

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-

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glossary

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