



DARK

OPAC

ITIES

**DARK OPACITIES LAB**

**MANIFESTO:**

**A ZINE**



# 1. On the Evasion of Racial and Colonial Capture

How might **opacity** be an essential method in the evasion of racial and colonial capture?

What is the evasion of racial and colonial capture?

How might we understand it, on the one hand, in political terms, and on the other hand, in aesthetic terms?

Enclosure/capture/  
The prison/oversight  
Carcerality

Fugitivity/on the run/  
Evasion/avoidance  
Abolition

Representation/inclusion/  
Visibility/legibility  
Extraction

Opacity/illegibility  
Invisibility/inscrutability  
Anticolonial

When we think of capture we think of the static the enclosed the prison the photograph. We think of the trap of visibility as per Foucault, and the trap door offered by Stanley, Tourmaline, and Burton.

We think of the CCTV still, the blurry close up of those caught on surveillance footage, captured and placed into the local news, the national spotlight, deemed criminal based on logics steeped in white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.

We think and theorize and study against capture as a means to think for those on the run, for those under cover, for those invested in fugitive planning, for methods necessary to enact liberation under accelerating conditions of unfreedom, surveillance, policing, and ceaseless harm.

We create and make manifest such methods of opacity as a means to divest from the diversity inclusion equity discourse. We are not interested in the administrative and extractive violence of producing art and cultural expression to behoove cultural institutions who are only now interested in the work of diasporic, BIPOC, immigrant, Third World communities. We will not fall for such platitudes when the bottom line is the bottom line, capitalist accumulation for the white walls and whiteness itself.

Opacity emerges as an anti-colonial strategy theorized first by Édouard Glissant that has become increasingly of interest in certain fields of study. We draw from the foundational work of Francophone Caribbean anticolonial theorist Glissant to ask how opacity might work as a strategy against the overwhelming statist and capitalist desire for omnipresent sight, vis-à-vis surveillance and forms of policing. In turn, it is vital to reckon with the demand for visibility and representation for racialized and visible minorities as it plays out as part of liberal forms of inclusion, while understanding the contradictions of such forms of inclusion as they exist against the backdrop on ongoing structural violence against such communities (Lloyd, 2019; Hartman, 1997, Stanley, 2021). For example, as Saidiya Hartman argues, “the afterlives of slavery”—in which the practices of Black dehumanization, captivity, and premature death, continue into the present, despite state recognition of being an “emancipated” peoples. A framework of opacity understands how and why strategies of increasing visibility for marginalized communities, especially those of color, might actually hide or occlude quotidian and normalized structural violence. As these theorists have argued, the mainstream rhetoric of equity, diversity, and inclusion can often be predicated on a kind of violence, requiring the disavowal of historical injustice and harm so as not to express forms of racial grief and grievance.



## 2.

### 2."One of the risks of retreating

to opacity, which often includes conceptualising it as a mode of total liberation, is that it provides an alibi that obscures the harm done to black communities. Opacity is, though, tethered to intimacies, encounters, and violence. Opacity is not freedom; it is a terrible working through of objecthood and the legible and quiet forms of racist violence. Opacity is not freedom; it is a terrible working through of racist visual economies that simultaneously accumulate and dispossess black people."

—Katherine McKittrick,  
"Dear April: The Aesthetics of Black Miscellanea,"  
Antipode, 2022.

McKittrick conceptualizes opacity as rigorous practice of study, wonder, and curiosity that prompts the aesthetic work of affirming life and aliveness as we live through, and counter, colonial and plantation violence. McKittrick locates black aesthetics as a site of learning, remembering, imagining, and creating. We emphasize how this definition of aesthetics loosens us from the grips of institutional art discourses of representation, retrieval, or reveal in terms of subjection and oppression. Rather, here aesthetics is a "working through," by ideas and by stories, which shows up and takes cover in what we recognize as opacity.

Opacity is a method of living conditioned by moments of clarity that emerge in the post-1492 violent world order that also gives rise to action, activity, organizing, creating. "What do i mean, where have i seen this before?" This question formulated by McKittrick holds the power to identify moments and movements between opacity and clarity.



