

Black futurity in Tina M. Campt's *Listening to Images***Arifa Banu**

MA English

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

CES, SLL & CS

Abstract

In *Listening to Images*, we see an archive of images belonging to the African Diaspora which has been subjected to historical negligence over the years. While exploring this visual archive of images, Tina M. Campt introduces us to the methodology of listening to images, as the title of her work suggests. This act of listening prompts us to pay attention to other spatial and temporal dimensions of the image and even locate in them a practice of refusal by the African Diasporic subjects. According to her, these images are driven by a desire to have control over the creation of their future. Defining black feminist futurity she writes, “The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn’t yet happened but must. It is an attachment to a belief in what should be true, which impels us to realize that aspiration” (17). In this paper I will attempt to understand the different ways in which Campt is working through the interiorities of images.

Keywords: black futurity, African diaspora, black feminism, black fugitivity, resistance, refusal.

Tina M. Campt’s methodology is to locate the practice of futurity not in explicit revolutionary acts but in the mundane and quiet practices of the black community. Instead of looking, she introduces the dimension of listening with an ear attuned to quiet frequencies and locating resistance in them so as to create an alternative understanding of refusal. She goes on to explore “quiet photography” and treats the images as sites containing the realization of a future in the form of resistance. The cover of her book *Listening to Images* shows us four images with

their faces cut out. Instead of their faces there is a white square which marks the absence of faces and thus the “points of memory”¹ shift from the face to the rest of the body.

In *Image Matters*, Tina M. Campt combines the terms ‘orphan’ and ‘fugitive’ where an orphan is associated with docile behaviour and is utterly helpless. An orphan is subject to infantilisation as well as feminisation. This predetermined notion about the orphan denies any form of fugitivity that an orphan may exercise (90). By extending this argument to images, one can say that the images only appear to be docile because they have been orphaned. However, they do carry within them different forms of fugitivity. These orphaned images are thus taken by Campt and are seen through the lens of black fugitivity and black futurity. Taking different sets of images such as passport photos of black British men, photos of rural African men and women for missionary documentation, convict photographs of Breakwater prison in Cape Town, mugshots of African Americans, and lastly pictures of young African Americans who take control over the grammar of black futurity.

Hortense J. Spillers’ essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” begins with a few predetermined names for a black woman that intervene with the future that they would have created for themselves. These names carry within them a heavy burden of predetermined and ahistorical meanings and highlight the authority with whom the power of naming rests. The names are given under operating power relations and carry a violence within the very act of naming based on “markers so loaded with mythical prepossessions that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean” (64).

The title of the essay refers to the creation of an American Grammar Book for the African-American men and women whose lives were defined by the Atlantic Slave Trade. This grammar has risen out of historical circumstances of dehumanization of black subjects and reduction of their body to a commodity. Regarding the relationship between the mother and the child, there are two important points that she makes, one is that because there was a consistent

¹ Marianne Hirsch elaborates on Barthes’ notion of points of memory, “Points of memory produce *touching*, *piercing insights* that traverse temporal, spatial, and experiential divides” (Hirsch 63).

demand for the reproduction of conditions of slavery and women were reduced to mere commodities for that production. "Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political manoeuvre, not at all gender-related, gender-specific" (Spillers 67). They had no rights over their children and thus, both the male and female subjects were ungendered subjects as they were dehumanized. Secondly, the relation of the child with its parents is an ambiguous space because the child is separated from its mother and father legally and is not free to exercise any filial obligations. Thus, a grammar of futurity was imposed by law upon the familial structure of black subjects. Such severing of relations between the child and its parents refused the black subjects to exercise any form of control over their future. The passport photos which Camppt studies show us the moment of opportunity that they got to create a future for themselves. In this way the passport photos become a creative praxis of black fugitivity where one has an aspiration to realise a future that is desired.

Spillers makes a distinction between body and flesh, where flesh "does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse" (67). This can be understood in light of Tina M. Camppt's discussion of "stillness" and "stasis"² as the muscular reaction of the face seen in images which connote a language of the flesh. Similarly, Spillers gives a definition of flesh as "the concentration of "ethnicity" that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away" (Spillers 67). Thus the muscular tensions convey an affective response to the gaze of the photographer. Through this display of stasis and by identification of this stasis one can infer the relationship between the subject and the photographer. Relaxed muscles and happy faces convey that there is an affinity and familiarity between the two. However, tense muscles and taut skin is a response to the gaze of the photographer. Camppt sees stasis as a response rather than a characteristic feature of the image. As "an effortful equilibrium achieved through a laboured balancing of opposing forces and flows" (*Listening to Images* 52). She re-defines the meaning of the photograph by foregrounding that the truth of the image does not lie in what is

