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Hollywood Shuffle: The History and Impact of Maya Cade's Black Film Archive

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Abstract: *In December of 2018, the short film* Something Good – Negro Kiss *(1898), featuring the first known on-screen kiss between two Black actors (Saint Shuttle and Gertie Brown), directed by Black film director and Selig Polyscope Company owner William Selig, was recovered, restored, and added to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry. Before its discovery,* Something Good*'s legacy remained threatened by what Claudy Op Den Kamp thus encapsulates in their book* The Greatest Films Never Seen*: "if [films] cannot be seen, it will become increasingly hard to remember them" (12). Two years after* Something Good*'s restoration and exhibition, the Library of Congress scholar-in-residence Maya Cade launched the revolutionary Black Film Archive, a living register of national and international Black films made from 1915 to 1979 (now 1898 to 1989) that exhibit and celebrate "the rich, abundant history of Black cinema". The site itself promises in its mission statement to uplift and make known "historically and culturally significant films [...] about Black people accessible through a streaming guide with cultural context". This paper examines the placement and impact of Maya Cade's Black Film Archive within the larger discourse of film history and film historiography.*

In December of 2018, the short film *Something Good – Negro Kiss* (1898), featuring the first known on-screen kiss between two Black actors (Saint Shuttle and Gertie Brown), directed by Black film director and Selig Polyscope Company owner William Selig, was recovered, restored, and added to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry (Garcia-Navarro) (Fig. 1). The restoration was seen as a miracle in film archival terms. *Something Good*'s discovery was made possible when Dino Everett, University of Southern California archivist, happened to be rummaging through a box of unidentified reels (Talla Mafotsing). *Something Good*'s condition was surprisingly manageable compared to other lost or rare "race films" often found in vaults, collectors' attics, and other odd places where the celluloid could be severely damaged from poor storage (Fuster). The knowledge of *Something Good*'s existence was prominent, but only due to its listings in distribution catalogues from the time of its release. Before its discovery, *Something Good*'s legacy remained threatened by limited to no access, or as Claudy Op Den Kamp encapsulates, "if [films] cannot be seen, it will become increasingly hard to remember them" (12). Two years after *Something Good*'s restoration and exhibition, the Library of Congress scholar-in-residence Maya Cade launched the revolutionary Black Film Archive, a living register of national and international Black films made from 1915 to 1979 (now 1898 to 1989) that exhibit and celebrate "the rich, abundant history of Black cinema" ("About"). The site itself promises in its mission statement to uplift and make known "historically and culturally significant films [...] about Black people accessible through a streaming guide with cultural context" ("About"). This paper examines the placement and impact of Maya Cade's Black Film Archive within the larger discourse of film history and film historiography.

Figure 1: ***Something Good Negro Kiss (1898, Restored)*****. Screenshot.**

Maya Cade's Black Film Archive includes a synopsis of each film, a list of categories, and a link that redirects audiences to where they can watch segments or the whole film. The origins of the Black Film Archive are in Cade's Twitter archives, where in June 2020, Cade started posting links to what films she was watching (while using Larry Richards's *African American Films through 1959* as a reference for film viewing ideas) along with a brief description. In an interview with *NPR*, Cade describes her connection to the archive's origins: "This all started for me in the early pandemic [...] we're in the middle of the Black Lives Matter protest, and I'm asking myself a question, like many of us were, about what sustains me. And with that as my guiding light, it became an easier task to find those films and seek them out" (Cornish and Fuller).