### 3. What do i mean, where have i seen this before?

// i was rereading *The Black Jacobins* and wondering how the text itself, the act of writing that history, is an act of liberation.<sup>25</sup> i remember rereading and i noticed that the style of the text, the tone of the writing, the format of the book, the chapter and section names, the use of numbers, the word placement, all of these components, express not a past that is over and done with, but this massive intellectual effort to tell that story outside of itself. David Scott writes that *The Black Jacobins* is not an informational source. It is, in his words, a theory problem, a problem space, it is a narrative strategy, it is poetics.<sup>26</sup> Maybe, then, *The Black Jacobins* is an aesthetic provocation. There is much clarity in this book. It is all right there, word after word, pages, pages, and pages of specifics and numbers and details, but there is something that James does, i think it is the gift of effort—but i am not sure—that cannot be told.

i was screening Steve McQueen's *Lovers Rock* and i saw and heard this cascade of something—it wasn't joy because it was too laced with anxiety— and it was a familiar feeling but and i was unable to explain it even though i remember every single detail of the scene in the film.<sup>27</sup> Every detail is intelligible and plain. This is not a ruse, this is not a plea for opacity; i am not keeping a secret, i just can't explain myself. i cannot explain why i am unable to return to this film, even though my desire to feel that way again lives within me. Maybe i am unable to return because those details are so clear and inexplicable. //

—McKittrick, "Dear April"

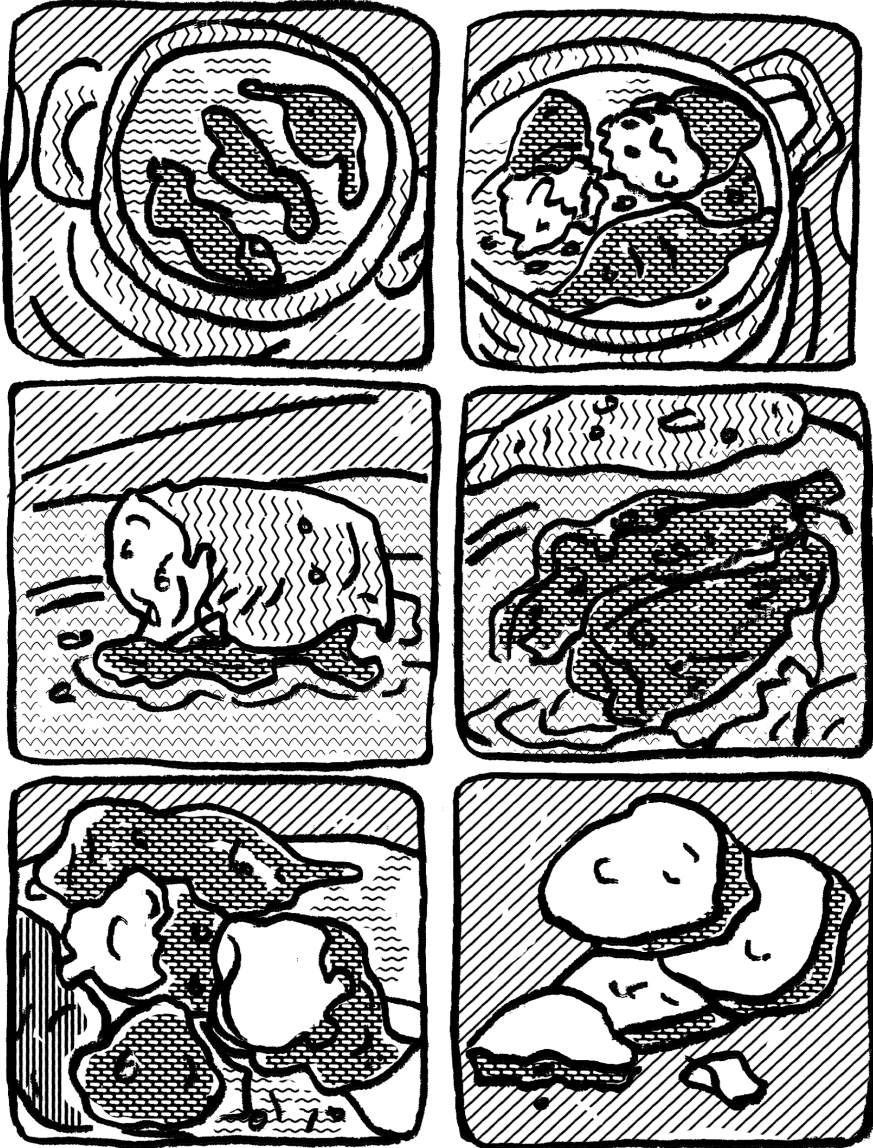
i attended a screening of *They Are We* (dir. Emma Christopher, 2014) at a diasporic film festival. The film documents the reunion of Gangá-Longobá people severed by enslavement; one side in Perico, Cuba, and the other in a small village Sierra Leone. When the Afro-Cuban family visits the Sierra Leone side, they joyfully encounter physically the indigenous medicinal plant they've known through song exclusively for over 170 years in Cuba. The Dominican woman who facilitated a post-screening discussion verbalized her grief over indigenous practices lost in slavery.



