decolonizing site: place-scape and land-sense

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The anthropologist Steven Feld has written that "as place is sensed, senses are placed," arguing that "the perceptual engagements we call sensing [are] critical to conceptual constructions of place."[1] Experiences of perception involve a complex processing of received stimuli by way of our multiple senses, mediated through the mnemonic and cognitive processing of incoming sensory information in the mind. Though "senses make place," as Feld claims, he notes that particular forms of bodily awareness are often foregrounded.[2] In our culture, that often involves the privileging of sight over other forms of sensory experience.[3] This can lead to a routinization of perception: recognition of place happens against a backdrop of "modes of absence," as the philosopher Drew Leder phrased it, while other kinds of sense experience are silenced or go unrecognized.[4] In this manner, as site is experienced by sight, sight comes to define site.

In considering this hierarchical notion of the senses, in which vision reigns (abetted secondarily by sound), we witness not only a power dynamic about the biophysical aspects of presence but also a colonialist proposition that joins vision with the dominance of reason and connects sound to orders of control in ways that have racialized (and gendered) the "lesser" senses of touch, taste, and smell. This is not to essentialize visualism as distinctive to Eurocentrism but to acknowledge the manner in which our lack of erudition about nonvisual experiences is representative of the current state of art's, art history's, and dominant culture's (over)emphasis on spectacle and appearance, and how this tracks, for example, colorism and other forms of visual prejudice.

What would it mean to decolonize sense experience with respect to the ways photography and the associated lens-based practices of film and video stress visual acuity and surveillance as forms of power and judgment, and sonic discernment, particularly of Western harmonies, as an expression of cultural refinement? Might a critique of the hierarchy of sensual experience happen within lens-based art, as artists question the camera's spatiotemporal recording of sites and subjects in order to combat the manner in which white, Eurocentric practices have long privileged certain experiences of vision and sound as tools to displace and control populations and to dominate environments? What might "landscape" mean in this expanded notion of environment, with respect to a postcolonial, ecocritical attunement to a sensory-rich notion of place? How can we overturn the historical bias of experiencing site primarily through vision, a tendency that, to follow Feld, "places" sight as the primary form of sense?

Lens-based image-making is intrinsically visual. To record an image, photography and cinema capture light waves, fixing them in analog formats like photosensitive film or in digital processes that assign photons red-green-blue (RGB) values. Even cameraless photography, such as a photogram, requires light exposure to be created and then displayed. Though every image or object requires exposure to light to make itself seen, lens-based imagery relies on light to be created. Hypothetically, one could paint, sculpt, or draw in the dark, but the apparatus of photographic media prevents their being made that way. These media demand light first to *render* an image and then to make themselves seen to viewers, just as light is the

1 Steven Feld, "Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Towards a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005), 179.

2 Feld, "Places Sensed, Senses Placed," 179.

3 In contrast to the more acoustically focused Kaluli culture in Papua New Guinea that Feld studied, in which dense jungle limited visibility.

4 Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 103.

precondition of vision. In this sense, we can think of lens-based media as *constituted* by light.

Consider, however, Walter Benjamin's famous discussion of the crucial meanings provided by the textual, by the caption:

At this point captions must begin to function, captions which understand the photography which turns all the relations of life into literature, and without which all photographic construction must remain bound in coincidences.... It has been said that "not he who is ignorant of writing but ignorant of photography will be the illiterate of the future." But isn't a photographer who can't read his own pictures worth less than an illiterate? Will not captions become the essential component of pictures?[5]

In most instances, writing too involves light and vision. As an art historian and art critic, my practice is frequently one of translating experiences of sense—generally vision—into written reflection. Such a process, at its fundament, requires toggling between one visual experience (visual art) and another (words on a page or screen).

