My Personal Photographer's Manifesto - Abdi Osman

Preamble
The necessity for a Personal Photographers manifesto of practice and ideas is crucial in our historical moment. Images matter more and more and Black and African people have often been at the wrong end of images that harm. In what follows I attempt to both give an idea of the importance in this manifesto and what must be done. At the same time, I situate this call for critical artistic practice in a range of ideas that have been central to Black diaspora and African peoples for the last five hundred years. This manifesto is in part deeply influenced by my location in Canada and more specifically Toronto. The multiple Black and African ethnicities and nationalities that call Toronto home provides for an understanding of global blackness which is multiple and yet also bounded by very similar global story of colonialism, slavery, racism and a range of experiences that have been shared over time. This manifesto is a blunt statement that seeks to give form to political and artistic action for myself as a way for me to think about my practice as contributing to something more than image making and at the same time pointing to how image making is central to Black and African liberation.

1. History
    My photographic practice would be aware of its history. For as Susan Sontag has argued "The familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past. Photographs lay down routes of reference and serve as totems of causes"(p.85).[1] I will familiarize myself with the history of the camera, both still and moving. I will know the history of how the camera was and can be an enemy of black people. I will understand from that history that the taking up of the camera is a political act. I will understand that a Euro-American use of the camera has often been to denigrate blackness and to make Africans primitive and uncivilized. I will use my camera not only to correct such histories but to forge new histories. I will be intimately aware of the iconic photographs of Blacks and Africans and in many instances cite those photographs in my own work as a part of the longer historical conversation and contestation of image making. I will understand my work as part of an ongoing historical struggle and narrative. Importantly, I will work very hard not to be immobilized by the negative images of photography launched at Blacks and Africans. Instead I will take strength from such images to work towards producing new and different futures.

2. Aesthetics
    Because I understand the racist history of image making as it affects me I will develop intimate knowledge of Black traditions of photography. I will learn from how others before me produced techniques of representation that distinguish their image making from racist Euro-American image making. I will immerse myself in the works of Gordon Parks, James Vander Zee, Lorna Simpson, Rotimi Fani- Kayode, Seydou Keïta and a range of Black and African image makers, not only photographers, in an effort to be in conversation with a Black aesthetic. I will familiarize myself with the history of Negritude, Black Arts Movement and other Black and African arts movements in recent history. My aesthetic will center the Black person in the frame. It will reference ideas that have now come to be associated with Black and African people – not only positive ideas but negative ones as well. As Essex Hemphill has written "Ours should be a vision to exceed all attempts to confine and intimidate us. We must be willing to embrace and explore the duality of community that we exist in

as black and gay men" (p.xxvii)[2]. The power of my aesthetic will be to re-imagine in visual form all the traces that people across different "races" and ethnicities read for when they look for blackness.

3. Politics

    I understand from the outset that my work is political work. I might give emphasis when needed and necessary to discourses and ideas of art, but I understand those ideas to be political in form and content and even history. I refuse to believe that art can exist without politics. And given the history that I enter image making with to not take politics seriously would be naïve. Thus, I will make political art conscious that aesthetics and history are always the foundation of political ideas. Learning from Linda Alcoff I should understand that even a political voice is a contested voice. She writes: "The rituals of speaking that involve the location of speaker and listeners affect whether a claim is taken as a true, well-reasoned, compelling argument, or a significant idea. Thus, how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated, which will in turn affect its perceived significance (for specific hearers). The discursive style in which some European post-structuralists have made the claim that all writing is political marks it as important and likely to be true for a certain (powerful) milieu; whereas the style in which African-American writers made the same claim marked their speech as dismissable in the eyes of the same milieu" (p.13)[3]. Thus, I must be aware that in asserting a political voice I can still be dismissed and similarly for my artistic claims as well.

4. Intellectual History

    I will immerse myself in the history of ideas that have produced Black people and Africans over the last five hundred years. I will know and understand the long traditions of Black diaspora intellectual thought and how that thought has often been in conversation and criticism of Euro- American modernity. W.E.B DuBois, C.L.R. James, Stuart Hall, Sylvia Wynter, Amie Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Senghor, Nkrumah, Ifi Amadiume, among many others will be my intellectual guides. Paul Gilroy in describing his ground-breaking *The Black Atlantic* has written that the book is "evidence [of] some of the things that black intellectuals had said—sometimes as defenders of the West, sometimes as its sharpest critics—about their sense of embeddedness in the modern world" (p.ix)[4]. I will also engage other intellectual traditions as those traditions offer both new and different insights and as those traditions seek to diminish Black and African peoples.

5. Community

    I will endeavor to create community through the images produced. I will work from a conscious understanding that Black communities are not monolithic. As Kobena Mercer has written, I use "their practices to undermine the hegemony of documentary realism, their practices disrupt the idea that a single artwork could be totally 'representative' of black experiences: this is because questions of racial and ethnic identity are critically dialogized by questions of gender and sexuality" (p.221)[5]. Given who I am, I understand that difference is a good thing for community making and seek to represent such differences. My image making will not only be relegated to representing non-heterosexual identities in Black and African communities. I will

attempt to always offer complex representations of Black and African communities across multiple forms of difference.

