

On Reverence and Relation

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Hi, everyone, it's so lovely to be back here with you all again. It's very kind of Haverford to keep inviting me back, I really appreciate it. And it's special that this time I'm showing photographs outside, I hope that you all can stay after and take a look with me.

It was funny because I was emailing with Matthew Callinan to set up the show and when I saw his name I was like, wait, didn't I work for you? I worked in the Cantor Fitzgerald art gallery on Sunday afternoons when I was student here. I had three jobs, at least, while I was on campus: in the gallery, in the library and with the Center for Peace and Global Citizenship. And it's funny because I've been undergoing a very profound transformative process over the past few years—I know that life is generally a constant process of evolution and growth but this year has been a particularly intense period for this in many dimensions.— And part of that process has been a sense of integration and rebirth, a move towards actualization, and an accepting of the shape my future appears to be taking, which has required a processing of the past, an integration of many threads of memory and experience, a casting off of what is impure or does not fit, and an allowance of what does feel resonant. I've moved now into art and literary worlds, and realizing, noticing, that this is actually nothing new, that fifteen years ago I was working in an art gallery and studying philosophy and photography has been very helpful in this process.

So, I used to be a journalist, and now I am not.

And the process of throwing off that identity has been a profound one, because it is related to a shifting of my center, it is related to personal awakenings, it's a spiritual process. I found myself existing and experiencing the world far past the edges of acceptable ways of knowing and relating in the dominant, white American culture I was forced to work within as a journalist. I spent years trying to make work that is non violent inside a violent structure, to expand the edges of that structure to push through true stories in this very limited and limiting framework, until ultimately I abandoned that structure all together to make work that is hopefully more human, more fluid, and ultimately more true in spaces that will allow that.

This is an intensely personal process, and it is one that I think is essential for people from imperialist and oppressive societies to go through. Because if we want to make the world less racist, imperialistic, violent, oppressive and rigid, we must purge these things from ourselves. Growing up white in the US, there's no way that I wouldn't have internalized some of the limiting and limited beliefs of this very fractured, violent, racist, self-centered and oppressive society. And I'm interested in dismantling this, which requires deep listening, and deep transformation, and ultimately it's a transformation that translates from the internal to the external. So my work, necessarily, has needed to change.

I am of the belief and experience that the internal and the external are inextricably linked. So this internal process of dismantling a broken structure and orienting to a more expansive one is the same process that societies are undergoing and must undergo to free ourselves from broken structures we have been living within and allow for the beautiful, loving, human world to emerge.

The liberation of narrative is essential in this process because our narratives are one way that we bring meaning to our lives. They are one way that we make sense of the world and of ourselves in the world.

Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist wrote:

“The universe dissolves into a cloud of heat, it plummets helplessly into a maelstrom of entropy—but within this irreversible process there may appear zones of order; portions of the existent that tend toward a shape, privileged points from which one may discern a design, a perspective. The literary work is one of these tiny portions in which the existent crystallizes into a shape, acquires a meaning.”

Alex Marzano Lesnevech in a recent Harpers essay wrote:

"It is the narrative constructed in retrospect—perhaps even more than the body—that makes the self recognizable, even cognizable. "

So it is a deep problem when the form of our narratives do not permit our full experience or expression to come through. Journalism claims objectivity, which is a myth. It defines the world in secular, rationalist, explanatory ways (which are subjective frameworks for reality) then calls *this* objectivity, and everything outside of it it brushes off as “superstition” or narrates pejoratively: “some people believe XX.” I’ve come to replace the verb “to believe” with “to experience.” I don’t “believe in God,” I “experience God” and if someone doesn’t, that is their personal subjective experience.

Journalism also attempts to erase the journalist. It tries to make invisible the relationship between the person collecting the information, and the person sharing the information. But our relation is essential. There is always a dynamic at play, we exist only in relation. And even if journalism pretends objectivity, you can always see the narrator, you can always see the photographer in their images. The gaze is visible in the photographic object that is produced.

