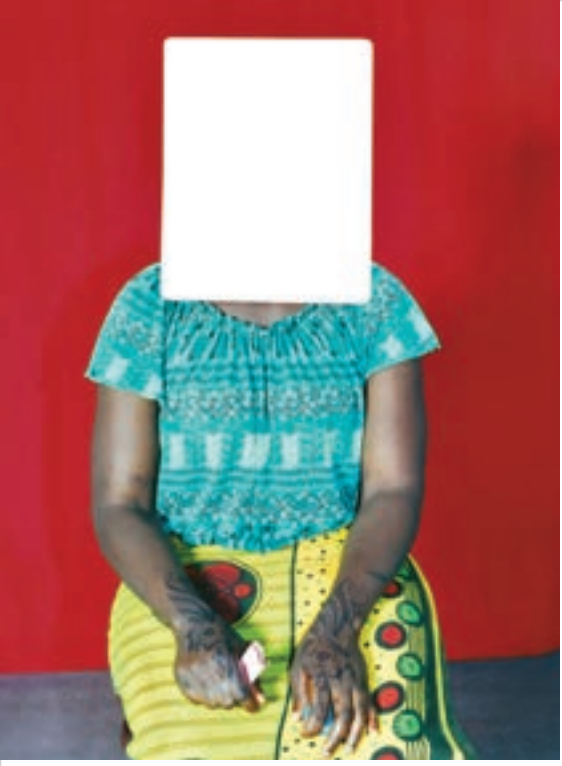


LISTENING TO IMAGES | TINA M. CAMPT

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INTRODUCTION

LISTENING TO IMAGES

An Exercise in Counterintuition

Like any good introduction, this chapter might best be described as a "throat-clearing gesture"—the kind that introduces any inquiry with a series of queries and propositions that create an analytic space for thinking. My own space-making gesture ruminates on two central questions: how do we build a radical visual archive of the African Diaspora that grapples with the recalcitrant and the disaffected, the unruly and the dispossessed? Through what modalities of perception, encounter, and engagement do we constitute it? These two questions induce a volley of corollary queries. What is the place in this archive for images assumed only to register forms of institutional accounting or state management? How do we contend with images intended not to figure black subjects, but to delineate instead differential or degraded forms of personhood or subjection—images produced with the purpose of tracking, cataloging, and constraining the movement of blacks in and out of diaspora? What are their technologies of capture and what are the stakes of the forms of accounting that engendered these archives? These questions of archival practice have fueled my thinking for a number of years. In the pages that follow, they captivate my imagination in ways that return me to the same intellectual juncture at which I left off in the writings that directly precede it.

I ended my last book, *Images Matters*, with a childhood memory of my father's quiet hum—the hum of a man mourning the loss of his wife. On the night of my mother's funeral, surrounded by his entire family and all of

his friends in our home, my father hummed my mother's favorite Roberta Flack song. Swaying back and forth while his eleven- and thirteen-year-old daughters sang over the record, he hummed instead of crying. A hum can signify a multitude of things. A hum can be mournful; it can be presence in absence or can take the form of a gritty moan in the foreground or a soothing massage in the background. It can celebrate, animate, or accompany. It can also irritate, haunt, grate, or distract.

On that indelible night in the basement of our home, my father hummed in the face of the unsayability of words. Even now, the memory of my father's quiet hum connects me to feelings of loss I cannot articulate in words, and it provokes in me a simultaneously overwhelming and unspeakable response. It is this exquisitely articulate modality of quiet—a sublimely expressive unsayability that exceeds both words, as well as what we associate with sound and utterance—that moves me toward a deeper understanding of the sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of black communities. My aim in the chapters that follow is to animate the recalcitrant affects of quiet as an undervalued lower range of quotidian audibility.

What is the relationship between quiet and the quotidian? Each term references something assumed to go unspoken or unsaid, unremarked, unrecognized, or overlooked. They name practices that are pervasive and ever-present yet occluded by their seeming absence or erasure in repetition, routine, or internalization. Yet the quotidian is not equivalent to passive everyday acts, and quiet is not an absence of articulation or utterance. Quiet is a modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact and affect, which creates the possibility for it to register as meaningful. At the same time, the quotidian must be understood as a practice rather than an act/ion. It is a practice honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life. For blacks in diaspora, both quiet and the quotidian are mobilized as everyday practices of refusal.