The Black Film Archive's complete website launched in August 2021 to a wave of positive press and fanfare. In an interview for *xoNecole.com*, Cade recalls the almost instantaneous and overwhelming response to the Black Film Archive by the public: "If I had launched it at 11-ish, by 1:00 PM, I had received 50 emails that were people saying: 'Hey can I interview you for this? Are you interested in this thing and that thing?'" (Phifer). The larger implications of the Black Film Archive became known from this swift response. According to the site itself, its philosophy is to uphold a platform that "converses among the intersectionalities of a global Black struggle, triumph, joy, pain, and overcoming with cultural context; a place that chronicles the optimism and heartache in Black cinema [...] a site that pushes the confines of voyeuristic gaze and representation by allowing users to bring their hearts, minds, and non-monolithic approaches to viewing cinema's representation of Blackness across time" (Cade, "Letter"). From a historical point of view, the Black Film Archive clarifies and challenges preconceived ideas of what films should be considered "canon" within Black and overall film history studies.

As necessary as it is to study the history of film and its respective industries, impacts, and trends, it is also necessary to study how film is recounted, what films/filmmakers are keystones of their time, and which films are deemed "important enough" to keep around. Theories and practices in American film historiography had only received modest remodelling towards the latter half of the twentieth century. Before this, American film history was written "in-house" in the form of promotional materials to sell cameras and advertise studio houses, including W. K. L. Dickson's *History of the Kinetograph*, *Kinetoscope*, *and Kineto-Phonograph*, published in 1895 (Belton 228). Eventually, film history broadened to analyse films, filmmakers, and studios based on aesthetic trends, economic impact, social impact, and individual achievements. For example, Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery published *Film History: Theory and Practice* in 1985, which officially proposes that historians consider films and film trends as being the result of "specific modes of production, determined by various economic, technological, and ideological demands" (Belton 231). This "scientific" approach is strengthened by the work of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985), which draws less upon the films themselves, but uses "primary, print-based research materials such as trade journals, studio files, court testimony, censorship records, screenwriting manuals, and other forms of evidence" to "diagnose" the cultural conditions in which they were made and therefore evaluate its "canon" value (Belton 234). That is, films not otherwise preferred by scholars and writers of film history deemed "too close" to the industry could now be identified as "films crucial to understanding the history of a particular film culture" (Nochimson 17). On paper, this eliminates prejudice within film historiography; in practice, this does not eliminate it from other sources, nor does it eliminate whatever prejudicial loopholes, consciously motivated or not, may exist within film historiography. When Maya Cade decided to build an archive dedicated to bringing about accessibility, awareness, and interaction for lost or less-popular Black cinema, it was with consideration for how these loopholes affected access to, and awareness of, certain works.

According to an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Maya Cade took careful professional, personal, and community-driven consideration into the creation of the Black Film Archive and the curation of works it would register. She quotes herself as asking, "What films belong here?", "How can I present it in a way that doesn't harm my community?", and, "Do people need this?" (Jackson). For every film that is listed in the Archive, there are hours of research dedicated to the period it was created in, and therefore its importance in understanding its place in said history, all while ensuring the information that she presents is still "accessible for everyone" (Cornish and Fuller). According to Cade, this means creating an archive free of judgment towards audiences with a lack of awareness about its collections as well as towards those who lack awareness about their sociocultural impact, thus including a wide set of films that allow audiences to engage with and decide where their importance for their own sociocultural experiences lie. A film chosen for the archive, indeed, must have "something significant to say about the Black experience, and it can either speak to Black audiences, have a Black star, writer, producer, or director [...] And that it is available streaming" (Minow).

But the Black Film Archive and other efforts to highlight forgotten or lost works that speak to, and about, underrepresented groups, continue to face challenges in the form of the aforementioned prejudicial loopholes inherent in the study of historiography that cannot be willed away by a "scientific" approach. In historiography, the conversations have shifted from "what should be canonized?" to "what gets to be considered for canonized conditions?" In an op-ed on

the Museum of Modern Art's annual film preservation/restoration series, "To Save and Protect", Ben Kenigsberg makes clear the still-existing loopholes:

> Decisions about which films become candidates for preservation—or even what preservation means for any given movie—are rarely clear-cut. They depend on a combination of commercial interests, historical judgements, economic considerations and the availability and condition of film materials.