² Camppt gives her own definition of stasis as, "tensions produced by holding a complex set of forces in suspension" (*Listening to Images* 51)

seen but in the held muscular response of the subject. Camppt however, does not stay within the limits of the four corners of the image in order to locate meanings. With each set of images that she encounters, she recognizes the larger historical framework and archive which these images are a part of. It is only in the relations that these images have formed over years that the truth of the subjects can be listened to. New meanings are created by knowing the purpose for which the photographic studios were made, or how and why are the labels of these images different from others. Her task is thus to intervene in the institutional memory of the images and re-configure the memory from the perspective of the subject. Similar to what Spillers discusses with names, these images have been targets of “mythical presuppositions” and in order to come closer to the truth of these images, the burden of presuppositions has to be worked through (64). Thus, the names and images of black subjects are deeply embedded in the fabric of myths. Myths function here similar to how Barthes defines them as, “The function of the myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short, a perceptible absence” (Barthes 142). This absence makes it difficult to see beyond the function of myth which operates with the assistance of historical reality. This is one reason why Camppt lays stress upon the existence of quiet frequencies and also shows us how to listen to them.

Tina M. Camppt finds a prison album of the Breakwater Prison in South Africa and studies it as a haptic archive. Engaging with the lower frequencies helps us in identifying the refusal and resistance that is a crucial aspect of these images which were originally intended to be images frozen in time as witnesses of their criminality. “Haptics, or the multiple forms of contact and touch that characterize any encounter with a photo album, commence the moment we feel their weight, open their pages, or inhale the musty smell of worn, aged, or deteriorating paper, plastic, or hide. They touch us as we run palms or fingers over glossy squares of paper, albumen, or metal prints carefully positioned and inscribed with sentimental notations, dates, and places” (*Listening to Images* 71). Haptic temporalities refers to the number of times a photo has been touched, seen, or even felt. It is the number of encounters with the image that add to it multiple events and contexts which have a quiet frequency. Close attention is needed to decipher and excavate meaning through the physicality of the photo album or the chapped edges of an image. This relation between the haptic frequency (whether it is none or a lot) gives us new meanings. It

is another methodology of moving beyond the image and listening to it through the touches it has experienced. In order to attend to the lower frequencies, one can take recourse to the haptic temporalities which include, “the moment of photographic capture; the temporality of the photographic re/production of material objects; their assembly and reconfiguration as nodes of state, social, and cultural formation; and the present and future temporalities of their interactions with researchers, archivists, and the broader community” (72).

In this way, there is a whole context in which the image is situated. Since it cannot speak for itself, these different haptic temporalities associated with the image are used to aid the voice of the image. It is also important that in this haptic relation with the image, if the viewer is a family member, friend, or a lover. Such an association is a personal one. Whereas images for prison albums are intended only for the use of institutions and thus become a form of institutional memory.

The photo of the child hiding his face in the lap of the mother in the cover of the book shows a “haptics of embrace” which is discussed in detail in her work *Image Matters*. Studying images of a black German girl Fasia Jansen who is a part of a close knit familial and social network as shown by her pictures, Camppt says that even though she is located in an environment of familiarity and solidarity, it does not elude the fact that Jansen is nevertheless subjugated by the workings of the Nazi regime. Thus, the image contains within it this paradox of what it shows and what it hides. The practice of fugitivity is hidden in the images but it is not impossible to undo the layers under which we can recognize fugitivity because it is under oppressive regimes that such practices emerge. It is not a cryptic or mythic process to recognize such practices of refusal and fugitivity.

The Breakwater Prison Album of convicts of 1893 is a collection of images of prisoners who are photographed within the prison premises instead of being taken to a studio to get photographed. These pictures follow Bertillon’s anthropometric system which is based on physical measurements as well as mugshots of the prisoners for the purpose of accounting. “Whether affixed to index cards or mounted on the pages of an album, what they share is the fact that they were made for the purpose of accounting- to account for and to hold accountable”

(Campt, *Listening to Images* 80). But instead, “they were made to provide visual evidence of criminality and incarceration and to telegraphically inscribe that evidence onto the future of their photographic subjects” (81). Thus, the purpose of these mugshots is entirely for future referrals. It is an attempt to arrest the truth of the individual by moving beyond the purpose of documentation and accounting and instead creating these subjects as criminals in the process of documentation. The purpose of documentation was not temporary, but instead a step in the process of cementing the future of these convicts as criminals so that they can be used to do manual labour. “These photos guarantee the futurity of these subjects’ fugitivity as instantiations of their perpetual pursuit as once and future criminals and manageable units of labour” (98).