The relationship between quiet, the quotidian, and the everyday practices of refusal enacted and inherited by dispossessed subjects is the de-

fining tension of this book and the archives of images it explores. It focuses on a genre of image that is both quiet and quotidian: identification photography. These photos are produced predominantly for the regulatory needs of the state or the classificatory imperatives of colonization. Although some are repurposed by their recipients (as well as by artists and relations) as objects of personal recollection, collective or community memory, commemoration or attachment, identification photos are not produced at the desire of their sitters. They are images required of or imposed upon them by empire, science, or the state. The unexceptional format of identification photos and the routinized nature of bureaucratic images frequently lead to a failure to read or a blanket dismissal of them altogether, as we are tempted to see only their success in capturing muted governmentalized subjects of the state.

Rather than reducing identification photos to the instrumental functions for which they were created, *Listening to Images* engages these images as conduits of an unlikely interplay between the vernacular and the state. Taking a counterintuitive approach to understanding quiet as well as the quotidian, it theorizes the forms of subjectivity enacted through the vernacular practice of identification photography. I consider the quotidian dimensions of these imaging practices not in the traditional sense of a site of social reproduction; I engage them instead as instances of rupture and refusal.

At the heart of this book is a proposition that is also an intervention, one for which "listening to images" is at once a description and a method. It designates a method of recalibrating vernacular photographs as quiet, quotidian practices that give us access to the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects. It is a method that opens up the radical interpretive possibilities of images and state archives we are most often inclined to overlook, by engaging the paradoxical capacity of identity photos to rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce.

Throughout the book my arguments emerge from what I consider

the endlessly generative space of the counterintuitive. The foundational counterintuition that serves as my first point of departure is a contention that, contrary to what might seem common sense, quiet must not be conflated with silence. Quiet registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focused attention. Analogously, quiet photography names a heuristic for attending to the lower range of intensities generated by images assumed to be mute. Redirecting Ariella Azoulay's evocative proposal to "watch" rather than look at photographs (2008, 16),[1] the choice to "listen to" rather than simply "look at" images is a conscious decision to challenge the equation of vision with knowledge by engaging photography through a sensory register that is critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations: sound.

In his foundational writings developing the conceptual framework of the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy defines sound and music, in particular, as a crucial modality of what he calls "a politics of transfiguration." His musical transliteration of a sonic politics of transfiguration invites us to attend to the "lower frequency" through which these transfigurations are made audible and accessible (37).[2] Taking inspiration from Gilroy, it is through sound that I seek a deeper engagement with the forgotten histories and suppressed forms of diasporic memory that these images transmit. I theorize sound as an inherently embodied process that registers at multiple levels of the human sensorium. To invoke another counterintuition that serves as a second point of theoretical departure, while it may seem an inherent contradiction in terms, sound need not be heard to be perceived. Sound can be listened to, and, in equally powerful ways, sound can be felt; it both touches and moves people.[3] In this way, sound must therefore be theorized and understood as a profoundly haptic form of sensory contact. My arguments in the chapters that follow extend the range and scope of our understanding of sound by returning to the fundamental definition of what constitutes sound and sonic perception, starting deliberately and specifically with the lowest sonic frequencies of all.

Frequency: In acoustics, the number of complete vibrations or cycles occurring per unit of time in a vibrating system such as a column of

air. Frequency is the primary determinant of the listener's perception of pitch. (*Harvard Dictionary of Music Online*)

Audible frequency: A periodic vibration whose frequency is audible to the average human. The generally accepted standard range of audible frequencies is 20 to 20,000 Hz. Frequencies below 20 Hz are generally felt rather than heard, assuming the amplitude of the vibration is great enough. (Wikipedia.com)

In his celebrated 2003 monograph, *In the Break*, Fred Moten asks, what is "the sound that precedes the image"? Departing from Moten, my invitation not just to look but to listen as well to quiet photos requires us to embrace a different understanding of "sound"—a scientific definition of sound as "frequency." To a physicist, audiologist, or musicologist, sound consists of more than what we hear. It is constituted primarily by vibration and contact and is defined as a wave resulting from the back-and-forth vibration of particles in the medium through which it travels. The lower frequencies of these images register as what I describe as "felt sound"—sound that, like a hum, resonates in and as vibration. Audiologists refer to such frequencies as infrasound: ultra-low frequencies emitted by or audible only to certain animals, such as elephants, rhinoceroses, and whales. While the ear is the primary organ for perceiving sound, at lower frequencies, infrasound is often only *felt* in the form of vibrations through contact with parts of the body. Yet all sound consists of more than what we hear. It is an inherently embodied modality constituted by vibration and contact.