But what of other elements of experience? Vision is just one component of our human sensorium, one that tends to be overemphasized in a culture that equates seeing with knowledge, visual evidence with truth. How can we reckon with the ways in which our contemporary existence is formed by a multitude of histories and material realities that cannot be encompassed by visual apperception alone? How might artists widen the sensorium of viewers to include an awareness of nonvisual or extra-visual aspects of spaces, including not only hearing and tactile experiences but also invisible forces such as time, history, politics, and cultural tradition?

Though dependent on visuality, photographic-based media are constantly, slyly eluding the monopoly of vision. One way this is done is by emphasizing touch and the haptic qualities of images in processes of collage. Another is by exploring how technologies of image capture that so often presume to be neutral and therefore truthful are in fact elusive and partial in "recording" the invisible aspects of space (histories and narratives) and of spectators (nonvisual senses and embodied experiences). Furthermore, we rely on art's "re-presenting" of sites to convey experiences of environments we have not, or perhaps cannot, encounter. In the era of human-triggered climate change and ecological destruction, this includes spaces that no longer exist as they did previously. At times this translation of one place into another can have the effect of reducing attention to the space of the viewer's immediate perception—the gallery, for example—due to the powerful sight identification that lens-based representation encourages. This is abetted by the presumed neutrality of light-based recordings, which makes it appear that the process of presenting something is an objective recording process.[6]

[5] Walter Benjamin, "Short History of Photography" [1931], trans. Phil Patton, *Artforum* 15, no. 6 (February 1977): 51. This has been translated with a different emphasis, using "inscription" rather than "caption": "This is where inscription must come into play, which includes the photography of the literarization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate....: 'The illiteracy of the future,' someone has said, 'will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography.' But shouldn't a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph?" "Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 527.

[6] When manipulations of those processes are made evident, this divergence is often considered a creative or artistic practice, as opposed to mere recording.

Lucy Raven's multimedia explorations of the landscape of the southwestern United States work across spatial and historical axes, often using techniques of representation that confront the limits of the human perceptual apparatus. Her practice engages the fraught history and present-day circumstances of the region with respect to the military's uses and abuses of space, industrial resource extraction, and the colonialization and displacement of Indigenous peoples.

History and historical time are difficult to make visible; we witness history in its effects, in the scarred landscapes and artifacts of human presence that can be documented. By contrast, the unfolding of filmed time is very often a constitutive element of cinematic experience, when attention is synced to the temporality of the filmic medium.

And yet we exist in an ocean of both transverse (moving up and down) electromagnetic waves and longitudinal (moving side to side) acoustic waves, which the human sensory apparatus is only ever able to perceive in part, and certain experiences of space are impossible for humans to sense at all. Traditional lens-based reproductions depict the surfaces of objects upon which the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum is reflected; we cannot "see" the remainder of the spectrum, including short wavelengths such as gamma rays, X-ray, and ultraviolet, or long wavelengths such as infrared, microwave, and radio-wave radiation. In contrast to electromagnetic radiation, which travels at the speed of light, acoustic waves are mechanical, meaning they physically move atoms and molecules. Our sense of hearing registers the portions of the auditory spectrum that the human ear can perceive; we cannot hear extreme low or high frequencies.

But we possess myriad tools that "tune" these frequencies and re-present them as sound or visual evidence we can perceive. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), for example, uses pulses of radio waves to spin hydrogen atoms as magnetic fields localize their polarizations in space, essentially mapping the location of the fat and water in the body, rich as they are in hydrogen. Sonography, in contrast, uses the ultrasound frequency range of 20 kilohertz up to several gigahertz to image by way of echolocation, sending pulses of sound waves, which are then received and recorded when they echo back to a probe.