In her book, *Image Matters*, Campt discusses black fugitivity in greater detail. She defines fugitivity as opposed to the docility that the images are supposed to manifest. The desire for fugitivity of the subject should not be overshadowed by the viewers’ projection of their own expectations of meanings from the images. “Rather than instantiating the heroic stature of the orphanistas’ act of reclamation and the mortality, fragility, and dependency of the orphan work, and rather than seeking the redemption or recovery of the orphan image, it is perhaps more productive to consider the fugitivity of the orphan and of the orphaned image in particular” (90).

In the chapter, Black futurity and the Echo of Premature Death in *Listening to Images*, she ruminates on the foresight that black subjects have of their predetermined future. They do so by contrasting images of what the State would show them as and thus portray them as flat subjects. Amidst the many images of these subjects, there is a premature idea of how their future *will be written*. “So, how do we live the future we want to see now when confronted with the statistical probability of premature black (particularly male) mortality? How do we create an alternative future by living both the future we want to see, while inhabiting its potential foreclosure at the same time?” (Campt 107). There is the looming question that, faced by contemporary challenges, how does one create a diversion from the larger narrative which fixes the future of black identities and closes all possibilities of imagining a future that must arrive? Through the images that she shows us, there is a “praxis of refusal” that will only show itself when one attunes to the quiet frequencies in the act of juxtaposing their images as and how they

see themselves and how the State would show them. There is a declaration which claims their future as only belonging to them. The rights of futurity reside only within the subject. Campt mentions:

I have argued throughout the book that practicing refusal means embracing a state of black fugitivity, albeit not as a “fugitive” on the run or seeking escape. It is not a simple act of opposition or resistance. It is neither a relinquishing of possibility nor a capitulation to negation. It is a fundamental renunciation of the terms imposed upon black subjects that reduce black life to always already suspect by refusing to accept or deny these terms as their truth (*Listening to Images* 113).

The grammar of how one remembers an image in memory and whether it is a true copy of the real image is also based on the circumstances and contexts under which it was seen. Marianne Hirsch talks about projection of subjectivities where one interprets images according to our own expected desires. Instead of a paranoid way of looking, she proposes reparative looking as a more suitable way to deal with images (74-75). The memory of an image can remain in the mind as a mismemory for a long period of time unless one witnesses the original image again. The example that Campt gives of Terrance Jonson’s image in her memory, highlights how even the ‘transfiguration of her memory’ was subjected to pinning down the future of Terrance as that of a criminal and as “evidence of his conviction” (*Listening to Images* 106). She remembered the image of Terrance vividly as a mugshot. After searching the archives, she realises that it was not a mugshot but an image of a vulnerable fifteen-year-old in hand cuffs who was being taken to jail in a police van. The difference between the memory of these two images, speaks about how distorted it became over the years and one non-existent version solidified in memory at some point. Her memory was distorted and it was transfigured according to the rules by which the opportunity of creating a black futurity is denied to black subjects. There is thus, ‘a premature echo of death’ associated with the black subjects.

The two ways that Campt mentions which constitute ‘the praxis of refusal’ and ‘the praxis of futurity’ are exercised both in the photos of convicts of Breakwater Prison as well as

the passport photos. The frequencies of these sets of photos are different, but not non-existent. If the photos in the last section in which the black subjects have more actively refused by using death itself as a practice of refusal, the other sets of images are also sites of refusal albeit at lower frequencies. “Refusing the impossibility of black futurity in the contemporary moment demands extremely creative forms of fugitivity” (*Listening to Images* 113). It is a refusal that makes possible the grammar of black futurity and this refusal has to be a constant and continuing force. In order to have agency over the grammar of one’s futurity in contemporary times, it is necessary to be able to listen to the everyday and mundane practices of refusal- otherwise the lower frequencies would be mistaken for an absence of refusal.

Images can be read/looked at/listened to in different ways. Marianne Hirsch discusses the ideal way to get acquainted with images is not by appropriating the suffering of the subject or only registering the affective response. An archive of images should be seen from such a critical distance that allows a reworking and re-animation (108). Camp’s work also maintains the balance in relation to an image which brings to fore elements which extend beyond projection of subjectivities. Her greater aim in listening to images is to pay attention to the visual journey of refusal in the images which have been historically dismissed as having no radical potential. The successful attempt to tease out refusal and resistance from these images creates an alternative grammar book of black feminist futurity.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, The Noonday Press, 1972.
- Camp, Tina M. *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- . *Listening to Images*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65–81. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>. Accessed 10 Jun. 2022.