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Seeing Through Carceral Geographies: Translucence as Abolitionist Aesthetic Method

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L'esthétique abolitionniste redistribue le sensible à l'encontre des répartitions carcérales, impériales et coloniales qui voudraient nous faire voir la propriété là où il y a de l'espace, le profit là où il y a du temps, et la permanence là où il y a, toujours et encore, de la possibilité. En s'appuyant sur les travaux de Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Gil Hochberg et Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, l'auteurice défend la translucidité comme méthode esthétique abolitionniste dans laquelle les structures, les logiques et les cadres carcéraux sont présentés comme des constructions fragiles. À travers l'explication de sa propre recherche visuelle et matérielle dans les domaines du textile, de la vidéo et de l'installation, l'auteurice présente des formes d'expérimentation qui sont fondées sur une méthode commune de translucidité et qui orientent le regard à travers les géographies carcérales vers des alternatives abolitionnistes.

If given the barracks dive in
If given the hand dig
If given the back make do | bend
If given the afternoon keep watch
If given the sun spare no country
If given the tool skim I loose
If given the given sing wind
If given the voice say so
If given mercy make do
If given us give us
—Canisia Lubrin, "Return #36"[1]

If unfinished liberation is the still-to-be-achieved work of abolition, then at bottom what is to be abolished isn't the past or its present ghost, but rather the processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.
—Ruth Wilson Gilmore[2]

INTRODUCTION

At the centre of Canisia Lubrin's "Return #36," the lines "If given the sun/spare no country" offer an abolitionist imperative.[3] Given the sun, the poem instructs its reader to leave no land beyond reach, pointing at once to the dominant order of differential rule over life and land and to its present, immediately possible, undoing. "Spare no country" reshapes the world; in its brevity, sayable in a single breath, the words run directly counter to the geography of imperial rule that Ariella Aïsha Azoulay describes as one in which "there is no longer a common world to care for but only scattered enclaves to protect."[4] The stakes of refusing this scattered, differential world are carried in the final line of "Return #36," "If given us/give us."[5] There is an "us" of the collective world, conditionally given, and with the gift comes responsibilities: to *dive in*, to *dig*, to *bend* and *keep watch*, and to free each other endlessly, giving us back to ourselves within a "commitment to recognize a common landscape [that] is not a denial of the violence and its painful and lasting consequences [of slavery and imperialism], but a commitment to transform it."[6] As the title states, this a return, and return is only possible when one can sense the way back.

To locate this return and so refuse imperial and carceral logics of division, containment, accumulation, and extraction requires a particular way of seeing. In *Visual Occupations*, Gil Hochberg proposes that "an effective political act necessitates an interruption and reworking of dominant visual fields, and that generating new *ways of seeing* is the precondition for overcoming oppressive geo-sociopolitical orders," suggesting that this generation occurs on the level of art and aesthetics.[7] Within my research-creation practice, I focus on how we might see the world beyond and against a dominant gaze: I create objects with choreographies and texts that refuse straightforward reading, engaging the body of the viewer as a participant in our collective work to see a world in which we

are all together more free. This aesthetic mode, which acknowledges the violence of the present without ceding ground to its permanence or inevitability, is an abolitionist aesthetic.

Nicole Fleetwood's concept of "carceral aesthetics" is integral to this research, "[referring] to ways of envisioning and crafting art and culture that reflect the conditions of imprisonment."[8] From Jacques Ranciere's notion of the "distribution of the sensible," I use *carceral distribution of the sensible* to mean the set of conditions, taken as fact, that make it such that the prison-industrial complex is at once invisible (and therefore impossible) for some and imminently possible as a visible and active threat for others. It is through carceral aesthetics that the scope, scale, and impact of the prison system can be sensed; an aesthetic that identifies and defines carceral distributions of the sensible, making it possible for abolitionist aesthetics to be formed in response. As "the distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community," carceral distributions of the sensible reveal the spatial politics of the prison-industrial complex.[9] Carceral distributions of the sensible are organized by the logic of racial capitalism, "a mode of production developed...improved...and perfected" across iterations of imperial and colonial violence, making an abolitionist redistribution necessarily anti-imperial and anti-colonial, even as the prison cannot be reduced to a straightforward inheritance of slavery and colonial genocide.[10] Abolitionist aesthetics, I argue, is a redistribution of the sensible against carceral, imperial, and colonial distributions that would have us see property where there is space, profit where there is time, and permanence where there is, still and always, the potential to relearn the shared and common world.