<sup>25</sup>James (1989).

<sup>26</sup>Scott (2017).

<sup>27</sup>McQueen (2020).



## 4. McKittrick's call to opacity draws

from the knowledge and skill VèVè Clarke theorizes as diasporic literacy: "reading practice that investigates and shows how we already do, or can, illuminate and connect existing and emerging diasporic codes and tempos and stories and narratives and themes." What do i mean, where have i seen this before?

La Tanya S. Autry, arts worker known for organizing the Museums Are Not Neutral movement, shares on Instagram her experience with trying to recreate a recipe in diaspora. Her experience speaks to the way diasporic literacy flashes between clarity and opacity and back again.

"i am a child of the African Diaspora. lately i returned to trying to figure out how my grandmother cooked the sweet potato snack she'd offer me when i hanged out with her back when i was just a kiddo in elementary school. i don't know how she made them. but i remember that she would cut them into discs.

i have tried to make them only twice. but i have thought about them all of my life. this time i boiled them. i pierced the potato with a fork before boiling also i halved it because i didn't want to ruin a whole sweet potato. (i was testing this out.) it looks like my method messed up the texture. it's close, but not right.

and actually to tell the truth, i think this might be a yam and not a sweet potato. it's not sweet enough. ☹️

she's probably watching me and shaking her head (lovingly though). well, things get lost in the diaspora, but the memory is still with me. i will try again."

## 5. At a Ntozake Shange reading,

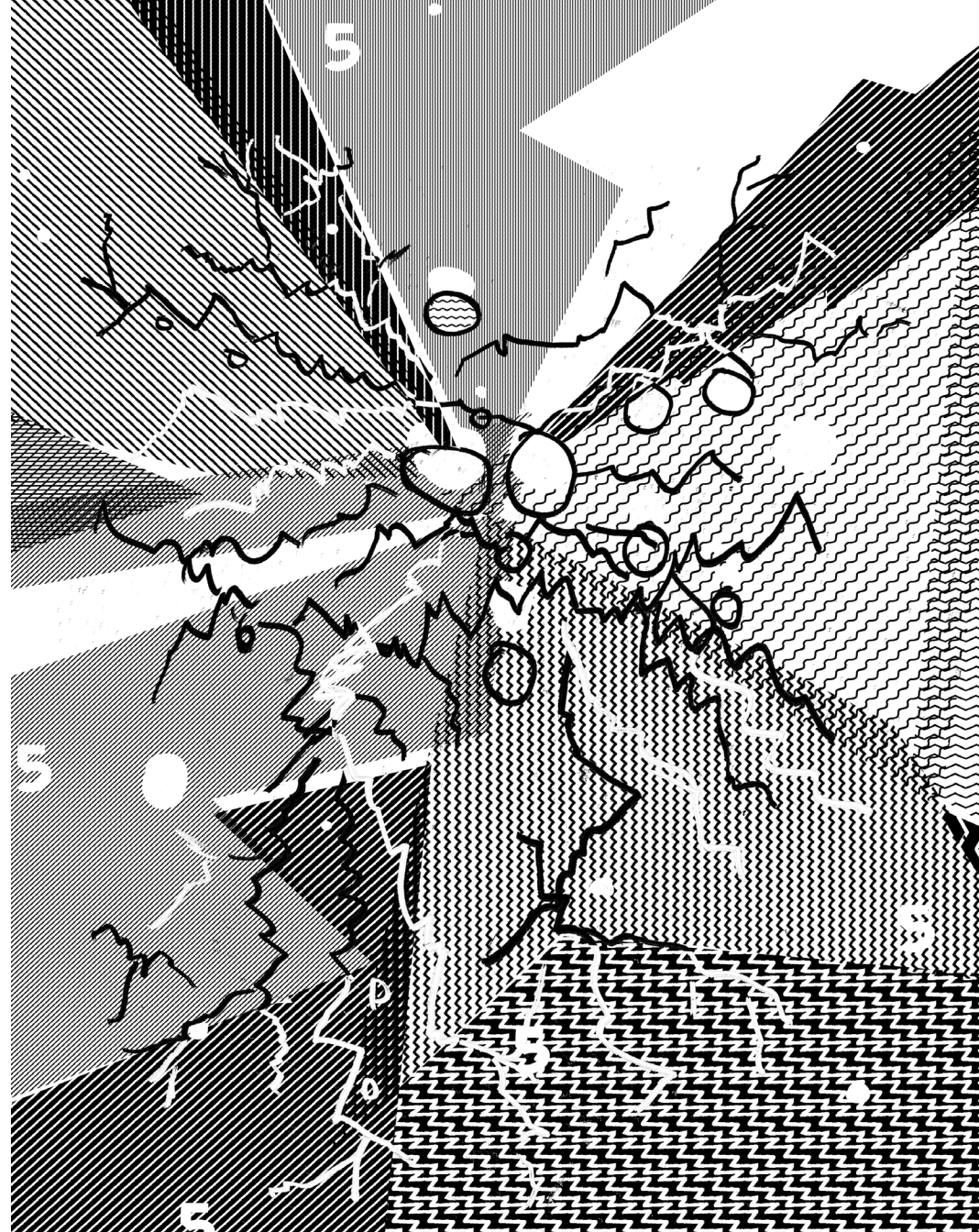
Cherríe Moraga is prompted to remember roots that she knows and does not know. The knowing and non-knowing collide. Moraga describes this collision as a "CLICK" that results from communing with Shange's work and testifying to that experience with other women of color. Moraga speaks of a letter to Barbara Smith that Shange "was speaking a language i knew— in the deepest parts of me— existed, and that i had ignored... The reading was agitating. Made me uncomfortable. Threw me into a week-long terror of how deeply i was affected. i felt that i had to start all over again. That i turned only to the perceptions of white middle-class women to speak for me and all women. i am shocked by my own ignorance."