This is wildly visible when you compare colonial era anthropological photographs with photographs by African photographers. I was recently in Benin city in Nigeria where there was a lovely exhibition at the National Museum of works by Chief Solomon O. Alonge, who was the official photographer for Oba Akenzua II of Benin beginning in 1933 as well as a studio portraitist over five decades. There are many archives now that are being collected and beautiful work is being made celebrating these lovely makers throughout history. Expanding upon the few well-known historic African photographers like Malick Sidibe and Seydou Keita to show the vibrant ecosystem they existed within with artists like Tola Odukoya in Nigeria, Jean Depara in Congo and so many others.

Simultaneously, while I was in Benin, there was a recent exhibition of works by contemporary artists working with and responding to the recently returned archives of N.W. Thomas, who was a British anthropologist. There was a mix of reactions to the photographs. Many people were very moved to see these old images because they had never had access to them before. But many of the artists also tussled with why the people in the photographs looked so somber. The images were taken in 1909-1910, which was only 12 years after the terrible attack on the city by British colonizers who stole many of the very famous Benin bronzes, and burned most of the city to the ground. Some artists said it makes sense that people looked so somber after that, even twelve years after. But some artists engaged with the question of gaze, such as this work by Joseph Ogie Obamina called "The Anthropological Gaze." From a distance you can see the painting is of the anthropologist's face. Up close you can see the images and objects that he collected, numbered, and categorized interspersed with text from the artist: "*preserve,*" "*why?*" "*emphasizing not art objects but items of everyday use,*" etc.



I kept thinking about the work of Tina Campt, a brilliant scholar who wrote a gorgeous book called "Listening to Images" where she explores how the resistance that people felt to colonial photographers—to that moment of having your photograph taken by someone who relates to you in an extractive and violent way—is palpable, is felt, is heard in those images.

Speaking with some of the young artists who were uncomfortable with the archival images, I asked if they had seen the Alonge exhibition. Together we noticed the difference in the images: no one in Alonge's photographs were naked. No one had the tight jaw or the resistant scowl. Shot by someone who saw their dignity, the subjects of the portraits were dignified. They were people choosing how they wanted to be represented, and photographed by someone who *saw* them.



(Portraits by Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge)

I am of the experience and belief that micro interactions and macro interactions stem from the same energy; that we can know someone by their actions — this is a saying in Benin, that I heard and then read: I know him by his actions. I've been doing a lot of psychoanalysis in the past couple of years and in that practice we do the work of untangling micro interactions because they spell out and spool out to the macro ones. This is why colonial photography is palpably violent — it is the momentary interaction that is a tangible, visible expression of how these people feel about each other, how these people treat each other. And in this case it is extractive, hierarchical, white supremacist and violent. You can feel this in the photograph and then see how this is manifested in the world in this case through historically burning down the entire city, stealing the artworks and taking over — aggression, extraction and acquisition.

Now here we are one hundred years later. And people like to pretend that this is “deep history,” something that we should be past already. But I can attest that the dynamics at play are the same today. We don't heal our wounds until address them.

You can hear it in micro language like: “reporting *on*.” There's hierarchy here, and there's extraction.

Most white people in the west believe that they are superior to everyone else; I speak often on the ubiquity of white supremacy in journalism. And very often it's unconscious, which makes it even more nefarious, because people don't realize how violent their worldview is. But it permeates everything from the stories people choose to tell: topics of war, belittling savior narratives, development stories as if any country would or should hope to end up like the west. And then how these stories are permitted to be narrated — what gets through to the public.

Mark Sealy, the director of Autograph, a gallery and art space in London wrote in his book *Decolonizing the Camera: Photography in Racial Time*: on “how photography's dominant regimes have assisted, maintained and made possible a racialised world. The historical work that has been done in photography on constructions of race, human and civil rights has, through the ongoing institutional hegemony of European photography, failed to alter the colonial

consciousness within Western thought concerning theories of and cultural attitudes towards race, even when wrapped within the context of humanitarian concern,”

He wrote:

“I maintain that photography is dominated by the legacy of a colonial consciousness repressed in the present. If this is the case, then this ongoing imperial mindset means that the colonial visual regimes historically active within photography remain inherently intact.”

It is our responsibility to investigate ourselves to dismantle this hierarchy from within. Doing this deeply internal, energetic, spiritual and psychic work then translates into our actions in the world; the work that we do, what we build. It is healing and ultimately transformative. I wrote on studies in healing, which in time turned into studies in transformation and then studies in liberation. I was writing on my self, but the very same process is what needs to be done for the transformation of society and for the transformation of documentary work. The wounded self and the healed self are two different things.

