

Countless Ways of Knowing: Looking at Images Beyond the Frame as a Practice of Liberatory Pedagogy.

During Arthur Jafa's 2017 exhibition *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions* at the Serpentine Gallery, I was invited to develop a workshop for educators exploring anti-racist pedagogic practices. I drew on the archival nature of Jafa's exhibition made up of images of black social life from historic and family photographs, images captured by photographers and contemporary images drawn from sources such as Instagram and YouTube to propose a mixtape methodology. I asked the group to consider: Why Black Lives Matter? How do we as educators develop discursive and creative opportunities to support the understanding of why Black Lives Matter? Key to this was the idea of developing *Countless Ways of Knowing*¹ and understanding, through working with images beyond representation, to develop narratives beyond the frame of any single image creating connections to explore other possible ways of understanding and thinking about race, racism, and the role of images as an emancipatory possibility.

As children, my twin sister and I often sat together in an armchair looking at old family albums. We were children of immigrant parents who came to the U.K. in 1967 after the 1966 coup that saw the downfall of Ghana's revolutionary Pan-Africanist first President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. Our dad was an amateur photographer and with his Russian Zenit S.L.R. camera, he took photos of family members, places of interest, weddings, funerals, parties, and more. Through these photographs, "objects of personal recollection" (Campt 2017:5), we could put faces to the names of the people mentioned in the stories we were told about family. There was a particular set of photos that fascinated me. These were of my parents, friends and other family members posed in front of world maps. What was captured in these images was the way that they would like to be seen as new arrivals in the U.K. proud, bold, and worldly. Smart, intelligent, and ready to embrace all possibilities. The men dressed in suits and the women in contemporary Kaba and Slit² styles, in keeping with the style in Abrokyirɛ,³ these images

¹ A methodology I have used for several projects in higher education that draws on the ideas of theory as a liberatory practice from bell hook's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and Moten and Harney's ideas around study as what you do with other people (Moten 2012:

) in a position of reciprocity in which "We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything." (Moten & Harney 2013:20)

² A Ghanaian style of women's dress consisting of a fitted top and long skirt, that originated from the loose top and wrapper cloth traditional style of African women's dress.

³ Abroad or foreign countries in Akan. Pronounced *A-bro-chi-rei*. Often used to refer to Europe or America

presented my parents and their friends in what Tina Campt has described as a state of “visual emergence” (Campt 2012:5).

Later when I started working with images as an artist and curator, I would be exposed to the different relationships black subjects have with the camera. In my undergraduate studies I picked up several volumes of *Living Races of Mankind* (Hutchinson, Gregory, Lydekker: 1985) a popular ethnographic journal from the early 1900s, that depicted African and other “ethnic” peoples as objects and specimens to be curios to be studied and marvelled at, presenting what Carleton S. Coon and Edward E. Hunt Jr, describe in their 1967 review for *Current Anthropology* as a “racial history” (112). Reading the descriptions that accompanied the numerous photographs of the people, it was clear to see that the subject had no agency in the creation of their images and that the authors did not see these people as agents of their own destinies. I would later work as a project researcher on an exhibition at *The Photographers Gallery* entitled *Brixton Studio*. Central to the exhibition were photographs taken by studio photographer Harry Jacobs, who, for over 50 years, took photographs of the migrant Caribbean and African communities in his studio in Landor Road. These photographs, with the same tropical scene and flower basket backgrounds, are much like the photographs of my parents and their friends. They are a record of what Tina Campt describes in the introduction of her 2012 book *Image Matters*, as the “choices” and “intentions” (Campt, 2012: 6) of the subject. These photographs record not only the moment of the image but also “a larger set of relationships outside and beyond the frame,” (2012: 6) what Campt describes as the “social life of the photo” (Campt, 2012: 6)

Contemporary image-making is immediate and intangible, but there is still intentionality in the creation of images, especially in a time when the visibility of black and people of colour is still highly contested, even as it seems that people have more control over how they are represented. The prevalence of image-making technology on our phones has meant that we are not only able to capture moments when we look and feel good, or memorable moments of joy, emergence, or possibility; we are also able to capture moments of violence and violation on black and brown bodies. The ethnographic images from *Living Races of Mankind*, like the popular images of lynching from the late 1800s and early 1900s⁴, were sold as curios and amusements to private owners. Images of contemporary lynching, such as the infamous

⁴ As seen in the Without Sanctuary Exhibition at Autograph ABP, Rivington Place in July 2011

Rodney King beating captured on VHS video and the death of George Floyd on May 25th 2020, captured on a camera phone are prevalent in our contemporary image experience. These images go *viral*. The images of George Floyd's death were shared in the quiet of the mass confinement of a global pandemic, triggering an awakening of those who had not seen, and may have chosen not to see, anti-black racism. There was something about the quiet of the pandemic that allowed people to finally see something that many of us experience as an underlying frequency of our day-to-day existence. Much like with the quiet of a rainy day that sparked the curiosity of two small children to sit quietly and explore the images in their family album, the pandemic brought a quiet that enabled a seeing that went beyond a curious occurrence that would go down in history, to the awareness of the continuing injustice of the legacies of colonialism and enslavement on black bodies. Suddenly through the power of the *viral* image, the message that my parents, their friends and the visitors to Harry Jacobs studio were trying to depict through self-representation was heard. *Our lives matter*. Black Lives Matter.

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References

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