For Raven's 2022 film *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2)* (page 41), she employed high-speed cameras used in research about shock-wave propagation, which record at 20,000 to 77,000 frames per second. The footage of a desert landscape at a ballistics research lab in Socorro, New Mexico, is punctuated by the sound of an explosion. Whereas film traditionally replaces one frame with another as time passes, Raven's work employs an analyzation tool that measures differences between each frame. With the moment of the blast serving as her baseline image, each subsequent moment depicts pixels that have changed from the reference image, capturing the force of the shock wave as it moves in space. As she explained, "The process isolates what's changed in an otherwise static landscape ... its mode of embedding the blast within every subsequent frame, baking it into every frame, as it were, as the landscape changes and the shock wave moves across it."[7] Raven uses this form of "difference mapping" to explore the history of optics in the western United States, visualizing the effects of humans' interventions in and alterations of environments. The convergence of sound and vision creates a haptic sense of presence in space, rendering the power of the blast as it moves in space and demonstrating a force that might knock you off your feet if you were within its perimeter. Thankfully, gallerygoers are afforded protection from the full intensity of the explosion, experiencing the work sitting in metal bleachers atop subwoofers that transmit the sound while nonetheless emphasizing

7 Lucy Raven, conversation with the author, April 27, 2023.

the powerful physical and sensual qualities of the vibrations.

Raven Chacon, both as a former member of the southwestern Native American collective Postcommodity and as a solo artist, takes up the visual and sonic possibilities of countercolonial art-making and the survivance of Indigenous practices and cultural creativity. Survivance can be understood as the complex relationship between resistance and survival, an emphasis on presence as opposed to absence in the face of deracinating Western colonial-settler violence.

Chacon's *Three Songs* (2021; page 43) is a seven-minute, three-channel video installation in which three women of various tribes sing songs of their own invention in their ancestral tongues. The Trail of Tears, the Navajo Long Walk, and the displacement of the Seminole peoples are topics of the short performances, in which each woman stands or sits alone in a landscape, accompanied only by a snare drum. The first depicts Sage Bond, of Diné heritage, standing in a plain of desert scrub, with an enormous grain elevator towering above her in an otherwise empty landscape. In the second, Jehnean Washington, of the Yuchi tribes of eastern Tennessee forcibly removed to current day Oklahoma after the 1830 Indian Removal Act and the genocidal Second Seminole War (1835–1842), stands by a river, with electrical transmission towers seen in the distance spanning the waters. The third film shows an elderly woman, Mary Ann Emarthle of the Seminole tribes formerly of central Florida likewise evicted in the Seminole Wars, seated in a circular monument commemorating the various Seminole tribes at the Seminole Historic Preservation Office in Oklahoma (pages 188–189). In each woman's performance, the beat of the snare drum, a non-Indigenous instrument associated with the US Calvary, provides a jarring accompaniment to the songs of lamentation and fortitude.

Chacon's work as a noise and experimental music artist frequently explores the relationship between assaultive and melodic sounds. In his 2023 performance *solos*, for example, he used samplers to interweave birdcalls and flutes with grating electronic rhythms that conjure both thunder and heavy equipment like trains or bulldozers.[8]