Moraga continues in the essay

"La Güera," "[i]t is in looking to the nightmare that the dream is found. There, the survivor emerges to insist on a future, a vision, yes, born out of what is dark and female."

The CLICK emerges as a remembering perceived as knowledge. The CLICK enables the perception of the limit of Moraga's knowing which she experiences in fear, terror, shock. The CLICK only happens in radical connection and collectivity, in embracing the nightmare of internal and interracial perpetuation of colonial racial heteropatriarchal violence. "i can't afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me," Moraga says. "if it takes head-on collisions, let's do it: this polite timidity is killing me."

We enter the nightmare as source of potential knowledge.





## 6. Audre Lorde has theorized darkness

as source and reserve of creative power. For Lorde, poetry bridges being from nonbeing: "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" (Poetry is Not a Luxury). Lorde argues, "places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden... as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more... to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge, and therefore, lasting action comes."

Darkness sources poesis, an activity of bringing something into being out of nothing.

If the Enlightenment gifted the knowledge that refined embodied sensorial experience and brought light to human being, what kind of being could darkness bring? If the Enlightenment gifted the knowledge that brought light into the world, what would it mean to know in darkness?



## 7. Perhaps i am still drawn

to the possibility of what **opacity** can do for us in terms **both** aesthetic and **political**: What if we are to argue for the **abolitionist** value of **opacity**?

In conceiving of **opacity**'s function as, in part, a material mode in which to evade forms of racial and colonial capture, what can be said for the value of **opacity** as against forms of punishment, from harassment to enclosure, from **policing** to prisons? How is **opacity**—as a fugitive strategy, as one that begs for motion and non-fixedity, that operates against reduction and so-called clarity?

In a 2021 article entitled “The Unsettling Surveillance of Anti-Asian Racism” Jane Hu argues that the legibility of hate crime status for contemporary forms of anti-Asian violence oftentimes means the ramping up of both surveillance and **policing** technologies, both of which are structured by historic and ongoing forms of anti-Blackness. In my reading, legibility and determining motive for hate crimes ultimately argue for a sense of clarity and

transparency that the violence was motivated by forms of prejudice, racial or otherwise. Rather than focus exclusively on the demand for legibility, I want to think against the liberal demand for transparency to theorize opacity as it offers abolitionist value that is inherently against forms of surveillance and policing. I specifically choose to think with a selection of community organizations, including CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, Muslim Abolitionist Futures, and Carceral Technology Resistance Network; to think with artists Assia Boundaoui and Jess X Snow; and with scholars Ren-yo Hwang, Anjali Nath, and Vivian Truong, all of whom help me think through opacity as a way to arrive at community defense as an abolitionist horizon for Asians and other diasporic kin in the contemporary.

