

WHITE SEEING-SPACE

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“This is how to place you in the space in which to see.”

—Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas*

“The power of the state to arrest and capture, to make visible and invisible, underscores the significance of visibility as a tool of state authority that structures who sees and what can be seen.”

—Nicole Fleetwood,

Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration

In discussing “relations between the conqueror and the colonized” in his *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger made a line drawing depicting in barest outline two figures. The one on the right was captioned “omnipotent” and the one to the left “less than human.” Berger noted: “the way each sees the other confirms his own view of himself.”¹ Two pairs of diagonals go from eyes to feet and eyes to the top of the facing figure’s head, perhaps evoking Hegel or Lacan. There’s much left unsaid here. Did the conquered actually think of themselves as less than human? Or were they confirmed in seeing that the conqueror saw them that way? “Seeing comes before words,” as Berger had famously begun his book. Before seeing comes “the space in which to see,” to borrow a phrase from Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier.² The way of “seeing” that arises in the space in which to see erases, so as to produce white seeing-space, which can then be claimed for absolute ownership. This seeing-space is the sensing of how to place people in relations of hierarchy in order to extract value. The formation of white space in which to see, by people and machines, is my subject here. This white seeing-space is the product of coloniality, a space formed by the erasure of existing human and other-than-human relations since 1492 when “America [the hemisphere] was constituted as the first space/time of a new model of power.”³ In the space of erasure, artificial vision and artificial surveillance is enabled. These processes are now being distributed across a network of machines that form artificial life systems. Together, the combination of erasure, extraction and surveillance has enabled racializing surveillance capitalism within that white

seeing-space: from the overseer on the plantation to neocolonial domination by the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV).

The operations of white space precede what is conventionally thought of as “seeing,” a look directed by a person at an object or other person that necessarily takes place in space. Whiteness is the apex, the place of organizing, and the vanishing point to and from which “seeing” is directed under racializing surveillance capitalism. White space is rendered by the systemic erasure of colonized terrain and existing social relations in that space. The erased ground made space perceptible to the “conquering” gaze identified by Berger. This process involved a multiplicity of senses from touch to vision and sound because (colonial) ground is layered and folded, as Stuart Hall has defined it: “it is the site irretrievably marked in relation to the question of ‘origin’ by an unpassable distance.”⁴ The resulting white space is at once static, responsive to input, and cultivates transformation. This static is the presence of the state, meant to be permanent and unchanging; the statue as a symbolic figure for the state; and the electric noise generated by surveillance apparatus. White space is always a surveillance arena and so it responds, if and when it detects something or someone within what Jacqueline Rose has called the “field of vision.”⁵ Elsewhere, I have called this regime “oversight,” meaning the work done by the overseer on the plantation to ensure maximum production and minimum resistance and projected forward into the still-continuing “plantation futures” of the Atlantic world.⁶ If there is always a “weave of differences”⁷ in human identification, the frame on which that weave is produced is, under the existing regime of coloniality, whiteness-as-white-supremacy, whether that frame is a picture frame, a mainframe, or a container for network packets. These frames are not identical or self-identical but contain and produce whiteness as “a changing same,” to borrow Paul Gilroy’s formula.⁸ In whiteness’s own imaginary, to be seen in white space is to be subject to violence without redress.

White space sustains whiteness as the “changing same” of what Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter has called “monohumanism.” For Wynter, monohumanism acts “as if it were the being of being human.”⁹ It is a system of violent domination, enacted by means of visualized distinction leading to separation, whether of “races” or of the free and enslaved, and the consequent production of vulnerability to harm. As a way of seeing, monohumanism uses a monocular vision of the world as a grid, shaping in turn the square of plantation agriculture, the layout of imperial cities, and

now the patterns of electronic surveillance. The combination of monocular vision with the enforcement of monohumanism forms what I call “racializing surveillance capitalism.” This concept simply connects Cedric Robinson’s racial capitalism, with the recent upsurge in awareness of surveillance as constitutive of capitalism, and Simone Browne’s understanding of “racializing surveillance.”¹⁰ Far from being a “rogue mutation of capitalism,”¹¹ racializing surveillance capitalism has been active from the surveillance-dominated grid cities of sixteenth-century Spanish Mexico organized on the principle of “concentration”;¹² to the slavery-era plantation with its overseer; the factory with its foreman; the “new Jim Crow” of mass incarceration; the “carceral reservation world”¹³ invented by settler colonialism for the indigenous; and today’s CCTV-controlled megacities on quarantine lockdown. Assertions that “surveillance capitalism is young”¹⁴ fail to account for its long role in generating and sustaining racializing surveillance capitalism on stolen land, in the plantation, and in the factory. Sustaining racializing hierarchy is and was codependent with the extraction of value by means of persistent surveillance of those excluded from monohumanism. State-gathered racializing “intelligence” is now being formulated into facial recognition, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) or drones, and border identification technologies, all still seeking an automated version of the perfect surveillance once desired by the plantation overseer.