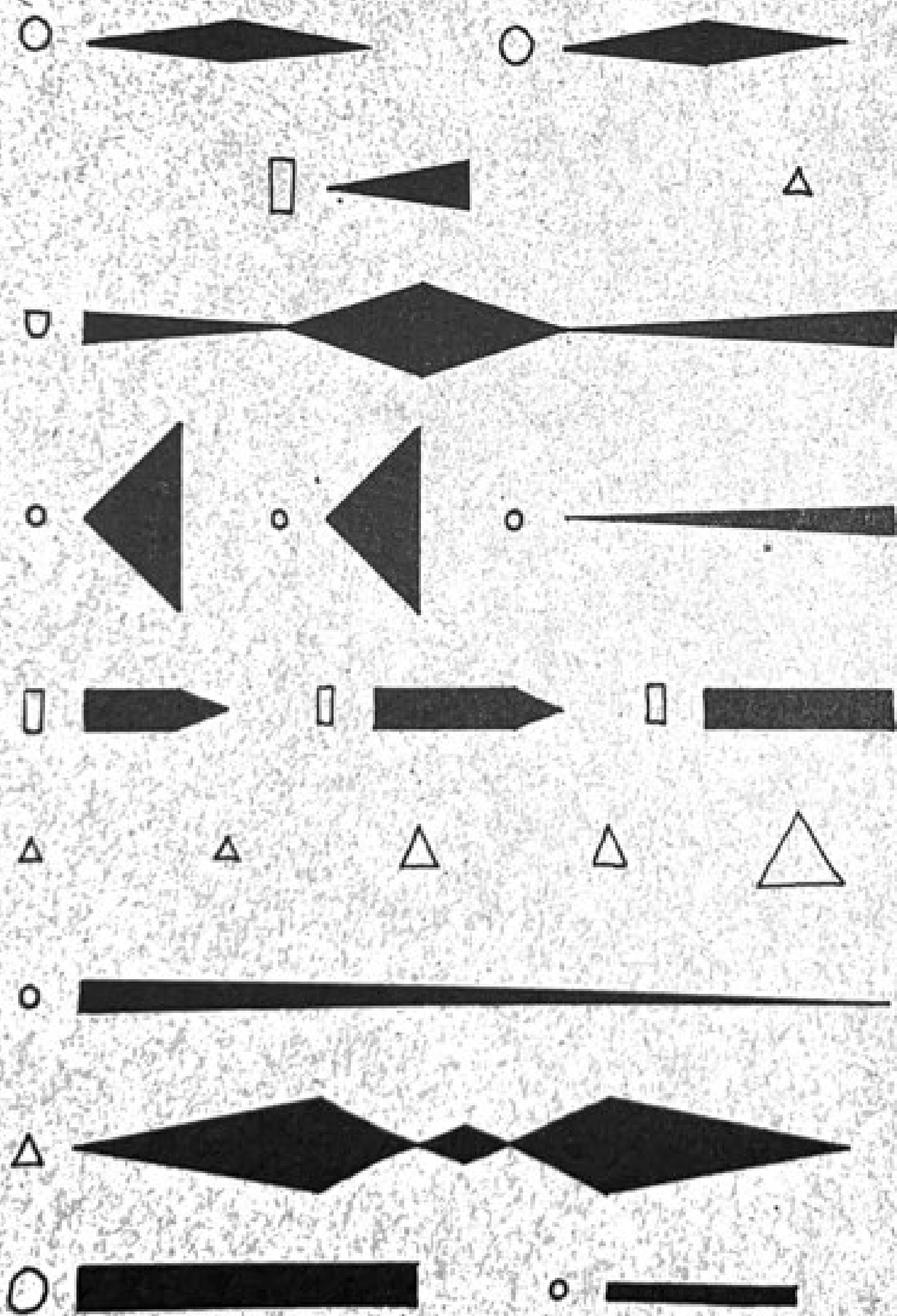
Sound in lens-based media is often deployed in service of authentic-seeming diagetic space (sound effects), persuasive characterization (by means of the human voice, most centrally), and the presentation of narrative (music scoring, often).[9] When used by artists, in contrast, sound has a long history of disrupting these effects of continuity and naturalism, especially by emphasizing noise.[10] The disruptive potential of noise manifested in works such as Chacon's activates elements of sound and vibration as enhanced forms of experience, calling attention to the land, its ecologies, and its people, either Indigenous or formerly enslaved, to whom North American settler capitalism and its ideologies of resource extraction and labor exploitation have done the most harm. The history and contemporary experience of

8 Chacon's *solos* was performed at e-flux Live, 172 Classon Avenue, Brooklyn, April 27, 2023.

9 One could argue that cinema is the perfect marriage of these "higher" powers of sense. Other than a few failed attempts at "scent-o-rama" or "scent-vision" in the mid-twentieth century, filmic experiences exist squarely in the realm of the audio-visual, with little acknowledgment or consideration of other types of embodiment.