Contemporary journalistic photography has yet to do this profound dismantling, and so, in continuing without questioning its very framework, it necessarily perpetuates the violence and hierarchies that were present in its creation as a field of westerners going out into the world to tell westerners back home what they think they saw; this information was usually for the purpose of feeding and fueling the colonial or capitalist end goals of the one asking for the information.

So when have this concept of the micro relating to macro we can understand why our narratives are so essential. Because they both reflect our view of the world, and perpetuate our view of the world. We make the world based on what we think and see. It's why the expansion of consciousness is spoken of as liberation. Because we are literally crumbling the edges of our thoughts, and so the edges of our perception of the world, the edges of the world that we allow into our consciousness. The world becomes bigger when we allow it to. As Jay-Z raps: “We're more expansive now.”

And so as we consider this relation between the micro and the macro, the thought and the expressed, consciousness and physicality: the form of our stories must expand to reflect our consciousness, to make space for our engagement with wider planes of reality.

A friend of mine and quite brilliant photographer and artist Logor Oluwamuyiwa wrote an essay on using Virtual Reality for story telling. He wrote: *“Immersive experience has always been the culture of Africans.” We've been very well aware of the tectonic state of the universe and not just mere admittance but actual negotiation of these planes, an awareness of the architecture of reality and it's layered nature...I strip and distill the specific emotion I want my visuals to communicate. The banal is what I love to concentrate on as it allows me to see beyond the bland camouflage that truly beautiful things mask themselves with, allowing me to see the beauty and poetry inherent. This kind of philosophy came solely from acknowledging the Yoruba's visual ethos of developing an inner eye “Oju Inu” freed from the stifling power of one reality plane.”* (Emphasis mine.)

Journalism with its emphasis on the didactic and explanatory, the secular and the reason-based is an expression of a limited engagement with the layers reality that is unfortunately common in imperialistic thought in “the west.” (I’m putting this in quotes because it’s not geographic anymore. People who see more broadly are everywhere in the world; but there are still many institutions and power holders that are based on the more limited structures historically associated with imperialistic whiteness.)

Because of white supremacy, and because of the self absorption and blindness to all that is *beyond* that this false belief in superiority perpetuates in imperialistic thought, journalism imposes itself on places that are much broader than the ways they are allowed to be narrated; and in so doing constrains and contains them, flattens them, contorts them, narrates them in simplistic ways that are almost unrecognizable. That may as well be “fiction.” Fictions like: Mali is poor. Someone said this to me and I said: //Capitalists don’t know richness when they see it.//

It can be frightening to lose the structures we’ve once existed within, but the beauty is that there’s something else, something broader, something truer that exists in the world of free expression. So I’m going to share the work of two artists who are really engaging with this in their practices. Expanding, in and through their work.

Rahima Gambo is a close friend of mine, someone who has been such an important interlocutor throughout this evolution. We were both finding our way out of journalism into something more expansive together over the past few years and we’ve had wonderfully fluid conversations throughout this process that has really I think helped move us along, at least I know it’s helped move me along, to find this resonance and expand together. I’m fascinated lately by what we can move with our words.

Rahima received her masters at Columbia journalism school and when she returned to Nigeria she received grants from many documentary organizations including the Magnum Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, and others. She had a project that started out titled “Education is Forbidden” which is the translation of “Boko Haram” and is a project on school girls in Northern Nigeria. But through the process of making the work she came into proximity with all the very brutal aspects of journalism: things like the categorization of people, turning them into subjects for these epic stories told on top of places, instead of engaging with their beautiful multiplicity and humanity. And the simplification of a place into solely a bastion of conflict; the victimization of people, and the re-victimization of only engaging with people as survivors of trauma. And over several years of work she “alchemized,” as she said, the project into something she could live with. She started holding workshops, called the Tatsuniya workshop, for a group of girls. They ate together and talked. They followed Yoko Ono’s instructions. And eventually they made some collaborative videos on play.

