

Penitent Spy

Alison Dean

Jordan Scott's *Clearance Process* is fraught with contradictions: the right to show versus the right not to show; the demonstration of power performed by the prohibition on showing faces, and the way anonymity also calls up the power of covering others' faces (in order to evacuate their power); the way these photographs make their story about the detainees while at once erasing them from it. And then, at the centre of all of this—anxiously trying to move himself to the periphery—we have a poet who, instead of writing poetry, is making portraits without faces and audio recordings empty of words...

When journalists, writers, and photographers like Jordan Scott are permitted access to Guantanamo Bay Detention Center, they are granted something more than just entry into the space. Arriving in Gitmo in April 2015, Scott compiles an archive of audio recordings, photography, and poetry that actively questions what counts as evidence, and what, as such, will not be allowed past the walls of Gitmo. Through his photographs, Scott negotiates the official restrictions outlined under “General Photography and Video Limitations” in the “Department of Defense Media Ground Rules for Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (GTMO), September 10, 2010.” Though the Ground Rules don't completely prohibit the photography of detainees, Scott rarely photographs the men being held in the detainment camp. He does, however, photograph the guards, whose inflated, uniformed bodies serve to highlight the detainees' conspicuous invisibility. Although these guards are always present as part of Scott's photographic frame, he doesn't make them the main subject of his images. Instead, he often trains his camera away from bodies. Scott carves out a space for critique through arguably the only visual recourse available; he shifts his attention to fragmentation, texture, pattern, surface, and light—nonrepresentational elements that the censors overlook. Emptied of bodies, these photographs complement Scott's interest in ambient sound. Whereas fragmented portraits actively call attention to the body and to the restrictions placed on its representation, these textured images invite contemplation about the space and about the role of documentation within it.

Uniform Bodies

In Scott's photographs, the uniformed guards shift their weight before the camera. These men are active participants in the photo-making process and their posture is carefully trained. At once subjects and supervisors, many of these same soldiers oversee the act of photographing itself, sometimes framing the shot in order to avoid restricted views, as Scott has noted. This "framing" can go as far as the marine taking the photographer by the shoulders and shifting the man and, by extension, the camera, to where he wants them to go. In this sense, cropping and redaction both follow and precede the image.

In Scott's photographs of Gitmo guards, visual features like gesture and body language seem to travel easily, regardless of context or caption. The men he pictures seem at home in the act of showing their postures, boots, and bodies before an audience, whether real or imagined. We've seen it all before, and it is important for them to project this strong, confident physical presence to anyone who views the image. Unlike photographs of torture and interrogation, or even images of detainees, the shapes of these bodies are meant to travel outward. This isn't just a question of transparency in terms of policy and process; these bodies travel in a carefully controlled service of import/export.





In the photographs above, the Gitmo guards are secure enough to turn their backs on the camera (set up in plain sight) and face away from the other men nearby. With the ocean and lounge chairs before them, and the photographer in shorts and t-shirt behind them, this image resembles a bizarre vacation scene. Even in seemingly casual conversation, these uniformed bodies take up space. Rather than shying away from a potential photograph, the soldiers stand firm. They have internalized the sense of self as a potential image. They know which part of the scene will be allowed to travel out of a cropped or redacted photograph, and they must realize that no personally identifying images can be allowed without their consent. Aware that the photographer will have no recourse to show their faces, the anonymous soldiers pour themselves into posture and uniform instead. As (I presume proudly) uniformed bodies, they participate in making themselves into image and symbol well before any cameras come out.