10 The relationships of noise, sound, and music have been explored in the wide literature on sound art and sound in art of the past decades. Two of the most important texts are Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* [1977], trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), and Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

Raven Chacon, Diné, b. 1977; still from *Three Songs*, 2021, three-channel HD vi
Courtesy of the artist



Raven Chacon, Diné, b. 1977; *For Zitkála-Šá Series (For Carmina Escobar)*, 2019, lithograph, sheet: 11 × 8 ½ in. (27.9 × 21.6 cm); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the O'Grady Foundation, Inv.: 2022.15.3

indigeneity, its reckoning and resistance to the violent imposition of European values while simultaneously preserving and creatively growing its own traditions, is made into an intertwined soundscape. In one iteration of *Three Songs*, shown at the 2022 Whitney Biennial, Chacon paired the trio of songs with lithographs of graphic compositions dedicated to thirteen female Indigenous and mestiza composers (page 44). These scores, collectively titled *Zitkála-Šá*, employ a mix of tribal geometries and Western notation to create a powerful hybridization that used unorthodox musical language to produce indeterminate outcomes.

David Hartt's work accentuates the connections between Western colonial projects and their ecological and cultural effects, particularly how photographic and sonic media represent cultural and political power. In his 2021 installation *The Histories (Crépuscule)* (pages 190–191), he combines a seven-and-a-half-minute video, synced audio transmitted by radio, and a large jacquard tapestry showing two scenes of Jamaica. Part of a cycle of three works collectively titled *The Histories, Crépuscule* investigates the transatlantic slave trade and areas of European exploration and colonialization, using music of the same title by the Jamaican-born, classically trained composer and pianist Oswald Russell, interpreted by Berlin-based experimental musician Stefan Betke, to tease out the diasporic contradictions of life in the Caribbean.[11] The tapestry's images—one of the sea surrounding Kingston Bay and the other of the jungle at night—derive from photographs Hartt took in Jamaica at locations where Connecticut-born landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church once sketched. A central figure in the Hudson River School of painters, in 1865 Church traveled with his wife to Jamaica after the death of their two young children. Hartt's video depicts icebergs crashing into the ocean off the coast of Newfoundland, a motif Church had sketched during an 1859 trip to the region, in order to create his monumental 1861 painting *The Icebergs* (page 46).

The French word *crépuscule* translates as "dusk," and in enigmatic fashion, Hartt's work questions what this twilight refers to specifically. Both locations depicted in Hartt's piece were formerly British colonies, part of the triangular trade in which cod from Newfoundland was shipped to West Indian plantations to feed enslaved persons brought from Africa. Between the Newfoundland and Jamaica trips, Church produced one of his most famous paintings, *Twilight in the Wilderness* (page 37), an 1860 sunset scene of a Maine woodland landscape seemingly unsullied by humans, a theme popular at the time when the United States had only recently attained continental dominance. Today, we find ourselves at the twilight of another form of wilderness, in which the alterations of environment have triggered fanciful notions of geoengineering, as if humans can author their ecosystems at will.

According to Hartt, *The Histories* poses a series of questions: "How do we understand history, how do we receive it, how is it written, and how do we participate in it? What stories or narratives are most present, and which ones are marginalized?"[12] Underscoring Hartt's queries, consider that dozens of Wikipedia pages in thirty-eight languages are dedicated to Church and his individual works, while at the time of this writing, Oswald Russell had neither his own entry nor even a single mention. Among his many compositions, Russell's 1970 work for piano *Jamaican Dances*, according to fellow Black Jamaican musician Paul Shaw, is notable: "These dances embody the direct simplicity of

[11] "Crépuscule" is the title of a song from Russell's soundtrack for the 1969 Swiss film *Les vieilles lunes*, directed by Daniel Farhi.

