

Book Review: *Listening to Images* by Tina. M. Campt

R. Alexia McFee
Summer 2018

Visual Culture Studies

In *Listening to Images*, Tina Campt combines black feminist inquiry and diasporic visual culture to suggest that resistance and refusal are to be found in photographs historically used to surveil and subject black bodies. Relying on archives from the 19th to 21st century, Campt examines photographs that carries ‘low frequencies’ that she contends have been both disregarded and discarded - using them to reconstruct the subjectivities of black subjects positioned as mute. Locating her arguments in the work of Hortense Spillers and Alexander Weheliye who have looked at state mechanisms that structure lives as human and not quite human, she argues that such photos forecloses the humanity of the subjects captured, reducing them to subjects of surveillance as criminals, immigrants or spectacles. While each chapter is different in terms of geographical space and types of photographs, Campt ties them together through what she calls “quietness,” “unsayable truths,” “counterintuition” and “frequencies of possibilities.”

In the first to third chapters of the book, Campt looks at and listens to passport photos, ethnographic photos and convict photos from the black diaspora to argue that they “rupture the sovereign gaze of the regime that created them by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce” (5). To do this, she asks that we think of the quotidian forms of refusal and fugitivity that show up through quiet and stasis and thus proposes

a reconceptualization of agency, autonomy, and resistance. Specifically, looking at the “remains” of identification photos from which the faces had been removed alongside passport photos of black men in the UK, she argues that the evidenced patterns of similarity had produced multiplicity and difference that would deny the uniformity of the black diasporic subject. Beyond the difference in posture that led to questions of who they were and the different experiences to have brought them to that point, Campt argues that they highlighted the diasporic subjects’ claim to their rights as citizens with freedoms to move and refusal to stay in one’s place - even as images were meant to track and regulate mobility.

Further, in chapter two, by looking at ethnographic photographs of women taken in rural South Africa, Campt strengthens her argument that quiet does not mean silence. Here, she distinguishes between stasis and stillness and argues that the frequency of the photos is at their muscular tension- a tension evidenced in the angles of their bodies and the direction of their gaze. Campt asks “What shifts when we think of self-fashioning as not necessarily an inextricable expression of agential intention? (59) to move us to think about this stasis as embodied resistance and also the various ways that we may think through agency. Campt uses stasis here to mean, what she tells us in her introduction, that is, “a temporal modality of diasporic motion held in suspension in ways that hover between stillness and movement” (10).

In a similar fashion to chapter one, in chapter three Campt examines serial photographs, in this case, those that restrict mobility as opposed to enabling it (albeit surveilled as with passports and IDs) - convict photographs. She writes about the overwhelming experience of reviewing ledgers and the album of convict photographs from Breakwater Prison in South Africa. Describing the difficulties with trying to establish patterns of codification she articulates

how such mechanisms rendered its subjects mute and the different modalities of inquiry that were required to restore their presence- “the quiet frequency of touch.”

The final section of the book “CODA” cements Camp’s argument about the ways photographs have been deployed to subject, occlude and mark and naturalize bodies as violable. Camp’s narration of her misremembering of a mugshot of a boy convicted of murder is particularly poignant and indicative of the “power of photographic images to interpellate black bodies” (106). She writes that the camera “was an instrumental tool brought to bear on the body to produce images with the exceptional legal status of visual documents that furnished irrefutable evidence of what came to be defined as the “criminal body.” She, therefore, sees photographs as evidence of encounters that we cannot take at ‘face value’ but that we need to ask what the circumstances that framed such encounters are? Further, this section clarifies Camp’s assertions about frequencies of possibilities where she examines a series of photos meant to depict two different but equally authentic aspects of the subjects’ lives. In ways similar to Weheliye and Sharan Holland in *The Erotic Life of Racism* (who have commented on the ways the past present and future are always acting on each other) Camp suggests that photographs are not just about the past but projects you into the future, not one that will necessarily happen but one that you want to happen- a sort of diasporic longing captured in Nadia Ellis’ *Territories of the Soul*. #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, the only online archive which she examined in this book, Camp suggests speaks into a future marked by racial violence and premature death. The strategic use of the images give two authentic accounts of the subject but suggest that the less respectable version is what would be deployed as evidence that those bodies were deserving of death. The use of this archive is what helps us to answer a question Camp poses: “How does a black

feminist grapple with a future that hasn't happened but must, while witnessing the mounting disposability of black lives that don't seem to matter?' (p. 107).

Besides her clearly stated and manifested aim of reconstructing the subjectivity of black diasporic subjects, Camp's work challenges the archive as a site of knowledge production offering an alternative way of reading/listening against established theoretical and methodological frameworks. Paying attention to the physicality and location of the archives themselves, and the historical context in which the contents emerged Camp practices an approach of moving from seeing to hearing/listening via touching. Her work is moving and leaves one to contemplate the taken for granted, common-sense narratives that she has shown to be specially engineered to malign and dispossess non-white racialized subjects. The use of different archives, across different geographical space and technologies points to the necessity of readings and listening to multiple sources together to uncover alternative stories- Camp's work bears testimony to this overwhelming but rewarding approach to reconstructing subjectivities of those rendered mute.

Other references

ELLIS, N. (2015). *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora*. Durham; London: Duke University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctv1134f7w

Holland, S. (2012). *The Erotic Life of Racism*. DURHAM; LONDON: Duke University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctv11g96gx