In the Americas, racializing surveillance capitalism began with the “clearing” of ground, mentally and physically, and by displacing or disposing of the Indigenous. This clearance continues with the assertion that Indigenous peoples are “extinct,” dispersed, or that their claims to land are void. When the Indigenous within the borders claimed by the United States congregated in 2016 to protest the extension of the Dakota Access Pipeline into land designated as Lakota by the 1851 and 1868 Fort Laramie Treaties, they were met with violence, from state police with sticks, to tear gas, and presidential Executive Order. LaDonna Bravebull Allard was quite clear as to what was happening: “Erasing our footprint from the world erases us as a people. These sites must be protected, or our world will end; it is that simple.”¹⁵ By replacing the Lakota world with a pipeline, that world was erased, at least in part. That erasure continues: for example, Tohono O’odham burial grounds were demolished in 2020 to make way for the US border wall with Mexico.¹⁶ The 2020 Land Defenders on Wet’suwet’en land within the borders claimed

by Canada met similar response. As Freda Hudson, spokesperson for the Unist'ot'en (one of the clans of the Wet'suwet'en nation) put it, the issue revolved around competing definitions: "for us, our critical infrastructure is the clean drinking water and the very water that the salmon spawn in ... to them, they massively clear-cut land, which the animals depend on."¹⁷ When settler colonialism directly confronts its others, the issue is stark: erasure or survival.

Layli Long Soldier's poem "Three" (within the section of *Whereas* called *He Sapa*, known to settlers as the Black Hills, unceded treaty-protected land sacred to the Lakota Sioux) visualizes this space of encounter and confrontation: "This how you see me the space in which to place me/The space in me you see is this space/To see this space see how you place me in you/This is how to place you in the space in which to see." Seeing is spaced and placed, you and me, unevenly. Here, I, the non-indigenous white settler, am the "you" of her poem. Reading from the top, the poem begins with the settler placing the Indigenous in any space whatsoever. The sentence is evenly and standardly spaced. The next two lines have spaces between phrases. Later in the collection, she terms this unreadable space a "white hole," which arises in letterpress when two or more spaces are used, whether by accident or design.¹⁸ Those "holes make the space open," allowing you, me and them to enter, as and when. Across these spaces, a form of relation occurs. By the last sentence, evenly spaced, the settler may become able to access the space in which to see. The rules for the Oceti Sakowin encampment, worked into Long Soldier's final poem sequence *Resolutions* state: "This is a ceremony. Act accordingly."¹⁹ There are no rules. There are ways to learn by observing and then act. It's a performance but a very real one: the unlearning of settler colonialism. The Capitol insurgency of 2021 made it clear that there are many white people unprepared to engage in that unlearning. Adjust, and act accordingly.

Indeed, *Whereas*, the title of Long Soldier's book, follows from the 2009 Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans, which was placed entirely in the "whereas" clauses of the 2010 Defense Appropriations Act, providing over \$500 billion for the military (Public Law 2009). That is to say, the Act articulates, in the sense offered by Stuart Hall, the foundational erasure of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, together with present-day neo-colonial ventures in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. This articulation of what settler colonialism does amplifies Long Soldier's statement that the Apology "falls short of legal grounds."²⁰ Yet, like Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth*, Long

Soldier dreams of running, a dream of embodied and decolonized freedom. In her poem, on waking she “teeter[s]” to the mirror, saying “*You’re old enough now to look at yourself full-on*”²¹ (her emphasis). Long Soldier comes into her own view, deferring and making different the experience of colonized ground. For Long Soldier, the result is “defiance,”²² not the deconstructive *différance*.²³ It is not a “gaze,” because that is what the settler does and then automates in the surveillance system. It is a full-on look, one that expresses majority, in the sense of legal subjectivity and of maturity, which have both been denied to the colonized. And to women. Or Jews. Or anyone whatever excluded from the apex of white seeing. Being able to look at yourself full-on counts. Within the colonizing state, Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson has identified a “death drive to eliminate, contain, hide and in other ways ‘disappear’ what fundamentally challenges i[t]s legitimacy.”²⁴ This visualized structure of domination by concealment and disappearance is a powerful formation of racializing surveillance. As Nicole Fleetwood argues in relation to mass incarceration, the “state...structures who can see and what can be seen.”²⁵ It is both deployed against individuals and has a collective set of outcomes. The death drive of disappearance renders what Simpson calls “Indigenous political orders” unappearing within white space. Likewise, in carceral visibility, “incarcerated people [are] both invisible and hypervisible.”²⁶