6. <u>Diaspora and the Black International</u>
Given points 4 and 5, I understand my image making as a part of a Black/African diaspora and international intellectual tradition and as part of a community making exercise. I understand my image making as a part of a Black global conversation where the circulation of images is never just national. In this regard I'm aware of the dominance of US images of blackness circulating as global Black images and of images of African poverty, pain and degradation circulating as blackness as well. I enter this field of the visual by producing images that take point 3 as a starting place. I produce images that are not just counter to dominant images but that are also images not seen before. Isaac Julien's commentary on new Black British cinema is instructive for photography as well when he writes that the film and in this case photography are "not preoccupied with the old histories of nationalism...they resurrect the spector that haunts the old cities of the West...Old ways of seeing are abandoned by these new film and video makers as they begin to shape the understanding of the new subjectivities and perspectives in our culture" (p.94)[6]. Julien's insights also influence point 9. Therefore, I attempt to broaden the visual palette so that a range of representations is available in the public sphere.

7. <u>Resisting Erasure</u>
Marlon Riggs has written concerning the erasure of Black gay people from Black histories of representation that "All terms denoting an ideological frame of reference that enforces a rigorous exclusion of certain kinds of difference, that erects stifling enclosures around a whole range of necessary debates, or alternately, confines them within an easily recognizable—and controllable—psychosocial arena" (p.101)[7] should end. Given the history of the camera as an assault on Black peoples, I work against the camera and image making that seeks to erase Black and African peoples. Since Birth of A Nation and the numerous ethnographic films on Africa and photographs in magazines like Life, I have an archive of erasure to work with. Therefore, I must be aware not to merely produce images as though images have no consequences and histories to them. I must produce images that offer up the visible contributions of Black and African life to human civilization. This calls to mind Susan Sontag's claim that "The exhibition in photographs of cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries continues this offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; for the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees" (p.72)[8].

8. <u>Producing Pleasure</u>
I know how to produce pleasure, how to make us laugh, cause we are "dark and lovely too"[9]. Or as Zora Neal Hurston apparently put it to Carl Van Vechten, one of the white photographers of the Harlem Renaissance, "I like myself when I am laughing, and then again when I am looking mean and impressive". (Important note: I'm aware that white photographers are a part of the story too. From Robert Mapplethorpe to Christopher Cushman, especially as far as the Black male nude is concerned.)

9. <u>Inventing Futures</u>

    I'm involved in my communities and therefore while I cannot predict the future; my involvement allows me to document the   present in a way that points to the future. Following Enwezor, Okwui (2010) "Whatever conclusions are reached about that authenticity/veracity/truthfulness/realness of photographs [...] an image can be false in its details but true in the substance of its pictorial address."(p. 81)[10]. Therefore, I do not only have to produce realist images to document Black and African lives. Since I'm a part of the community, my work is inspired by the community, and the work is about the future of the community. Therefore, I'm aware that my work is about impacting the future and helping to invent new futures that can be wildly inventive.

10. <u>Coalitions and Solidarities</u>

    As Linda Alcoff points out "...Rituals of speaking are politically   constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and sub-ordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle." (p.15)[11]. I make community and political solidarities with oppressed people everywhere. In this sense my camera does not only frame the Black subject but when given the opportunity to be in coalition and solidarity I also produces images of others. I'm aware of the ethical dilemmas of producing such images and there I only do so in coalition, cooperation and solidarity. I understand such work as crucial to point 9.

[1] Sontag, Susan (2003). Regarding the Pain of Others. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

[2] Hemphill, Essex (1991). "Introduction". Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men. Boston: Alyson Publications, xv-xxxi.

[3] Alcoff, Linda (1991-2). "The Problem of Speaking for Others." Cultural Critique, Winter. NC : Oxford University Press, 5-32.

[4] Gilroy, Paul (1993). The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

[5] Mercer, Kobena (1994). Welcome to the Jungle. New York & London: Routledge. [6] Julien, Isaac (2000). "Black British Cinema—Diaspora Cinema". The Film Art of Isaac Julien. New York: Center for Curatorial Studies, 93-94.

[7] Riggs, Marlon (1992). "Unleash the Queen". Black Popular Culture. Seattle: Bay Press, 99-105.

[8] Sontag, Susan (2003). Regarding the Pain of Others. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

[9] I take from the title from Mercer's essay (1994). "Dark & Lovely: Black Gay Image- Making".

[10] Enwezor, Okwui (2010). "What is it?: The Image, Between Documentary and Near Documentary," In Gilman, Claire and Margaret Sundell (Eds), The Storyteller. New York: ICI (Independent Curators International).

[11] Alcoff, Linda (1991-2). "The Problem of Speaking for Others." Cultural Critique, Winter. NC : Oxford University Press, 5-32.