[12] David Hartt quoted in press release for *The Histories (Old Black Joe)* at Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery, Chicago, 2020, https://corbettvsdempsey.com/exhibitions/david-hartt-the-histories-old-black-joe/.

Frederic Edwin Church, American, 1826–1900; *The Icebergs*, 1861, oil on canvas, 64 ½ × 112 ½ in. (163.8 × 285.6 cm); Dallas Museum of Art,.gift of Norma and Lamar Hunt, 1978.28

indigenous folk-song melodies clothed in the sophistication of European craftsmanship. From a cultural and sociological perspective, the work leads the way in resolving the dilemma of the Caribbean voice 'educated' to speak with a European accent—a dance that every Jamaican must master."[13]

In Hartt's installation, between the monitor and the wall-bound tapestry, a radio resting on the floor receives a transmission playing the Betke score, broadcast from the monitor's nearby media player. Though the signal is on 87.7 FM, the unit itself is an RF-9000 National Panasonic shortwave receiver—a still sought-after top-of-the-line model from the early 1980s—seemingly overkill for a three-foot transmission. While radio waves of higher frequency like FM travel in straight lines, their range limited by the visual horizon (approximately forty miles), the shortwave band is transmitted by directing electrically charged atoms into the layer of the atmosphere called the ionosphere. Shortwave radio transmissions travel long distances using this so-called skywave propagation, though the technology has been supplanted in popularity by satellite radio. The first transatlantic radio-wave communication, which employed a shortwave frequency, was received in Newfoundland in 1901.[14]

And so another invisible, yet historically profound connection is made in Hartt's work between the spaces of colonized land and the zones of human conquest, between what is "discovered" and that which is painfully evident. The triangle trade created real but invisible channels of maritime power over the planet; radio was "invented" when humans bounced signals off the magnetic field that envelops the earth and tuned into the communications. Hartt's work in turn attunes gallerygoers to the often visually imperceptible nature of the circulation of power, allowing them to physically sense themselves in fields of dynamic physical and historical relations that shape their perceptions of distant places. Other frequencies have always been and currently are available to help reimagine these connections.

In somewhat paradoxical ways, exploring the limits of visual observation can have the effect of attuning senses to nondominant forms of perception, giving a richer appreciation of the land and its life. Yet human senses, embodied within individuals possessing different sensory apparatuses and various experiential perspectives with which they understand their surroundings, are always pressured by the limits of visual objectivity. This is not to say that there is an utterly relativistic subjectivity in sense perception, but that there *is* a subjectivity to embodied experiences, and certain senses are less transferrable, less exchangeable, as representational media. We circulate and exchange experiences of touch, for example, far less frequently than the experience of looking. In troubling long-standing assumptions about the primacy of vision as a means for understanding and therefore controlling nature, artists such as Chacon, Hartt, and Raven question the notion that the visual representation termed "landscape" can offer complete and convincing records of the complexity of environmental experiences, in order to enrich the perception of place to include a wider array of sensory responses. Probing both the vulnerability of vision and its interdependence with other sensory experiences of place, these artists investigate hearing and the haptic as means to unpack the embeddedness of human sensation in matrices of nonvisual experiential stimuli, not merely audible and

[13] Paul Shaw, "His Artistry," Music Unites Jamaica Foundation, undated, accessed April 27, 2023, https://www.musicunitesjamaica.com/oswald-russell.html.

[14] This was accomplished by Guglielmo Marconi, an Italian scientist who was soon after awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for his efforts as the inventor of radio communication. Details as to the success of this first radio transmission are contested; if it occurred at all, the signal was speculated to have bounced off the ionosphere twice from its site of transmission in Cornwall, England.

nonaudible acoustic waves but also other forms of perceptual data. In this, evidence of reflected visible light is only one way to understand our relationship to particular lands. Vision acts like an aperture that these artists expand, opening perception to the wider range of electromagnetic and acoustical information modern technologies use to record experience.