The Gitmo guards practice their poses not only for the camera, but also as a rehearsal or imitation of the bodies they will place before the detainees themselves. In another fairly characteristic image, a guard stands facing the camera, hands on hips, with his head outside of the frame. It is, undeniably,

yet another textbook lesson in power posing. At the same time, however, the Gitmo guard is almost violently decapitated by the photographic composition. Whereas the covering and hooding of heads has a distinct history in relation to interrogation of detainees (the infamous Hooded Man photograph, for instance), these heads are not placed in the dark; they are simply withheld from us. The soldiers' conspicuous anonymity evokes their power not to be shown. This is an inversion of the power that comes from covering someone else's head to keep them from seeing. These men (and these photos are almost exclusively populated by men) appeal to be seen in a certain way. We, as viewers, get a dress rehearsal. In the virtual absence of actual Gitmo detainees, we watch, as a warning that will circulate outward just as they are afraid the messages, codes, and weaknesses will seep out. But, of course, I have the luxury of imagining the POV of the POWs. As a viewer, I can't lay claim to it, nor would I want to. Of this, Scott seems acutely aware. Here, the right to photograph separates those with agency from those without. By extension, the right to be photographed a certain way also holds a distinct form of power.



“Photographing the Frame”

Thanks, in part, to the strict rules and regulations imposed on all images travelling out of the prison, many of the photographs of Guantanamo Bay look eerily similar. Some of the most common examples of Gitmo photographs include images of “privileged” detainee belongings. In these images, orange jumpsuit, toiletries, and various objects are unpacked and laid out on top of a bed in a photo-ready detainee cell, staged for the visitor’s benefit. These photographs are almost darkly funny, as they mirror the “What’s in my purse” page in fashion magazines, or the carefully unpacked contents of a Herschel bag in their “Well Travelled” advertising campaign (“here are my essentials; this is what I’ll wear; look at how much you can fit in this bag!”). As Scott has noted, even the details of the objects add to this effect—the sample deodorant is called Maximum Security. Like advertisements, these showcasing photographs sell an idea of benevolence and respect for personal property, in this case as a reward for good behaviour. Other notable photographs feature medical face-masks, which hold copies of the Koran to keep them from touching the floor. Still others show a combination of barbed-wire fences overgrown with greenery; broken pavement; cropped images of soldiers posing with hands on hips, or hands on belts—scenes that consistently echo (or are echoed in) the ones to which Scott had access.

This standardization is telling. There is no separating aesthetics from politics when there are such heavy restrictions leaning on the photographer. Here, the political directs the aesthetic frame. This narrowed field is illustrated in Scott’s photograph, below, made in the detainee viewing area in Camp Six. This was a photographic space long before Scott and the other men entered the room, aimed their cameras, and pressed *record*. In this photograph, all of the cameras are aimed toward an indeterminate view, a prefab scene obscured by glass and wire. This image performs what Judith Butler refers to as part of “a concerted effort on the part of the state to regulate the visual field” (64). Working in an environment where there is a state-controlled hand on both content and context, “embedded” reporters and media representatives are granted access

to privileged locations “only on the condition that their gaze remain restricted to the established parameters of designated action” (64). When embedded reporters do get access to restricted areas or information, they do under the condition that they “agree not to make the mandating of perspective *itself* into a topic to be reported and discussed” (Butler 64). Here, agreements have been authorized, visitors have been led into the viewing area, and the parameters have been clearly laid out.



The way Scott has presented this scene, however, undercuts the spirit of the documents he signed; through his lens, the glass suggests transparency while at once further obscuring the view, and its reflection calls attention to the mediated nature of the space. The cameras flash red for *record*, as if to highlight the way these camera views are all stacked one on top of the other—and all revealing very little. Frames within frames, the image is textured with grids and fences, scratches and coloured light. These elements work together to call attention to the visual limitations built into the space. Showing the deep respect for photography required to so actively negate it, Gitmo organizers have anticipated their audience and responded accordingly. Rather than reproducing the scene uncritically, Scott (who is nevertheless spared the responsibility of answering to a news organization or outside institution) offers a visual metaphor for redacted, limited, or embedded reporting.