Other factors cited include the existence of good-condition original prints, artistic and technical importance, available grants, or simply if the film will "play well" with audiences; all of which have variable determinants. For example, one of the rarest titles in the MoMA series that year was the controversial *Reform School* (1939), a film that examines the brutal state of reform schools while radically proposing changes within it and the overall incarceration system that is motivated by compassion instead of cruelty. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences eventually restored the film for their August 2022 series "Regeneration: Black Cinema 1898–1971". The simple fact that curators helping to plan the "Regeneration" series felt this film held enough artistic and cultural importance to overcome its grim subject matter provided the impetus to assure its restoration (Kenigsberg). Similar efforts by the Black Film Archive, the L.A. Rebellion Preservation Project at UCLA, the Black Film Centre & Archive at Indiana University Bloomington, the Black Cultural Archives based in London, and others take their target films out of "competition" with others, further ensuring their survival and carving a path to awareness that offers a dedicated space not only for the films themselves, but for those to whom the films speak the most.

Upon launching the Black Film Archive, one of the more common questions Maya Cade was asked by press outlets was, "Why stop the roster at 1979?" According to Cade, this is when major Hollywood studios stopped "investing in Black cinema", using the financial failure of Sidney Lumet's *The Wiz* (1978) as their best justification. She considered the fact that up to that date, it was the most expensive musical, even the most expensive film of the time, as well as a collaboration between Hollywood and Motown. "You've got the who's who of Black Hollywood at the time coming together", Cade explains for *Slate.com*, but reframes it to consider its impact as an influential bookmark:

> I think making Black film history accessible is an act of transforming collective memory [...] a lot of what is considered Black film's past [are from] the '80s and '90s, and we are somewhat more familiar with those films—mostly the ones that played on BET, that are kind of just around [...] I think to intentionally preserve, intentionally collect, it means to remember—and to remember is to reimagine what Black cinema in America can hold. (Goffe)

With over four hundred films on the Black Film Archive's registry (as of 2025), Cade succeeds in bolstering works of "Black expression" that otherwise do not fall into the pattern of works chosen for mainstream historiographic study influenced by "the whiteness of decision-makers in the film industry" (Metz). For Cade, this is a pattern of films that focus on Black trauma, "meaning the kind of slavery epic or [...] [t]hings where Black people are suffering physical as well as emotional violence" (Cornish and Fuller), with many criticising what they feel to be "the commercialization of Black struggle" (Jane). This pattern within selected canonised films is

recognised by other archival professionals like Jiya Pinder, curator of the Instagram archival photo account "We the Diaspora". "It's not that there wasn't truth in those images", she expounds for *CNN*, "[b]ut there was so much more that wasn't being reflected" (Kaur). The Black Film Archive is one of a handful of recent pushes to highlight films focusing on Black joy and affection; as Cade observed, "I think the first thing that the archive negates is that all Black films are traumatic [...] The second thing it negates is the fact that we're seeing Black film as a binary in general. It's not either 'this' or 'that.' There are multiple 'and's" (Goffe).

In restructuring how audiences access, analyse, and commemorate Black cinema, audiences are raising more questions about industry practices and representations, and how incomplete the story of Black existence seems to be in the mainstream. The overall importance of representation in film can be summarised in John Belton's theoretical comparison between "empirical" knowledge and "conventional" knowledge. Empirical knowledge, or empiricism, "argues that the subjectivity of the observer does not invalidate the knowledge gained from observation", whereas conventionalism insists that film "observation is always subjective", but said observations are always absorbed through "frames of reference or systems of knowledge that transform them" (230). No matter how we examine representation, there must always be consideration for and analysis of the points of view of both the audience and the "camera eye". According to Manthia Diawara, there has never been a question in Black audiences of the existence of bias in both observer and observed. Diawara posits the existence of the "resistant spectator", one which refutes mainstream psychoanalytic accounts of the "mirror phase" of identification with the camera and/or characters therein, most of which are unclear about whether the experiences of Black spectators are included in the first place (768). Diawara elaborates that these psychoanalyses often ignore that all film audiences are "socially and historically constituted", as in not raised in a vacuum outside the sociopolitical, economic, and physical environments around them; "just as some Black [audiences] identify with Hollywood's images of Black [characters], some white spectators, too, resist the racial representations of dominant cinema" (767). Robyn Wiegman expounds on one of the less-discussed fallouts of a torn relationship with audiences' on-screen representation: "In minor roles, [non-white] character development and complexity are even harder to achieve as narrative combines with the ideology of the camera to reiterate the secondary or background nature of non-white groups and cultures" (164). In other words, if audiences only see negative or secondary/tertiary roles for characters that look like themselves, what significant opportunities are there for them in the industry? According to Maya Cade, these opportunities are and have been present, but not without the struggle to access said opportunities.