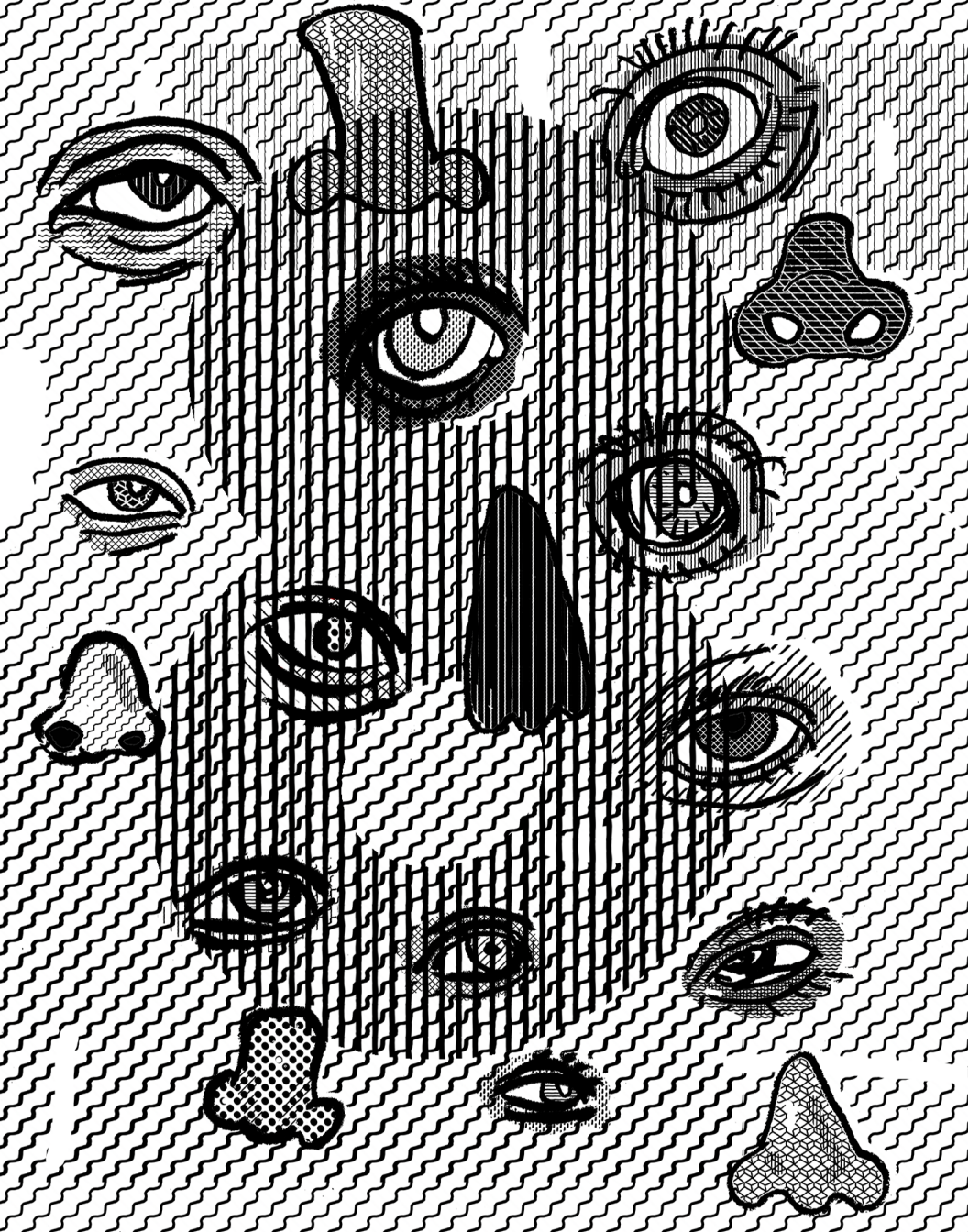
And yet, to return to McKittrick, to acknowledge the limits of opacity as a result of it existing as a "terrible working through of objecthood and the legible and quiet forms of racist violence. Opacity is not freedom; it is a terrible working through of racist visual economies that simultaneously accumulate and dispossess black people." If it is not freedom, if it requires an acknowledgement of the terror and the

trauma of the plantation and the colony, then what can it offer? McKittrick gives us much language here in terms of wonder, curiosity, prompt, but I hone in returning to number 2:

"We emphasize how this definition of aesthetics loosens us from the grips of institutional art discourses of representation, retrieval, or reveal in terms of subjection and oppression. Rather, here aesthetics is a "working through," by ideas and by stories, which shows up and takes cover in what we recognize as opacity."