In other words, Scott makes the viewing process the subject of the photograph. His focus is aimed as much through other people's viewfinders as through his own. With this self-conscious layering of frames, Scott's composition readily admits to his presence and his relationship to the other media representatives on site. Through him, we catch glimpses of hair and ears, we graze the back of a neck. Rather than seeing the detainees, we are offered an image of other men who stand shoulder to shoulder, front to back, bunched close enough that their frames overlap. Rather than seek out a shot of the already barely-visible detainees, Scott photographs the photographers. More than a study in visual limitations imposed by the state, then, this photograph also frames and critiques the media visitors who scramble like tourists before an animal cage to get a look at the bodies within.

Tracks, Traces, and Textures

Even in the photographs absent of bodies, Scott's penitent spying peers out toward the ones not pictured, the people whose invisibility characterizes the photographs in the first place. (Here is Guantanamo Bay Detention Center... but where are all the people?) His own anxiety piqued by his presence as a privileged observer in the space, one who gets "special requests," one who has an escort, and (though it may remain unsaid) one who, most importantly, knows exactly when and how he gets to leave, Scott cranes to both see and hear nature from the perspective of one to whom it is denied. To leave out a body is not necessarily to erase it, however. Sometimes, the absence has rhetorical effect. As Jeff Derksen argues (speaking specifically of the militant image), "[t]urning from the primacy of the body an image without the representation of bodies can also circulate within an affective economy" (17). Aware of the potential power to show the relationship between political precarity and invisibility, "many artists turn away from the direct representation of human acts...and instead produce an *oblique look* that exists alongside acts"—or, we might also say, alongside bodies or conditions—"often in their troubled or calmed aftermath" (17). These seemingly calm moments and conspicuously emptied spaces make

their emptiness a part of the image. Although not explicit in their challenge to the Gitmo system and the government that controls it, Scott's photographs make questions of perspective and invisibility central to their critique.

We might also consider Scott's photographs in relation to sound, as the non-representational, abstracted scenes follow the same impulse as Scott's ambient recordings. Asking that we consider sound not only on its own, but as an important component of a greater sensory encounter with a photograph (and encounters with black performance and representation, specifically), Fred Moten claims that the act of becoming sensitive to sound, refusing to ignore or "neutralize the phonic substance of the photograph," effectively "rewrites the time of the photograph" (201). This rewriting of time grows inside the tension between wanting to look away and then looking back—shrinking from difficult sights and yet working to negotiate through them. "There is a responsibility," Moten claims,

to look every time, again, but sometimes it looks like that looking comes before, holds, replicates, reproduces what is looked at. Nevertheless, looking keeps open the possibility of closing precisely what it is that prompts and makes necessary that opening. But such an opening is only held in looking that is attentive to the sound—and movement, feel, taste, smell (as well as sight): the sensual ensemble—of what is looked at. (201)

While nothing is ever guaranteed, this sensory engagement looks for the potential to re-animate the photograph in the present. Part of this process requires working beyond vision, and engaging with the photograph in other ways. Countering Roland Barthes's famous discussion of the photograph as something that exists in and as the past, Moten claims sound disturbs the *that-has-been*, the moment of death in photography, "in the interest of a resurrection. The content of the music of [the] photograph...is life, is freedom" (201). (Can there be freedom in Gitmo? Are we allowed freedom in gazing upon it? And what does it mean to keep detainees in the perpetual present, if our listening doesn't bring about action that would turn their time in prison into the past?)

In shifting from legible bodies to the photograph's attention to texture and detail, Scott's work complicates both the time and duration of the image and the viewer's relationship to it. While Scott's other photographs pay attention to body language, these more abstract images offer the sensory information encouraged by textured surfaces and the haptic qualities of touching or feeling.



This emphasis on the haptic might also help to make it possible for viewers to encounter photography as part of the present rather than as something static or easily left in the past. As Vivian Sobchack explains, when viewing an image, we do not experience the work through our eyes alone; we see, feel, and understand the image in front of us through bodies and minds that are “informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium” (63). When the photographic image touches the surface of the eye, it travels through the body and meets the viewer's memory and imagination. Like Moten's notion of listening to a photograph, haptic viewing offers the possibility of a sort of engagement with a photograph that encourages an embodied, emotional, or more layered understanding than cursory looking might allow.