Listening to Images explores the lower frequencies of transfiguration enacted at the level of the quotidian, in the everyday traffic of black folks with objects that are both mundane and special: photographs. What are the "lower frequencies" of these quotidian practices, and how do we engage their transfigurative potential? As a vernacular practice mobilized by black people in diaspora, photography is an everyday strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of visibility. Vernacular photographs are banal as well as singular; they articulate both the ordinary and the ex-

ceptional texture of black life. My approach to these images, archives, and the image-making practices that produced them revalues the quotidian as a site of cultural formation that Georges Perec designates as "infra-ordinary"[4]—everyday practices we don't always notice and whose seeming insignificance requires excessive attention. Attending to the infra-ordinary and the quotidian reveals why the trivial, the mundane, or the banal are in fact essential to the lives of the dispossessed and the possibility of black futurity.

This book proposes a haptic mode of engaging the sonic frequencies of photographs. It offers an alternate take on "watching" photos that materializes their transfigurations, albeit not in the form of statements of fact or as narratives of transit or mobility. They are accessible instead at the haptic frequency of vibration, like the vibrato of a hum felt more in the throat than in the ear. Each chapter explores a selection of photos that I define as "quiet" to the extent that, before they are analyzed, they must be attended to by way of the unspoken relations that structure them. I do so by setting them in a kind of "sensorial" relief that juxtaposes the sonic, haptic, historical, and affective backgrounds and foregrounds through and against which we view photographs. As we will see, it is an archival interrogation of the multiple temporalities of visual archives grounded in a black feminist mode of analysis that is profoundly grammatical in nature.

Listening to Images theorizes the anterior sensibilities of a series of photographic archives of the African Diaspora by unpacking the forms of photographic accounting and capture that these images enact, and how these forms of capture and accounting affect their viewers. Engaging these images as decidedly haptic objects is a method that requires us to interrogate both the archival encounter, as well as the content of archival collections, in multiple tenses and multiple temporalities and in ways that attend to both their stakes and possibilities. It is a method that reckons with the fissures, gaps, and interstices that emerge when we refuse to accept the "truth" of images and archives the state seeks to proffer through its production of subjects posed to produce particular "types" of regulated and regulatable subjects. The disordering and disruptive archival practice

enacted in these pages thus uses sound and frequency to question the grammar of the camera (as both an event of photography and a photographed event[5]) as well as the haptic temporalities of photographic capture as pernicious instruments of knowledge production.

As a series of four linked essays, each of the chapters that follow stages an encounter with an archive of identification photos of blacks in diaspora that enacts a practice of "listening" to quiet photography. Here again, listening to images is constituted as a practice of looking beyond what we see and attuning our senses to the other affective frequencies through which photographs register. It is a haptic encounter that foregrounds the frequencies of images and how they move, touch, and connect us to the *event* of the photo. Such a connection may begin as a practice of "careful looking," but it does not end there. Focusing on the forms of refusal visualized through these images, the book rethinks foundational approaches to diaspora studies that emphasize mobility, resistance, and expressiveness. It uses the conceptual frameworks of quiet, stasis, and refusal to reclaim the black quotidian as a signature idiom of diasporic culture and black futurity.

Chapter 1, "Quiet Soundings: The Grammar of Black Futurity," examines an archive of identification photographs of blacks in diaspora that complicates simple depictions of diasporic movement, settlement, and emplacement: passport photos. It explores the frequency of a collection of found passport photos of black British men in postwar Birmingham in the United Kingdom by juxtaposing the images with two dissonant but related archives of vernacular photographs. The subjects staged in these images are presumed to capture mute supplicants of governmentality. Listening attentively to these quiet photos gives us access to the registers of fugitivity they simultaneously animate and suspend, as well as the creative strategies of refusal they at once reveal and conceal.

Building on these counterintuitive suppositions, chapter 2, "Striking Poses in a Tense Grammar: Stasis and the Frequency of Black Refusal," proceeds from a third counterintuitive contention—that stasis is neither an absence nor a cessation of motion; it is a continual balancing of mul-

tiple forces in equilibrium. The chapter theorizes stasis as a temporal modality of diasporic motion held in suspension, in ways that hover between stillness and movement. It juxtaposes two additional archives of vernacular photography of blacks in diaspora: late nineteenth-century ethnographic photos of rural Africans in the Eastern Cape and early twentieth-century studio portraits of African Christians in South African urban centers. Focusing on the sonic frequency and creative reappropriation of these portraits by the South African photographer Santu Mofokeng in his acclaimed work, *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950*, the essay explores the continuities and disruptions between vernacular portraiture and compulsory photography. Viewed together, these images blur the line between "postured performances" and "compelled poses," and, in the process, they redefine what it means to "strike a pose."

Chapter 3, "Haptic Temporalities: The Quiet Frequency of Touch," stages an embodied encounter with an archive of quiet photography intended to regulate and literally "arrest" the movement of a class of individuals deemed criminal by the state: convict photos. The chapter juxtaposes two archives of incarcerated black subjects: convict photographs taken between 1893 and 1904 of inmates at Breakwater Prison in Cape Town, South Africa, and mid-twentieth-century mug shots of African American Freedom Riders in the US South. It uses these images to explore the possibilities of what we apprehend—and what we apprehend differently—when we engage criminal identification photos through their physical, affective, and archival touches.