MATERIALITY AS METHOD

Through explication of my own visual and material research-creation work in video, sculpture, and textiles, I present three forms of experimentation that help materialize the shape of abolitionist aesthetic practices. The three methods—*interlocking* or *negation*, *framing*, and *displacement of the gaze*—are informed by anti-imperial, abolitionist organizing and actions, and each method contains simultaneous strategies of opacity and transparency. "Political transformation and empowerment," Hochberg suggests, "are dependent on opacity, the ability to disappear, blindness, failed vision, and invisibility *at least as much* as they are on visibility, being visible, or having access to the gaze."[11] Key to this argument is the notion of visual sovereignty, here defined as the ability to determine one's degree of opacity and visibility at will.[12] Using Ruth Wilson Gilmore's articulation of abolition geography as the negation of carceral geographies, I argue that abolitionist aesthetics lie not in an oscillation between opacity and visibility (or transparency), but rather in their dialectic co-existence, a state which I refer to as *translucence*.[13] In translucence, both geographies are visible at once—the carceral and its negation—making it possible to *see through* carceral distributions of the sensible without straying from analysis of the material conditions that the prison-industrial complex is grounded in.

"FREEDOM IS A PLACE"[14]

In their study of the visual politics of Ezzedeem Al-Qassam Brigades videos from Gaza, Nayrouz Abu Hatoum and Hadeel Assali attend to the geographies of resistance. Divers descend into the sea and emerge with a store of munitions, rescued from the 1917 wreck of a British war ship that was deemed unreachable by the Israeli occupation; fighters emerge from the earth to attack a military post before escaping back into a network of tunnels that resists detection.[15] "Close attention to the language used by the resistance fighters reveals that human/non-human relations sustain their resistance, that the resistance is in collusion with the earth itself, that humans and earth are contingent on each other."[16] In their collaborations with land and sea, the resistance fighters subvert the "one-way hierarchy of vision" that characterizes the Israeli occupation.[17] The Palestinian

resistance fighters' relative states of opacity and visibility are not determined by the supposed all-seeing-eye of Israeli surveillance infrastructure, but by the earth itself.

Imperial, carceral, and settler-colonial regimes of violence traffic in a fiction of permanence, foreclosing history so that a land once occupied will always remain so, and a people once captured are entirely contained.[18] The fragility of this claim on temporal and spatial dominance is made bare by the earth, air, and water as they pass above, below, and through colonial borders, check points, and surveillance regimes. My current body of visual research creation turns to the sunset as a unique event and subject of imagery within land and landscape that embodies this material resistance. Its light and colour refuse the geography of national borders, property lines, and infrastructures, as it sets every night through fences, windows, and doorways. The sunset cannot be truly owned or occupied by any one individual, state, or corporation, and it cannot be exhausted through extractive industry. Within the material methods of translucence, the sunset operates as a kind of compass, directing our gaze to the walls, bars, and flags that mark the edges where one geopolitical zone meets another, and then *through* them, to the point where liberatory, political horizons meet the physical horizon, sun setting behind it.

If "all struggle is place-based struggle," as Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, then there can be no immaterial form of abolition.[19] All paths to freedom traverse the land, and so abolitionist aesthetics must necessarily be grounded in considerations of land, landscape, and geography. Following the language of Indigenous abolitionists including that of *An Indigenous Abolitionist Study Guide*, I use "land" as an expansive term to include water, air, soil, and ecologies therein, so as to indicate land as a collaborator and carrier of life, rather than a territory to be mapped and extracted from.[20] Landscape, in contrast, is the visual depiction or framing of land, whether in a photograph or video or through viewpoints and windows that order particular lines of sight. Geography describes a relationship between land, landscape, and the movement of people through time, encompassing political, economic, and cultural processes that impact and operate within particular environments. In *Abolition Geography*, Gilmore provides the term "carceral geographies" as another way of naming the prison-industrial complex in order to better describe its "apparently boundless boundary-making" around land, capital, labour, state capacity, debt, social formations, and life itself.[21] To frame the prison-industrial complex in terms of geography points to its fundamental re-ordering of place-making, which is both a spatial and temporal process. Abolitionist geographies are the spaces and times, however provisional, in which the path becomes visible, leading us in a return home to the collective world.

