BE/HOLD/EN A DUTY OF CARE

Holly Graham

Consider this image
Photograph as tactile object
Site of material
Cultural practice
Culture
Shock
Bodily relation
You to me
Me to you

What do you see?

to have and/or to hold
holding space
leaning against or holding
a slow space
in the hold
navigating
or processing
fast paced
an almost varnishy dipped black

I want to think about attending to images, collections of images that simultaneously don't belong to you, and yet do. Found photographs taken by others, of others. Orphaned images that depict skin like your skin. Tentative groupings. Fragile, difficult, raw, fugitive, demanding of a tender engagement. Soft touch. Slow looking. Careful study.

BEHOLD

I am looking on my laptop at digital folders filled with images of blackamoor sweetmeats bowls and rum caddies, ceramic figurines flanking sugar bowls and carrying glass rum decanters, screenshots lifted from online museum catalogues, and auction house listings. The sugar bowls come as a pair, a mid-eighteenth-century design from the Meissen manufactory in Dresden, replicated across Europe throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries in variations of delicate porcelain and clumsy earthenware. The caricatured sculpted forms are intended to represent Africans and indigenous Americans, displayed symbolically beside the products of their labour, 'leaning against, or holding' vessels containing processed forms of sugar. Their skin is black, the colour black, 'a varnishy dipped black'. Their lips are painted an 'almost clown-like' red.

I am looking at photographic prints in boxes, stored at the Lambeth archives: 3,253 studio portrait images, according to the catalogue, some colour, some black and white, some mounted, some loose; most depicting sitters seated or standing in front of the same garden backdrop; all taken by late south-London based photographer Harry Jacobs from the late 1950s to the 1990s. The studio was particularly popular with individuals of African and Caribbean descent, and this is reflected in the collection. The vast majority of faces present are black faces, many of whom would have been only recently settled in the Brixton area towards the beginning of this period.

Behold: two very different collections of images, both intended to represent to some degree individuals from the African diaspora, a solicited African presence in Europe. I am looking with a tentative recognition because the skin depicted in these images makes reference to my own, in one instance directly as imaged flesh, and in another as an abstract description as Black the social construct, as black the colour. Both images whisper in

different registers, but both voice a provocation: 'Come here, look, we are you'. The 'we are you' enunciated in case of the latter may be read as a benign reference to ancestry, or in the former instance as a provocation of malicious intent, a jibe or taunting beckoning; but in both collections of images, the skin depicted speaks to and of my skin.

'A Note on Method' is Saidiya Hartman's foreword of sorts to her study on the lives of early twentieth-century black American women, viewed through the lens of survey photography. Hartman writes of looking, speaking, storytelling from 'inside the circle'[5], amidst the chorus, collective voice that centres its subjects. She intersperses her text with a multitude of voices to aid her in attending to narratives with holes; collections of materials threadbare in parts where the words and movements of the original actors have not been adequately recorded. Borrowing from Hartman's methods, I open with my own 'utterances from the chorus'[6]. The extracts of texts, developed alongside these two instances of looking, draw upon strands of research and conversations that have informed and performed central roles in two bodies of work within my studio practice, an annotation on the images studied. Yet the chorus is not solely constructed from verbal articulations, but also from the collective gestures, movements, and relations of the players. One might be bound to or enveloped by the chorus, birthed into the ensemble, and prompted to act. My engagement with these two photographic collections emerges from within the chorus as dialogue transmitted *via* an ancestral lineage punctuated by colonial forces, as a wire that tethers me, implicates me in some way, to the subjects represented in these photographs. I am the granddaughter of Windrush generation resettlers, child of their children, born on British soil, with veins channelling, skin inscribed with among a multitude of other stories histories of sugar and exploitative labour, empire and migration. Perhaps this is why there is something like a rawness or snagging when I look. A call to look again. Some form of uncertain recognition or familiarity. Do I know you? A double take.