The through-line that connects each of the chapters is a critique of the limits of contemporary discourses of resistance and a rigorous engagement with the discourse of fugitivity in African Diaspora studies and black feminist theory. I theorize the practice of refusal as an extension of the range of creative responses black communities have marshaled in the face of racialized dispossession. In this context, refusal is not a response to a state of exception or extreme violence. I theorize it instead as practices honed in response to sustained, everyday encounters with exigency and duress that rupture a predictable trajectory of flight. Toward this end, the

final chapter of the book is written as a coda that grapples with the grammar of black futurity as it confronts us in the contemporary moment. It assesses the frequency of a very different set of criminal identification photos and their reappropriation by urban African American youth struggling to develop their own practices of refusing the statistical probability of premature black death in the twenty-first century.

Listening to Images reclaims the photographic archive of precarious and dispossessed black subjects in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries by attending to the quiet but resonant frequencies of images that have been historically dismissed and disregarded. Refocusing our attention on their sonic and haptic frequencies and on the grammar of black fugitivity and refusal that they enact reveals the expressiveness of quiet, the generative dimensions of stasis, and the quotidian reclamations of interiority, dignity, and refusal marshaled by black subjects in their persistent striving for futurity.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 16.
2. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 37.
3. One of the most moving examples of the affective tactility of sound is the experience of deaf people listening, responding to, and producing music. There are numerous instances of deaf people experiencing sound and enjoying music in particular through physical sensations. This capacity to experience sound in ways that bypass hearing and the ears has been explored most notably by the National Orchestra of Wales, which staged a series of workshops and concerts for deaf children who passionately responded to the music of the orchestra by lying on specially designed "sound boxes" through which they "listened" by feeling the contact of sound waves on their bodies. Aharona Ament describes these embodied sonic sensations as "feelings that hum along the body when the music infiltrates the molecules in the walls and in ourselves as well." See http://gapersblock.com/transmission/2010/07/22/beyond_vibrations_the_deaf_musical_experience/; http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-21601130.
4. Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. My thanks to Anne Garreta for pointing out this useful reference.
5. In her 2011 essay, "Photography," Ariella Azoulay argues that no individual is ever in sole control of what she describes as the "event of photography." She explains, "The camera generates events other than the photographs anticipated as coming into being through its mediation, and the latter are not necessarily subject to the full control of the agent who holds the camera" (70). Azoulay further differentiates between the event of photography and the photographed event that a photographer attempts to capture. "Both the

camera and the event that it catalyzes are for the most part restricted by the skilled gaze of the spectator in order to see the 'thing itself,' that is to say, that which will become the photographed event. But the rendering marginal of the event of photography, displays of indifference toward it or even the attempt to ignore it altogether can never obliterate its existence or the traces that this event which occurs between the various partners of the act of photography leaves on the photographed frame" (75). Azoulay makes two significant conclusions that undergird my own approach to engaging quiet photography. First, "The photograph is a platform upon which traces from the encounter between those present in the situation of photography are inscribed, whether the participants are present by choice, through force, knowingly, indifferently, as a result of being overlooked or as a consequence of deceit" (76). Second, "The event of photography is never over. It can only be suspended, caught in the anticipation of the next encounter that will allow for its actualization: an encounter that might allow a certain spectator to remark on the excess or lack inscribed in the photography so as to re-articulate every detail including those that some believe to be fixed in place by the glossy emulsion of the photograph" (77).

1. Quiet Soundings

1. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 39, emphasis added. The future perfect tense (e.g., future anterior in French) expresses action in the future *before* another action in the future. It can also be described as the *past in the future*. For example: The train will leave the station at 9 am. You will arrive at the station at 9:15 am. When you arrive, the train *will have already left* the station.
2. Prefiguration refers to the attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present: either in parallel with, or in the course of, adversarial social movement protest. It was coined by Carl Boggs as the desire to embody "within the ongoing political practice of a movement . . . those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal." Prefigurativism is the attempt to enact prefigurative politics. See Boggs, "Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control," 100.
3. See Bacigalupo's catalog essay, "Leftovers," as well as Sandrine Perrot's historical contextualization of the history of Acholiland, "Pieces of Life, Pieces of War," in *Gulu Real Art Studio*.
4. See Lewitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966."
5. See the interviews conducted by Bacigalupo with customers of the studio published in the exhibit catalog, *Gulu Real Art Studio* (110–167).