INTERLOCKING/NEGATION

A rope climbs to the ceiling, paracord wrapping around itself in shades of sunset. Blues twist and twine together around yellow, bright orange, and an earth-tone cord, shifting the colours of a horizon line on their axis—the edge of the earth becomes a structure, inviting escape or a way up, off the ground, towards a better view. *Present (a six-hand structure)* (2025) is a handmade rope, its process evident in unravels, knots joining lengths of cord, and deviations from the tight order of pattern (fig. 1). At twelve feet in length, the rope is installed so its bottom knot hangs barely three centimeters above the ground, as though it could drive right through, drawing a connective line between the spaces directly above and below the confines of the room. The process of making a three-strand rope like that of *Present* requires at least two people holding fibres taut between two ends as well as multiple runners who transfer the tension down the material as the fibres begin to interlock, building their strength.

The core gesture of *Present* is one of translucency. The gaze is simultaneously drawn to the image of a horizon, and then through it, as the eye turns up

fig. 1 M. Gnanasihamany, *Present (a six-hand structure)*, 2025. Paracord, electrical tape, surveillance warning sign, mirror, paper, sharpie, tape, 376 × 183 × 183 cm. Photo: Michael Patten.

and then down, moving beyond and around the horizon line. In parallel, the piece suggests that metaphorical political horizons are not actually utopian—distant and unreachable points to labour towards—but are instead immediately graspable and then surmountable. While the paracord itself is not literally translucent, textile practices offer techniques in which two or more materials are joined (such as through knots, stitches, or weaves), enabling a form of sight in which multiple, distinct forms are visible at once.

Network (Actions in Which Visibility in the Dark is Required) (2025) is a hand-knotted net made of orange paracord, stretched at its four corners with blue cord in two, room-length horizontal lines (fig. 2). The net hovers off the wall at an acute angle, creating a triangle of space underneath—from there, the viewer can watch the sun set for forty minutes on a monitor that hangs with only cord and a secondary net to keep it from falling to the floor. A half-dome surveillance mirror hangs on the adjacent wall—its only dead angle is the area directly under the net, facing the screen, offering the viewer a place of simultaneous opacity and visibility. Out of view of the surveillance mirror, the viewer is aligned with the setting sun. The form of the net, with its diamond-shaped openings framed by opaque knots, echoes that of a fence, but its purpose is undetermined as it can be easily circumnavigated, making it neither an effective form of capture nor an adequate tool for defence. Watching the sunset from within *Visibility in the Dark* requires a translucent gaze, as the eye lands on the lines and knots of the net, and then travels through to see the sun and then through again, to the space beyond it, both within the exhibition space and into the blue evening landscape inscribed in video.

Gilmore writes: "Abolition geography, the antagonistic contradiction of carceral geographies, forms an interlocking pattern across the terrain of racial capitalism."[22] This is a pattern of negation; each intersection between carceral and abolitionist geographies is a site of attempted negation of life, in the form of the prison-industrial complex, and its negation through inevitable resistance. Throughout her work, Gilmore offers an understanding of the expansive work of abolition as labour, thought, and feeling towards simultaneous creation and decreation.[23] Both *Present* and *Visibility in the Dark* use the concept of an interlocked negation as a visual metaphor. Methods of twisting, twining, and knotting interlock materials together in order to build strong, flexible forms—both pieces respond to the physical properties of the sunset with its inherent negation of carceral geographies, positioning the structures as abolitionist links within the interlocking pattern that Gilmore describes.