If we are loosened from such aesthetic institutional grammar, is there not the possibility of the opposite existing and positing other ways of making and mattering:

Of abstraction—non-representation  
To not mine our personal and often painful  
histories—against such retrieval  
To conceal, keep hidden—as Rita Dove writes  
"If you can't be free, be a mystery"



## 8. i keep thinking about who

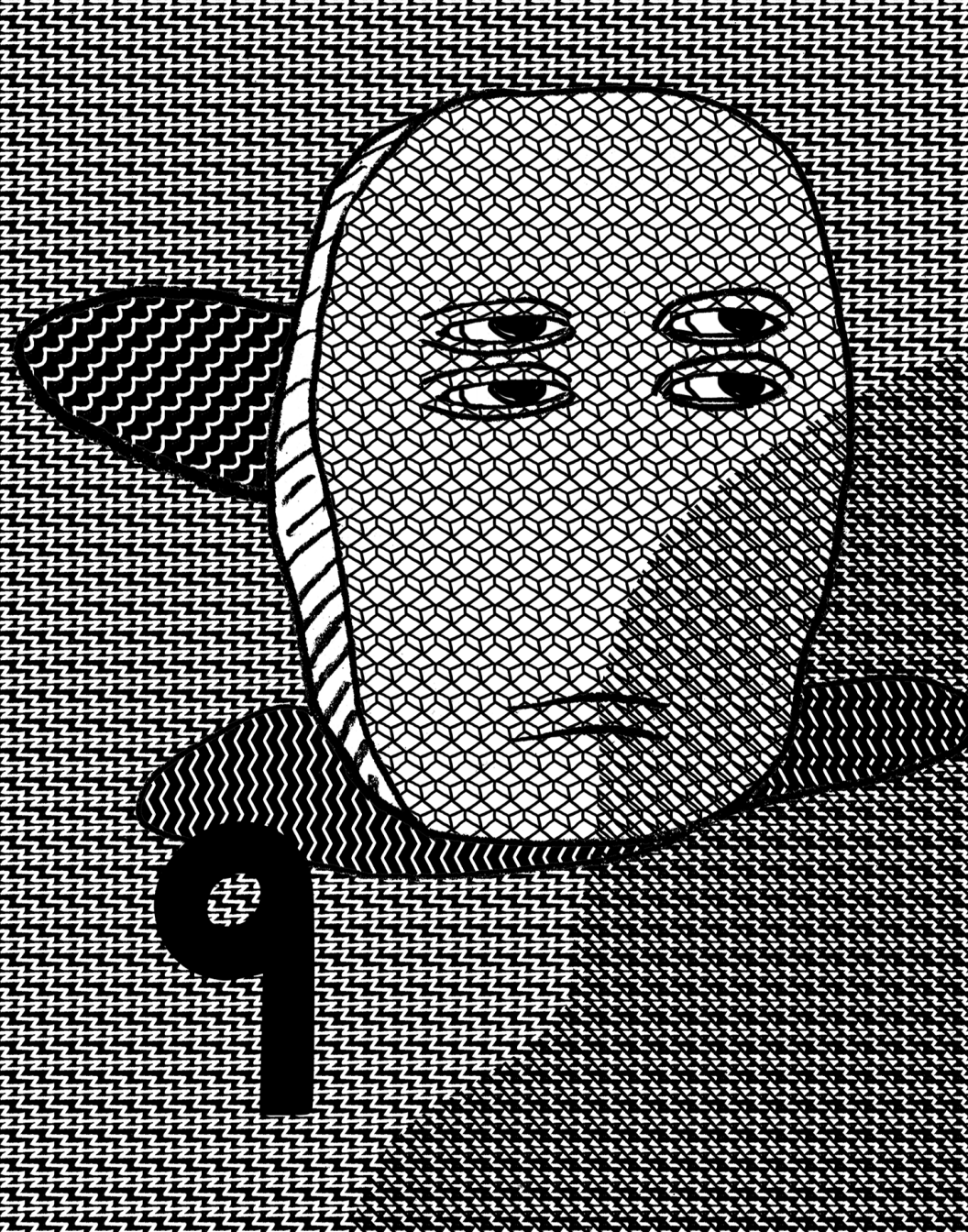
we should be afraid of when we think about what we display as art or other akin forms as an analogous way of thinking about how we navigate the everyday and the public sphere. It is about the consumption of our work and our bodies that the constant forms of watchfulness—whether through consumption of art vis-a-vis the audience or it is through the tightrope we walk everyday, our vigilant watch over ourselves and our BIPOC and diasporic kin for our safety and survival against the vigilante and organized violence of white supremacy.

