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*Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* by Nicole  
R. Fleetwood (review)

Jennifer L. Lieberman

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# Reviews

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Nicole R. Fleetwood. *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2020. 352 pp. \$39.95.

Review by Jennifer L. Lieberman, University of North Florida

*Marking Time*, a book about art and mass incarceration, is a work of art in its own right. Using a blend of interview, analysis, and autobiography, Fleetwood details how images of criminality and carcerality circulate in popular culture—and how some artists subvert those dehumanizing images with their own creations.

The book's Preface begins by describing the haunting absence of men and women who disappeared from communities in the 1980s and '90s as mass incarceration expanded its reach into the author's life and across the United States. Fleetwood writes that "As prisons rendered more and more people invisible, a spectacular visual assault on residents in communities like mine helped to justify mass incarceration" in speaking of state-crafted imagery such as "wanted posters, arrest photographs, crime-scene images, and mug shots" (xvi). In contrast, she argues, families circulated "artworks and illustrations . . . from prison." These pieces, Fleetwood argues, were not new in and of themselves but they were many and powerful.

What follows is a stunning collection of full-color images alongside their thoughtful interpretations. Fleetwood's Introduction discusses how artists assert their humanity within the dehumanizing system of the prison. She writes that "[i]ncarcerated artists deliberately take the status of being labeled a social problem or failure as the very grounds for their artistic experimentation. Failure amplifies their aesthetic improvisation and the risks they will take to produce works and worlds that exceed the prison" (7). Of course, experimentation proves difficult in these spaces. While some artists included in *Marking Time* had the benefit of programs such as the Arts in Corrections workshop run by the William James Association, others, like Jared Owens, sought canvases and untraditional media only by evading surveillance and at great personal risk.

In addition to cataloguing the different ways artists create within the prison, Fleetwood reflects on how these creations inflect our understanding of the world of art on the outside: "prison art shifts how we think about art collection and art collectors. The primary collectors of art made in prison are other imprisoned people and their loved ones. . . . 'Commission' and 'negotiation' are fraught terms to describe arrangements in which unfree artists are asked by people who hold enormous authority over their livelihood to make art in exchange for money, goods, or special treatment" (9). Fleetwood invites readers to learn a lesson about humanity and power in these pages: Even in the extreme conditions of the prison, people create. Might that in itself stand as one rationale for prison abolition?

The first chapter of the book, "Carceral Aesthetics: Penal Space, Time, and Matter," builds on this implied question by discussing how "American prisons cannot be disentangled from racial capitalism" (30). In other words, assumptions about the inferiority and inherent criminality of nonwhite and specifically Black Americans is the justification for mass incarceration; the art that incarcerated people create even in these conditions contradicts the very logic of the prison. Incarcerated artists, like other creators in this tradition, create works that advocate

for liberation—freedom not only from the strictures of prison but from prevailing ideas about “value/worth, criminalization, and punitive governance” (31); the chapter also traces depictions of space and time, including the altered experience of time after incarceration. The pieces themselves are stunning, and Fleetwood’s analyses of them perceptive: Her discussion of Raymond Towler’s Salvador Dali-esque piece, *Passing Time*, includes melting clocks and a color scheme of “penal hues” (43). The discussion of Elizabeth Baxter’s (pen name: Isis tha Saviour) series of videos, *Ain’t I a Woman* (2018), is particularly rich and moving as it traces the intimate connections between public housing, public schools, and prisons. The art discussed here ranges from painting to video to landscape photography. Fleetwood carefully examines each piece, discussing how artists reimagine elements of their incarceration to tell narratives about healing.

Chapter two, “State Goods: Clandestine Practices and Prison Art Collectives,” focuses on how artists procure materials to create and build relationships to develop such collectives—often resisting their isolation in the process. Fleetwood introduces readers to the terms “mushfake” and “procurement,” which are used “to describe the processes of turning penal matter into art.” The former term describes “objects made from materials acquired in prison, especially contraband objects” (63), while procurement denotes the process of “building networks across differences,” which networks are needed to gather together items such as sewing needles or fabric (65). The images of sculptures that Dean Gillispie created using procurement, including replicas of a diner and a camper, reveal incredible technique, ingenuity, and resourcefulness. Gillispie shared his pieces with his family and used his procurement network not only to gain the materials he needed to create art but also to build lasting relationships, as reflected in his willingness to show up to parole hearings for “incarcerated allies” (69). Fleetwood ends the chapter by discussing the development and importance of these social networks.

