

## Decades Through a Screen

The National Archives are buzzing with activity; the echo of footsteps from school children-including mine- scatter across the building, learning about American history. My friends are up ahead chatting about the historical document they just saw, but my attention is drawn elsewhere.

Above the noise of the crowded room, my eyes land on a huge touchscreen tucked away in the corner of the room. The piece of technology shows a street corner, frozen in time. The strange part is, there is no one standing in front of it.

The world disappears as my curiosity pulls me closer to the screen. My mind wants to take in every part of this image. The snapshot of the street feels familiar, as if this is a glimpse from the 1900s.

The street corner is crowded with white men, and there are hardly any white women. The women who are present are dressed in long flowing dresses, tight corsets, and wide-brimmed hats, their attire making them look domestic. However, as I study this picture, more unsettling details emerge.

Signs reading "White Only" mark the bathrooms. In the corner of the image stands a single black woman, with her head hung low. Her gaze is fixed on the ground as if looking up might cost her life. The white men near her glare with such hatred that the air seems heavy with unspoken violence. I notice a sign in the restaurant window behind the crowd, where white families sit eating unaware of this event happening right outside. A paper in the entry way states, "No Smoking, No Drinking, No Negros."

I point at the black woman and the snapshot vanishes, replaced with another frozen moment, one from the 1960s. I let my hand drift across the screen in pure curiosity. White and Black students march together, their hands gripping signs with messages like, “Freedom Now” and “End Segregation.” Their faces are drained with exhaustion as though they walked for miles for this moment. The diverse crowd is small, standing tall in the face of police officers in the street. In heavy uniforms, the cops hold shields at their sides. The officers' expressions are unyielding, their body language tense, as though they are waiting for any excuse to act.

In the background, the same restaurant as before catches my eye. However, it is not the same. Black and White people sit together at the counter, sharing space for the first time. I can't help but notice the black men and women sit stiffly, their back straight, waiting for an unsettling confrontation. The white families beside them glance their way, some curious, others with quiet fury.

Then, the image shifts again because of my hand touching the screen, but this time to the 1980s. My mind whirls as the scene comes into focus. Women march confidently down the same street as the last two images with messages in their hands. Some read “Equal Pay for Equal Work” and “My Body, My Choice.” Alongside them LGBTQ+ activists run through with rainbow flags, their faces painted with determination and pride. As if this is war, a smaller group scowls and pointed stares cut through the air. Many similarities within one another, but the difference is beliefs.

In the distance, the restaurant stands once again. People of all backgrounds share tables and counters, making it look livelier. Yet as I look closer, I notice the discomfort once again. A black couple sits in one corner, their shoulders rigid and movements carefully calculated. At the next table, a group of white people still have the same look in their eyes as the other picture

before. Change is happening, but I can still feel the tension in the air, a quiet reminder that there's a long way to go.

The touchscreen shifts the picture to the 2000s. I pull my hand away quickly so that the image does not fade into the next one. As soon as I glanced at the image, I knew change was sweeping through the street. A group of LGBTQ+ activists, charged with progress and victory, march down the sidewalk with vibrant flags, ringing with pride. Now the signs read, "Marriage Equality Now" and "Love is Love." A few feet away, women hold the same signs for equality. Their eyes fixed on the road ahead, determined and hopeful for change. The world is different now-new technology has arrived, with people constantly checking their smartphones. Their lives are connected in ways that seemed impossible just a decade before.

Inside of the restaurant, the atmosphere is casual and laid-back. A female couple is sharing a meal and laughing, their hands intertwined across the table without a second thought. My eyes scan over the restaurant and land on a business man. He sits there in a suit checking his phone in one hand, the other is holding a coffee cup. At the counter, a diverse group of workers-black, white, and hispanic- chat as they enjoy their lunch break, joking with each other as the restaurant hums with life. The old tension that once filled the spaces is gone, replaced with comfort.

The scene shifts once more, this time to the 2020s. The streets outside of the restaurant are buzzing with greater diversity and visibility, as people of all backgrounds walk by holding signs yet again. All signs say something about Black Lives Matter, with protesters marching, chanting, and even standing on top of cars demanding justice and equality. Behind the crowd, there are homeless people on every corner. They beg for help while others pass by, their eyes locked in their phones, not noticing the struggles happening right in front of them. The glow of

the devices illuminates nearly every face. I can hear the constant buzz of notifications as people move through the frozen image.

Just as the restaurant was vibrant before, it changed to a quieter scene. All the holes that were once replaced with happiness now seem detached. A young couple, both black, sits at a booth, one scrolling through their phone, the other lost in thought. On the young couple's bag, a "Black Lives Matter" sticker is visible on the bag, making a silent protest. At the counter, a middle aged woman, who looks like she might be on break, stares at her phone. Her facial expression is neutral and dead as she swipes through social media. Right outside the restaurant, a homeless man sits on the sidewalk, holding a cigarette. His clothes are worn and unkempt, not keeping him warm enough to face the coldness of the night. He stares into the group of protesters, but never speaks or shows any sign of desperation. Once again, people around him that aren't protesting, are glued to their phones. The devices steal every last will to lend a hand to the souls begging on the sidewalks. The air feels heavy with unresolved problems that have been haunting our nation for years.

The screen slowly fades into darkness, and I wonder if that is foreshadowing for our future. Will our nation ever see the bright side, or will we stay in the darkness with similar problems? A little push can change our world for better or for worse.