THE HOLD / THE WAKE / THE WEATHER

I'm thinking about time and loss, and how long it should take you to get over something. I think part of the rawness and snagging imprinted on the surfaces of these images is tied to a sense of unfinished business; an open and leaky wound, that must be tended to; a deathly disaster that writer Christina Sharpe speaks of through multiple frames of reference 'the hold'[7] as in the hold of a ship, 'the wake'[8] as in the path carved out in water by a vessel's movement, and 'the weather'[9] as in the environment that all this is suspended within. All of these terms carry multiple readings that Sharpe applies in order to call for 'an ethics of care […], an ethics of seeing, and of being'[10] in the aftermath of slavery, an event that she describes as still ongoing with an indeterminate endpoint for those of the African diaspora worldwide. This sense of an unfixed temporality is counter to interpretations of transatlantic slavery as a crisis that has been resolved, positing it instead as an ongoing trauma 'In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.'[11] We might read this less a case of a long memory nursing deadened scar tissue[12], and closer to chronic illness instigated by previous injury and still unhealed, inflamed weeping flesh. What does it mean to live in the wake of the slave ship, in a 'now' drenched in its repercussions? What forms do the ripples and swelling take, which in turn trouble the surfaces of images of black skin?

In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidya Hartman answers: 'If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery'.[13]

She speaks from an American context, but we see similar trends present in the UK. Reni Eddo-Lodge cites a range of reports and articles testifying to a litany of systemic destabilising forces that sound incredibly similar to those listed by Hartman[14]: higher rates of school exclusions for black boys and repeated marking down by their teachers, recalibrated only by anonymous examiners; limited university options and attainment levels; a lack of representation of black teaching staff in higher education institutions; ethnic discrimination in hiring processes; higher rates of unemployment for black men and women; targeted stop and search leading in turn to an overrepresentation of black people on the National Criminal Intelligence DNA Database, higher rates of arrests and detainment; a lower quality of medical treatment; and an intersection of race with class, which sees ethnic minorities experiencing higher rates of income poverty proportionately to white people.[15] We also see echoes and repercussions of the hold in hostile immigration policies that overwhelmingly impact upon black and brown bodies. The list is exhausting.

The hold continues to take hold, the present in its clutches.

TOUCH ME / FEEL ME / HOLD ME

Lodged in the binds of the hold, the wake, and the weather, our images feel tender. They demand that we, you and I, handle them with care. I'm interested in the forms that careful handling might take, and in what we discover about the social lives of images when we examine them closely and slowly, thinking through touch and through sound, haptic registers detailed by Tina Campt.

Think first through touch — the touch often involved in the handling of prints, the feel of the surface of a photograph, glossy or pearled, dog-eared and yellowing or crisp edged, skin to paper, or through latex gloves and protective Melinex plastic film. Campt argues that this form of haptics is particularly present within family photographs, as domestic images are often intended quite literally for handling — for passing from one family member to another, for being caressed and thumbed through in an album, for sending to a relative overseas to be framed for a mantelpiece. We may imagine these relations as central to the social lives of the Harry Jacobs images when first produced, and in the continued lives of the singular prints that still exist in peoples' homes today. This skin-to-surface interaction continues in the Lambeth Archives, with visitors poring delicately over the prints in the stuffy and reverent silence of the library. Yet this changes when we shift to look at the digital and the 'poor image'[3], where the photograph remains elusive, intangible, untouchable. Being neither domestic portrait, nor physical print, perhaps the sugar bowl images avoid such handling altogether, despite the likelihood that the porcelain objects depicted may have themselves been subject to similar tactile practices.

Think again through touch — but this time touch as the social and bodily relations required to construct the image; and then as those relations that continue to be at play within the storage, presentation, potential duplication, and circulations of the image once it has come into being. Campt calls for a form of looking that is attuned to all these different registers, calling our attention in particular to the lower 'sonic frequencies'[4] of quiet images, a vibration that cannot always been heard, but can be felt *via* a slow and careful engagement that probes beyond the frame. And for her, often within this hum there is resistance to be found[5], a push-back perhaps against the hold, within the wake and amid the weather.