And i know that the ruse of analogy is just that, a deception, dangerous in its ability to occlude details, complexity, nuance. But, there is something valuable in this particular analogy between display of our work and of our bodies—and its not just the politics of the gaze, though

that does give us much to sit with. From bell hooks giving us the “oppositional gaze” to Laura Mulvey naming the “male gaze” and now Tina Campt offering “a Black gaze.” But if we go beyond the ocular, beyond sight, beyond vision, what do such forms of consumption enable both aesthetically and politically. But perhaps i am more invested in thinking about the political ramifications of the gaze, the danger of being seen, being recognized, for what or who you are thought to be. To be on display. To be read in public.

It is the danger of being consumed, extracted, digested and transformed through the vessel in an abstract and material sense.

It is in the possibility of being read as out of place, as out of joint with whichever norms are operating. It is existing, being in harm’s way.



## 9. i tell my students

"opacity is an imperfect strategy." i think it enables more than it limits. it expands in ways that for me are incredibly generative and fruitful. i think of it as part of a growing constellation of work on illegibility, invisibility, abstraction, untranslatability, and inscrutability that all have something to say to each other.

Vivian Huang theorizes "inscrutable aesthetics" in her brilliant 2022 book *Surface Relations* to describe Asian American racialization as a queer form, describing the focus of her book thusly:

"[i focus on] Asian American appearance through this interaction of surface. How has the racial category 'Asian American' itself taken on an inscrutable form: all exterior surface with ambiguous interior content? [...] Asian inscrutability queers knowledge because it refuses the high valuation of modern thought as a kind of colonial capture. This book follows in the indigenous, Black, anti-racist, feminist, and queer intellectual legacies that have destabilized modern foundations of knowledge by historicizing the violence extracted by Western thought"

This is the kind of distillation of thinking we need—because it crystallizes ideas in ways that also multiply in meaning. It is gesturing toward the many possibilities of what inscrutable aesthetics are and can be, how surface relations offer a way of understanding the very political underpinnings of this concept of Asian inscrutability. Maybe this appears contradictory: that inscrutability and inscrutable aesthetics are structured by a particular politics, that the impenetrability of the Asian figure/face/ surface in the North American context, offers a way to read what appears as apolitical or neutral as instead strategic and studied, a kind of militancy.

How does the seeming impossibility of reading—and thus knowing—the Asian face as affectively devoid or politically ambiguous by statist heteropatriarchal white supremacist forces then confer upon said face a kind of militancy, strategic and studied? In my estimation, part of what Huang's argument conjures is a historic relation between Asianness and whiteness that is forever bound up by colonial and imperial ties, where forms of colonial and postcolonial resentments play out. However, Huang's interest lies in the quotidian queer affective forms of Asians akin to "staying in" (Lee) and remaining "in the closet": how might staying in...the closet then offer a way of imagining opacity otherwise?