Entries in the Black Film Archive create a cohesive sequence of opportunities for audiences to explore not only films featuring Black principal characters, but also those made by Black artists. In an interview for *The Boston Globe*, Cade remarks that the future of Black filmmaking mirrors its past, "robust" in technical and performative artists, but lacking mainstream investment, be it financial or otherwise. She continues, asserting that Black films, Black women's films in particular, "are caught between a system that only uplifts and rewards certain Black stories", as in stories "safe" for non-Black audiences to engage with comfortably. But Cade does not lose sight of the fact that these films' existence and increased engagement with these films act as a calling card to not only change how historiography is structured but how the industry is structured as well: "we must offer structural and tangible support to Black women filmmakers: to celebrate their past, present, and future; and to cultivate communities that allow their dreams to take root" ("Where").

Between the preservation and exhibition of *Something Good – Negro Kiss* and the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures' "Regeneration: Black Cinema 1898–1971" exhibit, devoting a gallery "that gives equal billing to [Oscar] Micheaux's career alongside the films *Citizen Kane* and *Real Women Have Curves*" (Jackson), Cade's Black Film Archive has continued, and simultaneously accelerated the recent consistent examination of Black artistic and industrial representation in mainstream institutions, herself contributing to "Regeneration" and to Indiana University's guest programming on the same subject matter (Kozma).

As focus on archival accessibility in the streaming age grows, the Black Film Archive has expanded and diversified in content as a response. For one, the Black Film Archive's registry has expanded from films made between 1915 and 1979 to those made between 1898 and 1999. The site has also added links to and descriptions for a number of international Black features, tributes to filmmakers and stars such as Melvin Van Peebles, Harry Belafonte, and Bill Cobbs, and special seasonal collections for both Black History and Pride Months. On the whole, the Black Film Archive's transformations and extensions have been and continue to be motivated by its audience. As an unpaid resource that streamlines the process to submit new films, the Black Film Archive makes itself a significantly radical and community-driven addition to the exposure, consumption, and understanding of Black cinema, and an overall accessible resource for improving audiences' relationship with the history of Black film that extends its objectives to current works and communal activity within the industry. For the 2024 Pride collection, Cade had included in the registry Bridgett M. Davis's *Naked Acts* (1996), a film that Cade, with Davis, brought to Milestone Films to help secure distribution, leading to its world premiere at BAM Cinema in Brooklyn nearly thirty years after it was completed (Cade, "5"). In a later blog post addressing the conflict in Palestine, Cade amplified the Palestine Film Index in an effort to connect awareness and activism in archival research through the power of sharing previously inaccessible films, and therefore perspectives: "As spectators and culture workers, our task is to render [that which is invisible to "colonized imagination"] into our own language to share with our communities and provide them with the tools to continuously share with others" ("For"). The archive's overall present and future legacy can be summarized by Cade's celebration of its two year anniversary, as a platform that "converses among the contradictions, silences, and triumphs to add legibility to the visible and invisible", a platform centred on black filmmakers as well as their works, and a site that "pushes the confines of the voyeuristic gaze and representation" by allowing users to choose from several, unique paths through the exploration of Black cinematic history ("Black Film Archive").

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