Abstract

In 2017, the Jamaican government communicated to the populace its intention to introduce the National Identification System (NIDS), which would house biographic, biometric, and demographic information. Following the announcement, NIDS became engulfed in controversy. Deep suspicions arose about the government’s desire to provide each citizen with a unique identification number and secure biometric data. For some, the introduction of identification numbers was read as an apocalyptic reference to the Mark of the Beast, a sign of those who worship the anti-Christ, as detailed in The Book of Revelation Chapter 13. For others, such as those who protested in Kingston’s Emancipation Park, the move to collect biometric data was taken as an act of warfare against the liberty of the Jamaican people. What is at stake in a post-slave and postcolonial Caribbean society with the merging of the body and technology predicated on state-legitimized techniques of branding, surveillance, and control? In this essay, I interrogate NIDS as an infrastructure of postcolonial datafication governance (Arora 2016) and one that embodies simultaneously biblical, spatial, and corporeal fears of insecurity in a Caribbean geography that lies in the shadow of the plantation. Moreover, in elucidating the discourses of racialization, carcerality, and emancipation surrounding the resistance to NIDS, I argue for a reading of the Caribbean that positions it as a critical geographic lens through which to consider Simone Browne’s (2015) contention that blackness is a key site through which surveillance is not only practiced, but also creatively resisted. In responding to the call for the decolonization of surveillance studies, this reflection takes seriously what the Caribbean can contribute to our understandings of the possibilities of black emancipation in the present moment of global surveillance.

One ID, Many Opportunities

In early 2017, the Government of Jamaica (GoJ), led by Prime Minister Andrew Holness, tabled the National Identification and Registration Act. This far-reaching bill would be responsible for promoting, establishing, and regulating the country’s new National Identification System (NIDS). Central to the operation of NIDS would be the maintenance of a databank that would house the biographic, biometric, and demographic data of all Jamaican citizens as well as the issuance of a National Identification Number and a National Identification Card to each Jamaican. Predicated on the reliable and secure authentication and management of the identities of Jamaican citizens, NIDS presents itself as a clear instance of postcolonial datafication governance (Arora 2016). Moreover, the intention of NIDS to assign unique identification numbers as well as capture individual biometric information situates it as a technology with the power to organize and categorize individuals, to gather and sort data related to biological and behavioral characteristics, and ultimately to surveil Jamaican bodies.

Like many identity management systems in the Global South, NIDS was promoted as a tool to fight crime and improve government efficiency, and as key to Vision 2030, the GoJ’s plan to achieve developed status by that year. Furthermore, the visual economy surrounding NIDS, which was crafted through targeted advertisements, a NIDS Facts website, and glossy images and videos uploaded to multiple GoJ-managed...
In this reflection, I elucidate how discourses of carceralit‌y, racialization, and emancipation came to surround NIDS. In doing so, I propose a shift in the study of surveillance, one rooted in a politics of decolonization. Central to this decolonial shift are three tenets:

- a geographic pivot toward surveillance societies of the Global South (Here I call for particular attention to the postcolonial Caribbean—where bodies live in the shadow of the plantation—the geography that perfected techniques of surveillance on the black body and positioned the Caribbean as central to the making of the modern world.)
- a methodological investment in a critical historiographical mode that takes surveillance as a spatio-temporal archive that is performed, lived, and embodied across entangled scalar levels
- a political consciousness that takes seriously the surveillance concerns of people in the Global South, with a commitment to critically studying modes of everyday resistance and their emancipative possibilities

By reflecting on the response of the Jamaican public to NIDS, I give explicit attention to the third tenet as a way to grapple with what is at stake in a postcolonial Caribbean society with the merging of the body and technology predicated on state-legitimized techniques of identification and surveillance.

The Mark of the Beast

Shortly after the announcement of NIDS, the veneer of citizen empowerment that the GoJ had constructed began to be attacked in the court of public opinion as well as the legal courts. Suspicions arose over the government’s intention to assign a unique identification number and collect the photograph, signature, fingerprint, palm print, toe print, foot print, iris scan, retina scan, blood type, height, and eye color of every Jamaican. For many, this plan was a manifestation of the Mark of the Beast, a sign of those who worship the anti-Christ, as detailed in The Book of Revelation 13. In a video posted to YouTube, one Jamaican man railed, “a Mark of the Beast dis oonu wah place pon di people dem … oonu nah get my fingerprint and oonu nah get my eye scan! … wi nah bow to no anti-Christ and wi nah bow to no Mark of the Beast!” (ReggaeDubscene the History of Reggae Music chanel 2017). In his passionate rejection, the man likened NIDS to a tracking system and defiantly refused to have his biometric data collected by politicians, who he argued represented the modern-day incarnation of the anti-Christ. This defiant viewpoint was not an isolated one; rather it encapsulated the fears of many Jamaicans who believed that NIDS was the apocalyptic sign of the end of times.

The religious rhetoric that situated NIDS as a sinister tool of government surveillance was reminiscent of language used by fundamentalist Christians in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, who viewed universal identification as a sign of the anti-Christ. However, it is important to interpret the biblical and corporeal paranoia surrounding NIDS as more than just the manifestation of religious psychosis. NIDS, I

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2. The man’s commentary, delivered in Jamaican patois, translates as “this is the Mark of the Beast that you all want to place on the people … you all are not getting my fingerprint and you all are not getting my eye scan! ... we are not giving in to any anti-Christ and we are not giving in to any Mark of the Beast!”
argue, represents a collective psychic reaction to black carcerality in a postcolonial society that continues to live in the shadow of the plantation. Here I draw on Ruha Benjamin’s (2016: 151) argument that carceral imaginaries “seek to contain individual bodies and collective visions of the future.” I contend that critically interrogating NIDS through a lens of black carcerality must foreground the black body as well as the historical and embodied traumatic fear of the branding and objectification of this body.