In *Another Aesthetics is Possible,* Jennifer Ponce de Leon draws on Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin to state that "the politics of artistic practices, and specifically the ways in which they are articulated with collective struggles, is manifested not only in the characteristics of individual works but also, fundamentally, in the social relations inscribed in these works' production, circulation, and reception."[24] The political quality of an artwork is not only ingrained in its sensory material or visual references, but in the conditions and social worlds of its production. Both *Present* and *Visibility in the Dark* are produced through materials and techniques such as netting, braiding, and knotting that are common to multiple, shared material worlds—meaning that none of these techniques are singular to any particular culture, history, or geography, but rather appear in multiple forms and locations—and both artworks are inscribed with the collaborative processes and histories of their production. As Azoulay elaborates, "Objects

fig. 2 M. Gnanasihamany, *Network (Actions in Which Visibility in the Dark is Required)*, 2025. Paracord, carabiners, eyehooks, screen, media player, surveillance mirror, 549 × 152 x 122 cm, video, 45 min. Photo: Michael Patten.

and documents are not what we have been socialized and trained to see: standalone artifacts whose inscribed content exists for experts to interpret. Rather, they constitute part of the material worlds out of which people's rights are made manifest."[25] Neither the net nor the rope can be understood as neutral forms, but rather as active participants in material histories, imbuing them with the richness of sovereign actions and rights that activate the structures.

Both *Present* and *Visibility in the Dark* present potential acts: the rope may be used to climb, bind, or demarcate space, and the net offers the possibility to catch or be caught, to trap within, or to carry a load. The bright colours of both pieces invite associations with childhood activities of play and competition, conjuring images of rope swings and playground nets as well as experiences of performing strength and agility for a jury of watching peers. The works' installation however—dividing the space horizontally and vertically—references militarism in the form of drills and traps, rehearsals for capture, attack, or escape. The position of the militant who would activate this potential remains mutable—both the occupying soldier and the resistance fighter might use the net or the rope towards their opposing purposes. However, only the latter can be "in collusion with the earth and its atmosphere," further grounding the works within an abolitionist aesthetic mode.[26]

FRAMING

Before the object becomes clear, the sound of *Water Fountain (Beautiful Skies)* (2024) arrives first (fig. 3). Water burbles up and rains gently down, with a tiny arc like that of a drinking fountain, emerging and then returning. The liquid never leaves the half-full blue plastic jug of a water cooler (the largest unit of drinkable water typically available at a grocery or convenience store). In place of a label, a digitally manipulated version of an Instagram story wraps the jug: over a fuchsia and violet sunset, the text of a FIJI Water advertisement reads: "FALL FOR BEAUTIFUL SKIES WITH THE TASTE OF FIJI WATER." Like the horizontal arm of a subtle cross, a widescreen version of the same landscape extends the frame

fig. 3 M. Gnanasihamany, *Water Fountain (Beautiful Skies)*, 2024. Water cooler jug, print, fountain pump, water, 36 × 36 × 91 cm. Photo: Kinga Michalska.

fig. 4 M. Gnanasihamany, *As Above, No Fixed State*, 2024. Wooden frame, screen, 128 × 152 × 8 cm, media player, looping gif, 13 sec. Photo: Kinga Michalska.

to the left and right; at the edge where the two images meet, a vertical line of pixelation reveals the manipulated quality of the image, and therefore of its subjects.

Water Fountain reframes the landscape at the heart of the 2024 FIJI Water ad campaign. The central image for the campaign was created on a soundstage by Taylor James Ltd., a design studio and production company with clients including MasterCard, Google, and Wells Fargo. Through set-building, imported plants, and post-production CGI and VFX, a studio replica of Fiji was formed in order to serve as background for an update to the packaging (a larger, brighter flower) on the FIJI Water bottle.[27] On Instagram, the constructed landscape is metaphorically invisible—despite taking up the majority of the screen when the ad appears, land is only a backdrop. In *Water Fountain*, the foregrounded frame renders the image translucent: the viewer's gaze lands on the image, and, propelled by the frame, travels through it to see the moment in which the image was made. Once this construction is visible it cannot be undone, inviting a potential return of the subjects to their worlds. The advertisement seduces its viewership into associating the beautiful landscape and its concomitant values (cleanness, freshness, authenticity) with the product. In returning it to its widescreen context and positioning it around a working fountain, the image is re-contextualized to make visible three forms of violent capture: the capture of water in processes of resource financialization, the capture of land as its transformed into property, and the capture of the landscape in photography. Within the advertisement, the sunset is conscripted into work for an imperial visual regime in which land becomes landscape, transformed from a living place in a shared world to a

free plot. Azoulay describes a parallel process in the context of the plunder of art objects during the colonization of Africa. Through the decontextualization of colonial cultural institutions such as museums, galleries, and other institutions dedicated to heritage preservation, stolen objects were detached from the worlds in which they originated, primed for the gaze of beneficiaries of conquest and extraction who would truly "appreciate" all they had to give.[28]