Scott's frames therefore shift from their focus on bodies to seek out scars, spills, ruins, and traces. These marks offer a visual shorthand for invoking the absent, communicating trauma, and calling attention to the slow passage of time (sometimes all one and the same) palpable within the space. The tight focus, and the act of zooming in abstract; they deny the viewer a sense of perspective. These dirt tracks become a maze. They show their own persistent layering over



time and multiple trips. These photographs are neither instructive nor didactic. They are both subtle and obvious. And although the photographs invite the reader to reach out, as I have suggested, even that potential point of connection is ambivalent. These are not necessarily soft, inviting, or alluring textures. My eye isn't tempted to linger on barbed wire, trees carved out like open wounds, or oil spills. In order to seek contact, to run their eye across such a texture, then, the viewer has to get past the easy disposability of the poor image and the bleakly prosaic appearance of much of the subject matter.

While Scott's photographs of guards give the viewer tangible bodies to consider, these photographs of tracks, traces, and cuts move away from bodies to the conditions that surround them and the passage of time that works upon detainees. This information is periphery and nondescript; these tracks could be anywhere; this gravel and its harsh yellow light would fit as easily alongside any small town parking lot as it does in Gitmo. This ambiguity explains their escape from prison censors. These are invisible spaces, irrelevant details, and as such they are easily overlooked. Maybe even more effective than the bodies of soldiers, these scenes invoke the invisibility of the lost bodies and endless time so central to the history, present, and (indeterminate) future of Gitmo.



As Scott's work demonstrates, the act of documenting Gitmo is not about shedding light, revealing conditions, or any of those other well-rehearsed metaphors of illumination so long associated with photography. I've been calling this reflection "penitent spy," after Walker Evans, because every frame in Scott's gallery seems to want to also be an apology. Regardless of shutter speed or condition, these photographs seem to offer a series of slow, sideways

glances rather than a single full-on stare. A looking-away from bodies while still, nevertheless, looking. (Looking at the grounds that make up the detainee's world; looking at the things and people that they see, and the marks their incarceration makes on the space.) So: penitent. But a spy nonetheless.

Conscious of his role as both responsible reporter and trespasser, Scott's work shows no illusions of exposure. Instead, this work is about moving uncertainly along in the shadows and conspicuous open spaces—or at least doing so until interrupted, accosted, or chastised by Gitmo guards and censors. And when that happens, those disruptions become a part of the landscape; part of the soundscape; part of the frame. Rebecca Solnit suggests that, rather than foreclosing possibility, ambiguity can create a sense of space where there was none. Like his audio soundscapes, Scott's textured images call attention to duration and uncertainty. If looking at a photograph means encountering the past, then it also means encountering the present moment of experiencing the photograph, and imagining some other possible future. Rather than accept the experience of photographic viewing as a look that gazes upon something inevitable, and rather than offer any definitive argument, these photographs can encourage the viewer to build in time for contemplation. What happens next is up to them. ‡

Alison Dean holds a PhD in English from Simon Fraser University. An interdisciplinary scholar with a focus on photography, she has published on the work of Nan Goldin, Rineke Dijkstra, and Sally Mann. Dean was Helena Rubinstein Critical Studies Fellow in the Whitney ISP and she is an alumna of the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University. She currently teaches at SFU and Fraser International College.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso, 2009.
- Derksen, Jeff for Urban Subjects. "Do Not Think One Has to Be Sad': Circulating the Militant Image." *The Militant Image Reader*. Urban Subjects. Graz: Camera Austria, 2015. 13-20.
- Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003. 192-211.
- Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004. ProQuest Ebrary. Web. 25 July 2014.
- United States Department of Defense. *Department of Defense Media Ground Rules for Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (GTMO September 10, 2010)*.