In “Captured by the Frame: Photographic Studies of Prisoners,” Fleetwood describes the complex relationship between carcerality and photography. She begins this chapter by pointing out that “For every person in prison, there is a portrait, perhaps more than one, that accompanies them. . . . These photographs are representations of carceral visibility, the state’s power to mark and isolate certain people as lawbreakers, criminals, and prisoners” (87). She shares a brilliant analysis about how visualizing technologies seek to discipline bodies and, as in other chapters, she also discusses subversive uses of the medium, such as the photo series created by Bruce Jackson, a white man, who photographed prisons in Arkansas and Texas in the 1960s and ’70s to “mak[e] explicit connections between criminalization, imprisonment, and slavery” (97). Although incarcerated people are less likely to have cameras themselves, Fleetwood does discuss programs such as Humanize the Numbers, whose “contemporary photo-based workshop and collaboration” as well as other practices provide “alternatives to the historical usage of photography by prisons to visualize and index incarcerated people as punitive measures” (117). As with other media, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists demonstrate their artistic acumen and virtuosity in this medium.

Chapter four, “Interior Subjects: Portraits by Incarcerated Artists,” demonstrates how incarcerated portraitists “take a revered art tradition and turn it on its head by centering the perspective, creativity, and subjects of socially devalued, marginalized, and captive people” (123). Fleetwood documents how “portraiture is a type of prison currency,” helping skilled artists survive in prison social networks (125). This type of art is particularly valuable because it can help “connect [incarcerated people] to their nonincarcerated loved ones” (127). The artist Kenneth Reams, “who has been on death row in Arkansas since 1993, creates historical portraits of other black men who have been condemned to death” (128); there are

other incarcerated artists who have chosen this poignantly expressive form. The chapter details the aesthetic techniques artists use, thus situating portraitists in a long history of “counterposing” that dates back to the early nineteenth century. Portraits are not always strictly realistically drawn; some incorporate elements of “fantasy and flight” (135) as well as other forms of speculation and self-making.

The fifth and sixth chapters, “Fraught Imaginaries: Collaborative Art in Prison” and “Resisting Isolation: Art in Solitary Confinement,” begin with an analysis of the feted piece *Shared Dining*. Like the previous chapters, chapter five delves into the challenging and multilayered power dynamics that shape collaborative art in carceral spaces. Fleetwood examines how expertise beyond prison walls inflects collaboration, arguing that “art-making [can] becom[e] a tool of the prison to manage and control populations” (155). This chapter includes a rich history of prison art programs and the approaches they use. Also, as previously, Fleetwood utilizes a discussion about collaborative art to think generatively about what this type of art can do. At the end chapter five, she asks whether such alliances can “build new imaginary horizons by forming relations, ways of looking, and practices of interdependence that challenge the institutional brutality and punitive discourse separating the incarcerated from the nonincarcerated?” (189).

In “Resisting Isolation,” however, Fleetwood looks in the opposite direction by examining art produced in inhumane solitude. Here, she confronts the practice of sensory deprivation and situates art as a form of survival in this brutalizing space. She also explores cover filmmaking as not only documentary evidence of abuse but also as an aesthetic primer in prison hierarchies. This chapter includes a powerful case study in Florida prisons, spotlighting Moliere Dimanche Jr.’s incredible graphite drawings. In addition to analyzing the art itself Fleetwood discusses Dimanche’s memoir, which engages “mourning the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Aiyana Jones, and Freddie Gray from his prison cell, as a person held in penal captivity and witnessing the precarity of black life in the not-so-free world beyond prison walls” (211). The resonance between the Black experience inside and outside prison calls up (but does not cite) Loïc Wacquant’s work on the blending of ghetto and prison in a neoliberal regime. This chapter shifts from the bleak into “revolutionary visions,” emphasizing the humanizing and political power of prison art.

The final full-length chapter, “Posing in Prison: Family Photographs, Practices of Belonging, and Carceral Landscapes,” reimagines family prison photos as “more than documents of [personal] pain and loss” but also as “one of the largest practices of vernacular photography in the contemporary era” (233). This reframing salubriously reimagines the aesthetic significance of this common practice, discussing different forms of emotional labor and personal connection (including but not limited to photography and letter-writing). It imagines the tools available to the incarcerated to represent and understand themselves as fathers or brothers.

*Marking Time’s* Conclusion recalls the thinking of Joy James by imagining how “mass imprisonment reconstitute[s]” the notion of *home* (256) and discusses the work of nonincarcerated artists whose creations elicit reflections on how incarceration affects their lives. Ultimately, every chapter of this striking volume balances personal and reflective writing with rigorous analyses of art, power, and relationality. Rather than intellectualizing and distancing the carceral state, Fleetwood draws attention to the humanity that no punishment can extinguish. This book will interest anyone with a connection to the prison-industrial complex, whether they have incarcerated family members, or study carceral geographies, or wish, like Fleetwood, to probe the prison’s ability to inflect our understanding of art. The richness of *Marking Time* is in its brave confrontation of the horrifying truths of mass incarceration while also illuminating how art produced therein can lend to transformative understandings of humanity and liberation.