Here is the text of an instagram post she wrote elucidating on the project. She posted this following yet another miscategorization of the work:

<https://www.instagram.com/rahrahhima/>

“The Tatsuniya series and workshop is not about saving brown girls from brown men. (Can we attempt to see a young girl with a hijab and not feel the need to save her or define her as a victim?) The Tatsuniya workshop is about the intangible things that happen when you bring a group of young women together, give space and hold space for creative expression to come through.

The Tatsuniya workshop is not about Boko Haram and doesn't find its point of departure from the trauma the conflict has inflicted. If anything the conflict is footnote to this particular endeavor.

The Tatsuniya workshop is very much about present experience (We had long conversations about random things, one of the days of the workshop we discussed how creativity and imagination could open up doorways where none were before...)

The workshop is about presence in the moment of interaction, about vacuous inspiring space stimulated from a lack of a tight definition of why exactly we were gathering and what the form of the film would be. Consistency was found in playing, eating meat pies and drinking soft drinks.

The workshop is an experimental starting point to explore alternative visual narrative, to explore modalities for healing and unlearning violent linear or explanatory documentary storytelling.

It centers what cannot be accurately and entirely recorded by the camera, which are really the relationships and bonds formed when we gather communally to speak and to listen, to teach and to learn, to play and to express.

The short film Tatsuniya II film continues on an intuitive and improvisational vein using children's games, poetry and exercises from a Physical Education book for secondary school students as a light framework for weaving the narrative together.”

You can see that the fact of relation was moved from a false invisibility, as journalism tries to pretend, into an acknowledgement of relation. In this surfacing of the fact of our relation we can then think meaningfully about how we want to relate to one another. How can we relate in a loving way? In a generative way? In an anti-hierarchical way? How can we embrace our full humanity? I think it's not through extraction, but through presence, through reverence, through acknowledging and embracing the fact of our being together. (You can contrast this with the ethical somersaults journalists go through witnessing traumas and pretending that they aren't human beings there in the name of objectivity. It's absurd.)

Rahima also in this time began her ongoing work “a walk series” and I'm going to play a short segment of her video now and then we'll talk about it.

(Play beginning to 3:39)

...”*If information is control, what is its opposite?*”



(Ivan Forde detail of Three Rivers)

I heard Ivan Forde Speak at the Black Portraiture conference at NYU this year, which was a truly inspiring gathering with beautiful, excellent scholarship around contemporary photography and many other related themes. The title of his talk was : *it's not true but it has truth in it*, which is something a Buxtonian activist and writer, Sister Yvette Herrod, told him in the course of his research, and is a concept I love. A central driving motivation of my evolution has been my seeking to orient to *truth in all its vastness*.

In his talk he explained many things about his own relationship to Buxton, a town in Guyana, where he has roots. He says he is “of but not from there,” his grandmother was born there, his father still lives there, but he does not.

What fascinated me, in relation to this talk, was how he evolved through his project process from using photography to abandoning photography for something more expansive.

I am going to read some sections of his talk so you can hear him describe this in his own words:

“The first few days, I began taking pictures on a small handheld camera of the main streets, people in transit on docking carts, mini-buses, bicycles, stylish cars with custom-named banners, the new two-story concrete homes, and the old colonial and Portuguese wooden manors, sagging like tired shoulders of farmers gliding in their boats; the fields where plantations once were, and now a large prison complex stands.

Then I simply walked and began to photograph gathered or collected objects, mainly in multiples or bunches, such as sand piles for masonry, stacked concrete bricks, groups of palm trees or papaya fruit, old cars and minibuses in twisted metal roadside piles, fire heaps, chicken crates on trucks, lumber yards, herds of cows, and so on.”

He was reading aloud from a paper he wrote while a student at Columbia under Saidiya Hartman who is a glorious scholar doing work on expanding narratives around histories, liberating archives from the violent, silencing constraints of historic organs of control and filling in the humanity of people written out. And as he was reading he said:

“This section is called ‘Listening.’”

I love that.

