American media history.

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