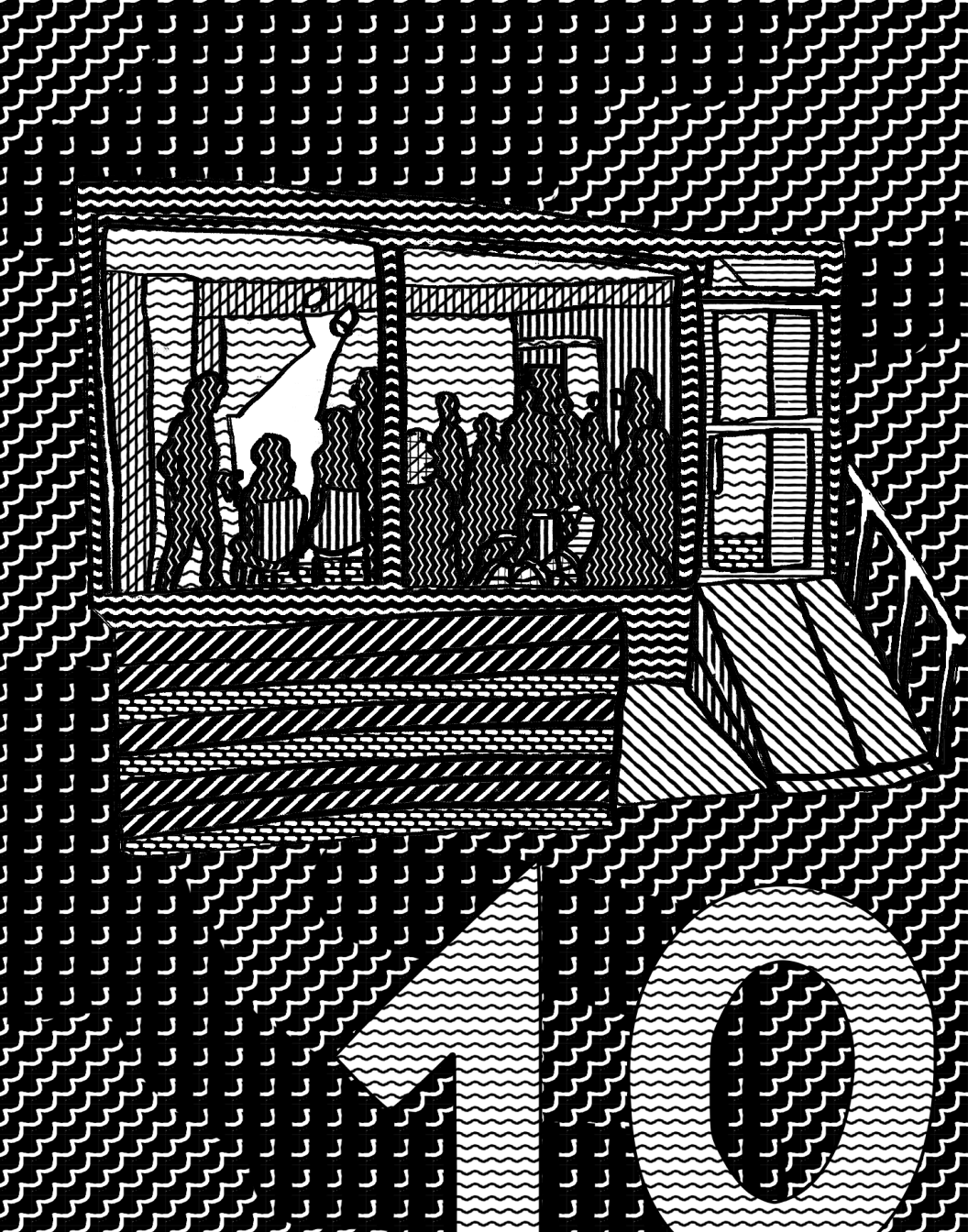
By choosing to remain ambiguous, unconfirmed, hidden away, concealing oneself—however we choose to put it—is to consciously maintain something of ourselves.

Our truth, our power,  
our self-knowledge,  
our sense of safety,  
our sense of survival,  
our mode of freedom.

By operating inscrutably we operate against the overwhelming weight of constant sharing, public life, the public eye, the watchful eye, the surveillance of everyday life, the desire to be seen; we operate against the gaze, its consumptive, greedy, ceaseless operation. "You're Feast Has Ended" as artists Nep Sidhu, Nicholas Galanin, and Maikoyo Alley-Barnes have articulated. The gaze is consumption incarnate, it is a desire for the ocular to dominate, to nullify other senses. For the feast to end, staying in, remaining in the closet might be better options than the alternative. Insofar as it revises and transforms the very terms of sociality and relationality itself, there exists a political potential in the racialized queer form of staying in, staying opaque.

It is this collective vision of ambiguity,  
haziness, occlusion,  
avoidance, concealment,  
we arrive together.

Me and you.  
(Your mama and your cousin too)  
—Outkast, "Elevators (You and me)"



## 10. We intend to study and create

with you, a collective of the minoritarian, the dark, the alien, the feared, the invisible, the confused, the opaque, the foreign.

When much feels pointless, wrestling with the overwhelming apocalyptic, what does it mean to study and create and think and practice in collectivity? Moten and Harney's undercommons might give us the tools we need for Dark Opacities Lab, embedded in black study, paying our debts to intellectual, political, and aesthetic genealogies;

let us steal,  
we begin our fugitive planning,  
despite it all.



Text by the Dark Opacities Lab Collective

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**DARK OPACITIES LAB** is a hub of BIPOC political and aesthetic study and strategy. The lab theorizes opacity through the triangulation of race, politics, and aesthetics: from theorizing around redaction to creative trans of color survival strategies; from historicizing visibility beginning with plantation slavery and interlocking colonialisms to envisioning abolitionist tools working against carceral technologies. Dark Opacities Lab engages with the evolving terms of opacity as a way to question the easy and extractive logics at play around race and representation, and to reorient around anticolonial struggles, global anti-racist social movements, and to center the intersectional and the internationalist.

Dark Opacities Lab will exist in three dimensions: Dark Study/Studio, a dual-purpose community reading room and informal art-making space; Dark Continuum, an interactive digital platform; and Dark Display, in the form of small-scale exhibitions by minoritarian artists, theorists, practitioners.

Founded in Fall 2023, the lab is supported by the Canada Research Chair in Art & Racial Justice, as well as the Department of Art History at Concordia University in Tiohtiá:ke/Montréal.