Slave branding was, as Browne (2010) writes, an enunciative strategy through which black bodies were signified as property. This enunciative labor was performed through metal, which was used to create a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (Spillers 1987: 67). Through the performance of branding, slavery’s disciplinary regime was able to mark, surveil, and ultimately strip this body of its human value and render it a commodity. In postcolonial Jamaica, NIDS has come to be imagined in a similar performative manner—as a technocratic apparatus predicated on the reductive act of marking and splintering Jamaican bodies into measurable biometric characteristics in order to govern and surveil them. Indeed, as Browne (2010) also reminds us, it is this splintering, or what she terms “fragmentation,” that is central to the performance of biometric technology, which takes the body and reduces it to its components, thus facilitating sorting and profiling.

A decolonial reading of NIDS takes the disciplinary logic of the slave plantation as not spatio-temporally limited to the bounds of that geography. In this way, the Mark of the Beast reads as an incisive metaphor of critique of the Jamaican “postcolonial” surveillance state. In 1976, this metaphor was similarly mobilized by reggae singer Peter Tosh in his song “Mark of the Beast,” which was released fourteen years after Jamaican independence from Great Britain. In the record, Tosh sings of his distrust of those who bear this mark, whom he refers to as “Babylon”—a term which signifies the oppressive state within Rastafari liberation discourse. Tosh croons, “What have I done to be incriminated? What have I done to be humiliated?” In 2017, fifty-five years post-independence, Jamaicans once again articulated the belief that to be marked—whether by the anti-Christ or by NIDS—is an act of incrimination and humiliation. In this reading, NIDS is neither historically neutral nor detached from the surveillance techniques that marked black bodies as other during the Caribbean’s slave and colonial regimes. NIDS is an extension of the logic of these regimes and illustrates what Payal Arora (2019) calls, the “imperial complicity” at work in postcolonial “periphery” landscapes, where, even in the new order, the logic of the old persists.

**Emancipate Yourself**

If one reads the Jamaican public’s response to NIDS as a critique of the postcolonial surveillance state, then it becomes evident that Jamaicans were not oblivious to the carceral implications of NIDS. In late 2017, when this critique crystalized as a moment of protest in front of Kingston’s Emancipation Park, it became clear that the counter-response to NIDS had evolved to discursively confront the perceived racializing logic of the initiative. This counter-response, grounded in a rhetoric of black emancipation and liberation, illuminated well Browne’s (2015) contention that we must read blackness not only as the site through which surveillance is practiced but also creatively resisted.

Kingston’s Emancipation Park is a site of much historical significance. Designed to commemorate the freeing of Jamaica’s slaves in 1838, the park features an eleven-foot bronze sculpture, *Redemption Song*, at its entrance. The sculpture depicts a newly freed and nude black man and woman gazing triumphantly upwards. Chanting “Bill Get Rush! Rights Get Crush!” in front of *Redemption Song*, the protestors expressed their displeasure with the speed at which the NIDS bill was moving through the Jamaican Parliament and the lack of input from the public. As they stood in solidarity in the midst of Kingston’s hustle and bustle, some of the gathered recited the infamous lyrics of Bob Marley, which had been adapted from a speech by Marcus Garvey: “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but you can free your mind.” Spoken in front of their ancestors rendered in bronze, the protestors’ words were a call to reflection and resistance.
For the protestors in Emancipation Park, true empowerment could never come through an identification system that would ostensibly launch, according to the government, a multitude of opportunities. On the contrary, NIDS was framed as a loss of rights and an attack on black freedom. Moreover, the invocation of Marcus Garvey—Jamaica’s first national hero and a globally recognized black nationalist figure—through the liberatory lyrics of Bob Marley was a declaration that Jamaicans would once again have to be invested in their own self-emancipation and embrace the emancipative power of their own blackness. Nearly two centuries after Jamaican slaves were freed, the Emancipation Park protest was, in itself, a rejection of the racializing and carceral logic of NIDS as well as an attempt at a decolonial re-mapping of the spatio-temporal bounds of black emancipation in Jamaica. By imaginatively drawing on and weaponizing the language of Garvey and Marley in order to call on Jamaicans to re-emancipate themselves in 2017 in response to NIDS, the protestors communicated that black emancipation cannot be read as a single episode in a time relegated to the past. Rather, it must be regarded as an ongoing project to continually create a true liberatory sense of belonging within the postcolonial nation.

Conclusion

In April 2019, Jamaica’s Supreme Court ruled that aspects of the National Identification and Registration Act were in violation of the Jamaican constitution. In essence, NIDS was declared null and void. The monumental ruling was the culmination of a two-year legislative and grassroots resistance to NIDS that saw Jamaicans electing to speak their own truths rather than have their biometric data speak on their behalf. In order to critically illuminate the ways in which surveillance is lived in geographies such as the postcolonial Caribbean, we must be willing to geographically, methodologically, and politically shift our disciplinary engagement with surveillance. Such a decolonial shift is, as Arora (2019: 374) notes, “as much an act of re-imagining people and place as it is of dismantling essentialisms that are regurgitated through scholarship.” The shift is, indeed, itself dependent on a disciplinary emancipation, one that will ultimately compel us toward revealing the complicated and non-linear ways in which surveillance is performed in under-theorized geographies.

References