Azoulay positions photography as a "resource for potential history," stating that "attempts to determine and shape in advance that which will be seen in the frame leave traces that enable one to reconstruct and stage the event of photography as a case of multiple and often quite complex relationships embedded in a whole network of power relations."[29] The camera severs subjects from their worlds at the moment of each image's creation, simultaneously casting what was captured into the stillness of the historical image where everything depicted has already happened and therefore cannot be undone.[30] Attending to the frame, or the line between what remained within and what was necessarily expelled from the production of an image, enables the eye to see through the picture plane to the violence therein, even when the image is produced within visual political regimes that insist on normalizing violence as part of the unassailable, everyday conditions of differentiated sovereignty. Drawing attention to the frame, however inadvertently, exposes the conditions of the image's production.

As Above, No Fixed State (2024), a sculpture with video, presents a similar method of translucency through framing (fig. 4). A false ceiling hangs from the actual ceiling (or is anchored over two walls); framed in a central square, a monitor plays a thirteen-second gif of the sky at sunset. By denaturalizing the experience of looking up through a skylight, *As Above* forces the gaze back onto the frame. Rendered translucent by its framing, the landscape draws attention to the infrastructure of carceral geographies that restricts land at even the level of access to sunlight through systems of capture, control, surveillance, and indebtedness that restrict movement through both time and space. As the false ceiling looms below that of the space it is installed in, associations between views of the landscape and a sense of freedom also come into question. In an article for *The New Inquiry*, Monica Mohapatra has criticized architectural efforts to redesign prisons away from "'shades of monotonous, soul-crushing beige' and fortresslike structures with 'concrete, linoleum, steel.'" She writes: "Bigger windows...do not obscure the jails around them," nor do they change the fundamental nature of the prisons that they are set within.[31]

DISPLACEMENT/REDIRECTION OF THE GAZE

In *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Azoulay presents a means of returning to a moment prior to imperialism, before its shutter closed and reopened on mass dispossession, forced migration, and forms of differentiated citizenship. This return is predicated on the theory of unlearning through rehearsals, refusing to see histories as foreclosed, instead "acknowledging imperial violence as a given condition yet endeavoring to think before it."[32] The mode of sight required for unlearning is one of temporal translucency: seeing the present, the past, and the future at once, and then through all three to an anti-imperial, anti-carceral temporality in which the violence of imperialism could never have occurred. Translucency enables the eye to bilocate, seeing at once before and after, above and below, inside and out. Materially, this bilocation is reified as a series of redirections or displacements; in order to see multiple possibilities, presents, or positions at once, the eye must remain in motion, traveling between one subject and the other. Unable to settle, the authority of the gaze is destabilized. In her February 2025 public talk at Concordia University, artist, scholar, and learner Kameelah Janan Rasheed reframed the gaze that is interpolated by practices of veiling as a redirected gaze. Instead of presenting the veil purely as a method of opacity, the act of covering is read as redirection, thereby exerting visual

sovereignty as the surveilling eye is forced to move from one (desired) subject to another.[33]

Through processes of reflection, layering, and looping, the gaze can be redirected and displaced, denaturalizing its position within imperial and carceral geographies. In *Preposition, Second Sight* (2025), a set of two cardboard periscopes are mounted on a wall in order to see through it (fig. 5). In the periscope on the left, a round hole opens on a monitor showing video clips of the sky with a different surveillance camera prominent in every frame. The viewer looks back into the surveillance camera, a point of view that ensures that the operator was captured by the surveillance camera as they filmed—displacement offers a degree of protective opacity for the viewer, but this is only made possible by the camera operator's equivalent visibility to its surveilling eye. Looking through the right-hand periscope, only the sky is visible. As a barrier, the wall itself is easily circumvented even without the assistance of mirrors. Walking around the wall, the viewer finds that the periscopes are angled to each show a different section of the same video, screening simultaneously on two adjacent screens—both show a surveillance camera set off against the sky, but at different levels of zoom to manipulate what is framed for each periscope's eye. The sky is no more free of surveillance when it is not seen in the right-side periscope, and its lack of visibility points to both the spectre of surveillance infrastructure—the threat of which is that you are made visible without your awareness—and the reality, which is that