Look and listen closely. Note the subtleties, the contradictions, the ambiguities. This woman is 'holding up or being held up by the basket of artificial flowers'.[6] The female figurine titled Africa is 'leaning against or holding' the sugar bowl. Which is it? Or could it be both?

Writing with a focus on post-war photographs of black people in Britain, Stuart Hall calls for 'considerable caution, historical judgement — in essence, a politics of reading'.[7] If we listen then to the quiet and quotidian portraits of black people photographed by Harry Jacobs, we might find murmurs of aesthetic strategies cultivated by the Western photographic gaze, with its historic focus on ethnographic cataloguing; nestled in amongst reverberations of principals traditionally employed to frame painted portraits of high status individuals. We might also catch resonances of migrations, a re-planting of roots in the 'mother country', and recurring motifs that sing of a hostile environment then and now, from 'Rivers of Blood' in 1968 to Windrush Scandal in 2018. We might note the agency of the photographed subjects, well-dressed in Sunday best or uniform — Jacobs's sitters commissioned the photographs to be taken of themselves, a detail of co-authorship mirrored in the copyright law of the time — and we may interpret these assertions of self in time and place as the resistance or refusal referred to by Campt, pushing back against some of the more oppressive frequencies audible within the quiet hum of these images.

Yet, despite owning the copyright to the images of themselves, outside their homes and in the context of the archive the sitters remain anonymous, individual histories and narratives compressed into a single story of migration and settlement. In the studio, without the means to seek consent in reproducing or circulating the depictions of those imaged, I zoomed in instead on the props and backdrops that framed them, thinking about the possibilities held by such groupings to collectively voice shared histories. By contrast, when Lambeth Town Hall exhibited a selection of Jacobs's images in 2018, it was without the explicit permission of the photographed individuals, under an assumption of good will in making the archive public and accessible to all; but visitors were encouraged to identify any individuals in the photographs they could using Post-it notes, small regenerative acts of intervention.

The social relations in the sugar bowl images are different. Initially I came across the objects while giving tours at the Victoria and Albert museum in 2016. As African Heritage Tour Guides, we were looking for objects in

the 'Europe 1600–1815' galleries that spoke of an African presence in Europe during this period. A pair of these bowls was presented on a shelf in Gallery Room 2. Moulded by white European artisans, they say very little about the individual lives of the enslaved African and Native American people forced to farm sugar to feed the European palate and pocket. As is so often the case, the objects speak more of their makers than they do of the subjects they depict. Their hum sings of an evidencing, a tight and rounded argument, a succinct testimonial of exploitation, and the development of the social construct of race that continues to inform contemporary lived experience for black and brown people in Britain today.

I found them difficult to speak about, but long after I stopped leading tours, they stayed with me. And when I was invited to make new work for a café space connected to an art gallery, I thought of them again, and couldn't shake them. My background is in print-making. The discipline colours my thinking about objects and things. I think of copies and duplicates, ways of disseminating information, methods of documentation. I saw these objects as documents, and the images of them as further documentation, set against stark black or white backdrops. I came across others like them in other museum collections and circulating around the nebulous spaces of the Internet. I discovered more of them on auction house websites and I found this economy troubling.

I wondered who was interested in purchasing decorative imaginings of enslaved people. I thought about the economy of bodies, the economy of objects, and the economy of images. They seemed important and worth pointing towards and talking about. But I was aware that just as I recognised these as crude descriptions of others like me, others also could and would, and might not want to stumble across such renderings, imbued with a latent violence, in white-filled, white-walled spaces. Could I obscure them somehow, crop elements and hone in on hands and arms — signifiers of labour, dissect the images into bite-size chunks to encourage a measured swallowing and deter from choking, to aid digestion of heavy and bitter matter? Yet, if I were to walk into such a space, and see a black arm on the wall, a doll-like arm, but unmistakeably a black arm, what would I think? Would I feel exposed, talked about, a prickly heat? And I was also aware that others still, who are not marked out as other, might not see them at all, might eat their cake and sip their tea in blissful ignorance, while the truncated limbs of the enslaved decorated the walls. And I worried that my new images would enter into a new economy, an art-world circulation of luxury goods and investments, and that the images might get lost from their siblings, wrenched apart, uprooted from all context or critique.