For the sovereign white stare of erasure, disappearance and death is an active, artificial and engaged form that seeks to conceal itself from those it observes. The state and its surrogates project themselves²⁷ onto the erased white space of plantation futures, to use the term coined by Kathleen McKittrick, meaning “a conceptualization of time-space that tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sectors.” To these sectors should be added the so-called “reservation” for the Indigenous as and the detention center for migrants and refugees. In the plantation imaginary, the overseer was capable of envisaging everything that took place in and around the plantation, keeping humans, animals, biomass and even landscape under transformative surveillance. McKittrick shifts the register of the plantation as past time to one in which “the plantation uncovers a logic that emerges in the present and folds over to repeat itself anew.”²⁸ In this case, that logic is the means by which plantation oversight continues to structure the automated systems of racializing surveillance capitalism.

White seeing-space is a space in which it is possible for a person to metamorphose into a commodity. Which can transubstantiate life into value or render life into data. This capacity rendered life into property, the process of enslavement by which a body becomes an object according to colonial law, but it also makes whiteness into property.²⁹ From that transformative violence results a chain of metamorphoses, as Walter Johnson has put it, from “lashes into labor into bales into dollars into pounds sterling.”³⁰ In formal economic language, the later stages of this process are usually considered as exchange, but while dollars can be exchanged for cotton and other things, lashes and their resulting pain cannot (or should not) be exchanged at all. But Johnson notes that “violence is the metric of production,” to which I would add in this context, “of white seeing-space.” Under current digital systems of surveillance and detection, life is rendered into data, creating a “hostile environment,” to appropriate former British prime minister David Cameron’s nasty tag. Any person within the hostile visual environment, the renamed white seeing-space, is subject to physical violence, ranging from arrest and detention to deportation, as E.U. visitors to post-Brexit Britain have discovered. All persons are constantly being considered a suspect and needing to self-identify whether by Face ID, swipe card, photo ID, passport or fingerprint. The digital form of the “wages of whiteness” identified by W. E. B. Du Bois³¹ is not access to the water fountain but to the hostile white seeing-space, itself made fully visible on January 6, 2021 during the Capitol insurgency. This long struggle is very far from over.

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- 1 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972), 96.
- 2 Layli Long Soldier, "Three," *Whereas* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 8.
- 3 Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(3) (2000): 533.
- 4 Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 168.
- 5 Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986).
- 6 See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 48-76; and Kathleen McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe*, 17(3) (November 2013): 1-12.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, "Différance," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 13.
- 8 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 72-110.
- 9 Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Auto-poetic Turn/Overturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, eds. Broeck, S. and Jason R. Ambrose, J.R., eds. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 199 n.22.
- 10 See C. Robinson *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* [1983] (Berkeley: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 200-30; Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, Durham, 2015), 16; and Shoshana Zuboff *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).
- 11 Shoshana Zuboff *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, ix.
- 12 See Daniel Nemser, *Infrastructures of Race: Concentration and Biopolitics in Colonial Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), esp. 25-64
- 13 Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019), 115.
- 14 Shoshana Zuboff, "The Known Unknown," *New York Times* (January 26, 2020).
- 15 Kim TallBear, "Badass Indigenous Women Caretake Relations: #Standingrock, #IdleNoMore, #BlackLivesMatter," in *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NODAPL Movement*, eds. N. Estes and J Dhillon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 17.
- 16 Christina Ruiz, *The Art Newspaper*, February 18, 2020. Available at https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/president-trump-blows-up-native-american-grave-site-for-his-border-wall?fbclid=IwAR0JWfLCjEeyx6Oa-7PIFs-jOYTULQNyx6R6H7D1K7jQF71_mSt8QOKU
- 17 Anne Spice, "Heal the People, Heal the Land: An Interview with Freda Hudson," in *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NODAPL Movement*, eds. N. Estes and J Dhillon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 215.
- 18 Long Soldier, *Whereas*, 71.
- 19 Long Soldier, *Whereas*, 96.
- 20 Long Soldier, *Whereas*, 70.
- 21 Long Soldier, *Whereas*, 70.
- 22 Long Soldier, *Whereas*, 75.
- 23 The term *différance* is a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida to express the contradiction that the French verb *différer* means both to defer and to differ.
- 24 Audra Simpson, "The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty," *Theory and Event*, 19(4) (2016).
- 25 Nicole Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 15.
- 26 Nicole Fleetwood, *Marking Time*, 16.
- 27 For the concept of projection in colonial contexts, see Jill H. Casid, *Scenes of Projection: Recasting the Enlightenment subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 89-124.
- 28 Kathleen McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 2, 4.
- 29 Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, 106(8) (November 2020): 1707-1791.
- 30 Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 244.
- 31 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. (Transaction Publishers, 1935).