fig. 5 M. Gnanasihamany, *Preposition, Second Sight*, 2025. Cardboard, hardware, mirrors, paint, printed diagram, screens, media players, video, 2 mins., 244 × 244 × 183 cm. Photo: Michael Patten.

"in order for [an] elaborate apparatus of control to be effective, [its] surveillance power must itself be rendered visible at all times," meaning that the infrastructure's visibility is a part of how it is used to exert control.[34]

On the front of the wall is a diagram of the parallax effect, a visual illusion in which an object appears to be displaced depending on the distance and position of the viewer. *Preposition* directs attention to the viewer's capacity to see or not see, and, since the subject is surveillance cameras, to see or not be seen depending on their position in space. The gaze is redirected and displaced across translucent forms: through the wall, through the camera, and through the screen. The piece invites consideration for how surveillance infrastructure sees, and so shapes, land and landscape, as well as for both the omnipresence and impermanence of that infrastructure. As the viewer literally spies the sky beyond the camera in a view mediated by a camera and a screen, the surveillance camera itself becomes translucent, something flimsy and vulnerable. The camera—like the net, the rope, the photograph, and the video—is mutable, at once a tool of capture and a material targeting system, trained on the systems and structures of carceral geography. As they are rendered translucent, these tools of containment and framing engender ways of seeing through to potential abolitionist presents that are at once emerging and already in place.

CONCLUSION

Carceral distributions of the sensible maintain the invisibility of systems of dispossession; the prison-industrial complex is always on the periphery, just out of sight. In order to see through this "trick of perspective," abolitionist aesthetics must redistribute the sensible to see through the illusions of imperial, colonial, and carceral visual-political regimes.[35] To see through is to recognize what is true, and in doing so to disarm and dismantle the false visions that uphold imperial and carceral systems: visions of safety, innocence, deservingness, inevitability, and normalized, differential citizenship. Translucency is a material method in which frames, structures, and logics are rendered as thin constructions, punctured by the gaze—it produces carceral geographies as at once visible and transparent, and invites consideration for the potential of simultaneous opacity and visibility through acts of negation, framing, and redirection. Abolitionist aesthetics propose that the form in which "unfinished liberation" takes place might be visualized, "acknowledging imperial violence as a given condition yet endeavoring to think before it."[36]

Returning to Lubrin's "Return #35," the line "If given the given/sing wind" connects what is given, what is sung, and the natural world.[37] A given is inarguable fact, something on which all parties can agree—the poem directs us to disagree, to not concede to the givens, but to collaborate with the wind, singing in a gust that blows beyond all dominant orders. It asks: what is given, and what have we the power to give? We cannot linger in the space of the potential, as we are instructed to dig, dive, and spare nothing alongside acts of speech and creation.

To begin from liberation requires a vision of the world in which we are already more free, a form of sight that is not swayed by the lenses of foreclosed histories and distant futures. My material research consists of experiments in visual politics through the construction of possible ways of seeing through carceral geographies to the abolitionist present. In order to actually relearn to see (and so live in) the world, though, we must participate in liberatory action. As Steven Salaita, drawing on Frantz Fanon, articulates, while decolonization occurs through psychic expulsion of the colonizer, this "process...nevertheless can only occur through physical resistance."[38] It is not enough to see. Abolition requires us to act: to collaborate with the land to dismantle colonial, imperial, and carceral control and to re-see the world from within that shifted terrain. In my research into material methods of abolitionist aesthetics, I look to where liberation is already the condition. In the labours of resistance fighters around the world, in

organizing efforts for migrant justice, trans life, and prison abolition, and in the work of everyone fighting for a better world, liberation is present: the collective world takes up arms and shrugs off the ties of imperialism, bringing us home.

ENDNOTES

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