They exist as multiples, fragmented siblings drawn together by the archive in one instance, and by my own obsessive collecting and cataloguing in another. A gathering, a rally. Perhaps there's something to be said for seriality as testimony, as evidence. Strength in numbers. Volume in volume. Campt writes about the rhythms generated by seriality and repetition, which contribute to the sonic resonances of collections of photography.[5] If the archive, the ensemble, is given space to speak, it may emerge as a cacophony of voices, a chorus, a hum.

BEHOLDEN

What then of when these slumbering masses are called upon, out of the stacks, assembled from disparate quarters of the Internet? What of when representations of bodies inscribed with muddy and violent histories, racist histories and presents, are assembled and laid bare to testify, singularly or en masse; when they are duplicated, reprinted, replicated, re-performed? Are the potentials of violence and/or agency embedded in the images also amplified? What are the responsibilities involved in their exposure and display? What protective measures are in place? And who cares anyway?

Sharpe voices some of these concerns as she stitches together an argument for enacting 'a beholden-ness to each other', a duty or obligation, a duty of care. The 'each other' speaks to the chorus, to other black diasporic beings and voices that are also navigating the throws of the wake, and beholden-ness is cradled in what she terms 'wake work'. Wake work is framed as a practice: 'a method of encountering a past that is not past. A method along the lines of sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are'.[6] It's a method of collecting, listening, framing, evidencing, and taking back control of an often distorted narrative. I recall Hall's essay title, 'Reconstruction Work', with its call for 'a delicate excavation, an archaeology, a tracing of the contradictory imprints which previous discourses have stamped, through those old images, on the iconography of popular memory',[7] here again, a piecing together, a delicate, critical tracing. Sharpe puts forward two suggestions for forms that wake work might take: 'Black annotation' and 'Black redaction'[8], strategies she speaks about in relation to her own difficulties with sharing images of black bodies, and a corresponding compulsion to filter, to edit, to preserve dignity. Her gestures take the form of limiting a reproduction of a pair of ethnographic portraits to only the

eyes of the photographed, and hand-written notations on reportage shots that call to light details such as the freshly braided hair of a young girl injured in Haiti's 2010 earthquake – a signifier of care. Hartman's pages 26-27 of 'Wayward Lives' function as both a redaction and an annotation. Michael Brown's family's request for a second autopsy is an annotation. The Post-it note naming of Harry Jacobs's sitters is an annotation.

Reading Sharpe, Hartman, and Campt's writing over the last year as I made work was a balm. It gave language to processes I was turning over in my head and in the studio: cropping out, fading, darkening, degrading of image quality through reprographics, of working in series and with multiples. It gave words to my sense of guardedness and control about sharing the images I had encountered, and adopted as my own to look after. It resonated with my desire for a slowing down of engaging with images, and explained to some extent my own recourse to text as buffer, or deterrent against too-quick readings. Redact. Annotate. Redact.

Wake work, reconstruction work, an accountability towards careful looking, with considerable caution, to listening, to annotating with care.

NOTES

1 Holly Graham, *After Harry Jacobs: Green Fingers II*, 2019. These words form the opening lines of a spoken audio accompaniment to a video piece developed for exhibition BOUNDS, on online project space Skelf.org. [https://vimeo.com/345908620]. The film builds on an existing body of work exploring engagement with Harry Jacobs's images. The first of two 'utterances from the chorus'.