He continued: *“One sweltering evening, I spoke to my great aunt — my grandmother’s younger sister — who was now 93 years old and sharp, she is the only surviving family member of her generation, she wears glasses, a shirt with white feet and long silver dreadlocks. My mother and I went to her home located in the village, her’s is a two-story house with 1970s post-colonial style... where she jokes that it already got warm since we bought beers up the road, that’s how warm the night was. So she puts it in the fridge, she sits and begins to tell of the earliest days of slavery in local memory of what her great-grandmother and father told her, and their grandparents told them*

She speaks and I listen to her old quick voice modulating from high tones to deep and elegant moans, sorrowful and joyful simultaneously, a voice of life itself, over the sound of crickets of the blue-black backyard. I hear how the ancestors solved the problem of language by realizing it was a problem, and organizing under surveillance and almost non-verbally to hold meetings in the deep, bushy parts of the land.

Once the other whites found out, they charged the white ally who was teaching the slaves to read and write as a criminal, and they beat the slaves terribly. She states that the pregnant women who were captured had to lay their bellies in a hole dug, and the slave masters would beat them while their pregnant bellies were secure in the hole.

I made sound responses to her account, using her recorded voice in my questions as text, to improvise melodies, and to find new questions and new answers through layering and repetition.”

And then he said:

“After bearing this account, I stopped taking pictures entirely.”

And what he did, then was:

“I began making temporary sculptures around the village, to respond to these conversations, or what I feel now were more like listening sessions.”

—

The work that he made is called Invocation and you can see some images of the works here. He is thinking about epic poetry, and orality, the personal in history, the personal recounting of history. Ivan speaks of listening, deeply, of listening deeply enough that he transforms. He respected the sanctity of the pain he was encountering and was moved to put down the camera, to deepen his presence, to slow down, to feel, think and change. This is an expression of reverence to me. Through this process his work transforms, and so does he. The work works on him. He makes something else. It was this transformation through the process of making the work that drew me to him; his permeability, his willingness to change and his

willingness to then produce work that is expansive far beyond the confines of the camera and yet is true, I would argue it is in fact truer.

This expansion is present in the form of the work. You can see he is working with cyanotype, he is working with layers, the works are silkscreen posters, “soft sculptures” that can be twisted and folded, worn and touched. A text based on interviews on the Unseen platform describes: “In many ways, the sculptures are as malleable as the act of recording history itself.” The work is as layered, as flexible, transient and alive as our memories, as our histories. There is no forceful simplification, no attempt to turn human fluidity into something nailed down, certain and solid, as is typical of the myths of documentary, of "fact". It is a liberated work born of reverence and relation: between Ivan and the space and the people he was engaging with and then experienced in relation with us, the viewers.

*



(Rahima Gambo, still from A Walk video)

I want to close with another section from Rahima’s video:

(Play 9:49-end)

“What is healing but a putting back together of things?”

Yes, walk in a straight line and after a time go off on a tangent and then go off on another tangent. Walk until you break apart and shatter the boundaries between inside and outside. Come apart at the edges a little and scatter into a pile of neatly cut lawn grass then slowly start to put the pieces back together but this time

they will come together where they fit, far from where they used to be: disjointed and uncomfortable and incoherent. Yes it comes back together but not as it once was. Not a woman, not a plant, not a picture, not a drawing, not a body, not a landscape, not a photograph, not a sculpture, not stillness and not movement.”

A walk.

*

Now, I've spoken about a personal evolution and about expansiveness, and I want to say though, that while I am no longer doing journalism, it is essential that journalism expands its framework to allow the breadth of reality in.

I had a conversation with the director of a documentary center in New York. I showed him some photographs and he told me that they were nice but when he shows photographs from Africa his focus is on African photographers. I said that that's great, and I asked if he wanted me to connect him with photographers in Nigeria because I know many. He said: you know the problem is all the Nigerians are making conceptual work, and we are traditional here. This made me so sad. Because this particular organization is based in an outer burough in New York. It is run by a white man, and most of its programs focus on elevating and investing in photographers of color. But if you are just entering a space and teaching people how to tell stories in your own way, that is colonialism. The broadening of participation in these fields; making journalism less white, must mean not just teaching young people of color to shoot like white documentarians, but to expand documentary practice to allow for people to express their own encounters with reality, their own truths. It's not enough for us to all do the violent process of leaving behind fields that won't let us recount the world as we experience it. We must broaden these fields. We must all broaden our conceptions of truth. In the end it will be liberating for everyone.