2 Holly Graham, *Leaning Against or Holding*, 2018. An extract from a digital text-based artwork developed for online project space Skelf.org. [http://skelf.org.uk/2018/HG/Holly_Graham.html]. The words form part of an ongoing and evolving collection of texts within the *Sweet Swollen* series, a group of works exploring histories and legacies of sugar and its production. In these works, snippets of V&A African Heritage tour guide conversation over a pair of blackamoor sugar bowls held in the museum's collection are collaged together with William Morris quotations on home-ware aesthetics and utility. These sit alongside contemporary critical reflections 'on blackness and being' posited by theorists Christina Sharpe and Stuart Hall, which in turn nestle between extracts from newspaper cuttings on the UK sweet food industry. The voices are stitched together to construct a gloopy and slippery narrative around sweetness and power; a collision of temporalities and subjectivities; a carving out of space for processing violent and sticky histories. The second of two 'utterances from the chorus'.

3 Holly Graham, *Sweet Swollen: You Can't See It But I Have One Here And I Can Show You*, 2018. These quotations are lifted from a transcription of an audio work, compiled from a series of interviews with African Heritage Tour Guides from the Victoria & Albert Museum, and developed as part of an exhibition at Jerwood Arts' former Project Space located in the gallery's café. The interviews with the guides were conducted by myself as one-to-one conversations about personal relationships with sugar, knowledge of histories of production, and interpretation of a pair of blackamoor sugar bowls (designed 1741) held in the museum's collection. These discussions were then edited together into what became the final exhibited audio piece, at approx. 20 minutes in length.

4 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments*, London: Serpent's Tail, 2019, p. xiv.

5 *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments*, p. xiv.

6 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, p.27 – Sharpe expands on the definition of the hold: 'the hold is the slave ship hold; is the hold of the so-called migrant ship; is the prison; is the womb that produces blackness'.

7 *In the Wake*, p.17. Sharpe defines the wake as: 'the keeping watch over the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and / or sight, awakening, and consciousness.'

8 *In the Wake*, p.104. Sharpe expands: 'the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack. And while the air of freedom might linger around the ship, it does not reach into the hold, or attend to the bodies in the hold.'

9 *In the Wake,* p. 131.

10 *In the Wake*, p. 9.

11 'A scar is a mark left on the skin after a wound or injury has healed. Scars are a natural part of the healing process. Most will fade and become paler over time, although they never completely disappear.' – https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/scars/ (accessed Dec 2019).

12 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, p.6.

13 Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 66–72 – Reports referenced include: Permanent and Fixed Period Exclusions From Schools and Exclusion Appeals in England, 2011/12; Department for Education, 25 July 2013; Equality in HE Statistical Report 2013 Students, Equality Challenge Unit; Youth

Unemployment and Ethnicity, Trades Union Congress report, 2012; Police and Racism: What Has Been Achieved 10 Years After the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report?', Jason Bennetto, Equalities and Human Rights Commission, 2009; 'Inside Outside Improving Mental Health Services for Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in England', National Institute for Mental Health in England, 2003.

14 *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. p.193 'Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that black and minority ethnic people are much more likely to live in income poverty than their white counterparts. At the time of their research, the foundation found that just 20 per cent of white Brits were living in income poverty, in drastic comparison to 30 per cent of Bangladeshis. The report also found that a disturbing 50 percent of black and minority ethnic children were living in poverty.'

15 Hito Steyerl, 'In Defence of the Poor Image', *E-Flux,* November 2009, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/

16 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 4. 'For blacks in the diaspora, both quiet and the quotidian are mobilized as everyday practices of refusal.' p. 8.

17 *Listening to Images*, p. 4. 'For blacks in the diaspora, both quiet and the quotidian are mobilized as everyday practices of refusal.' p. 4.

18 Stuart Hall, 'Reconstruction Work', in Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (eds) (1991) *Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography*, London: Virago. p. 155.

19 'Reconstruction Work', p. 152.

20 Tina Campt, *Image Matters*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, pp.139-140.

21 *In the Wake*, p.13.

22 'Reconstruction Work', p.164.

23 *In the Wake,* p.113.