Book Review

Review of Flynn, Susan, and Antonia Mackay (eds). 2018. *Surveillance, Race, Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

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In 2018, Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson were waiting for their business partner to arrive at a Philadelphia Starbucks. In less than ten minutes, the two Black men were surrounded by police. “They can’t be here for us,” Nelson recalls thinking.¹ However, Nelson’s fears were confirmed when he and Robinson were placed in handcuffs and charged with trespassing and causing disturbance. The Starbucks manager, a White woman, made the original call to police because the men requested to use the bathroom without making a purchase. The arrests of the two Black men, captured on cellphone video, were just one in a surge of incidents virally captured on social media in the last three years. Housed under the hashtag #LivingWhileBlack, these stories document the various extents to which “Blackness” can be criminalized as a punishable offense.²

As recent scholarship within the field of surveillance studies has suggested, race and racism have been central to the production and utilization of surveillant technologies (Browne 2015; Ferguson 2017; Benjamin 2019). From target to tool, surveillance technologies rely on racial categories to determine who should be the subject of policing (and who should be the enforcer), how they should be policed, and the tools (or force) necessary to respond to the “disruption” of the normative social order. In the case at the Philadelphia Starbucks, Robinson and Nelson’s Blackness marked them as subjects of suspicion and physical threats to not only the White manager but also the coffee shop at large. In the twenty-first century, how does a Black man’s request to use the bathroom become a White woman’s request for police intervention?

Contemporary issues like these can be best unpacked and explored while reading *Surveillance, Race, Culture* (2018), edited by Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackay. The second installation of a three-part series, this anthology succeeds their previous collection, *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves* (2017), and precedes their latest collection, *Surveillance, Architecture, and Control* (2019). In *Spaces of Surveillance*, the editors contend with surveillance as a technology of power. Applying a cultural studies lens, Flynn and

¹ Good Morning America (@GMA), FULL INTERVIEW: “This is something that has been going on for years...everyone is blind to it,” Twitter, April 19, 2018, <https://twitter.com/GMA/status/986934358563946496>.

² For more incidents like the one at Starbucks, visit: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/20/us/living-while-black-police-calls-trnd/index.html>.

Mackay aim to reveal the extent to which surveillance is deeply embedded within everyday decision-making processes as well as the dominant cultural psyche.

In *Surveillance, Race, Culture*, the editors extend the shelf life of those debates with further recognition of surveillance as “an imprint and signifier of racial categories” (6). Flynn and Mackay draw on a multidisciplinary approach, including literary, cultural, and artistic frameworks to analyze contemporary scenes of surveillance expressed through culture. In this sense, each of the essayists featured in the collection view the world through a “series of texts,” which include art, film, and literature. The authors take on a particular “text” to illuminate surveillant technologies’ effect on how racial categories are illustrated, asserted, and experienced within society. While there is some consideration of antebellum narratives due to their material and symbolic value, the scope of the collection primarily focuses on the contemporary moment in the United States. There is also some reference to colonial narratives, which reveal the historical legacies of control and attempt to eliminate the racial other. As the authors maintain, “the past, in some sense, continues to speak to us” (9). Such historical considerations strengthen the analyses of surveillant technologies and understandings of their cultural effects.

Surveillance, Race, Culture is organized in three thematic sections: “Surveillant Technologies,” “Screen,” and “Literary, Art, Performance, Action.” Part one, “Surveillant Technologies,” provides the conceptual and theoretical scaffolding for themes explored later in the collection. The four essays featured in this section discuss surveillance as it is enacted to determine racial division and experienced as a form of racial control. This section’s particular emphasis is on the technologies of surveillance including biodata, drones, sound technologies, and biomedicine.

Part one of the collection contains a strong debut with Joel Beatty and Stefko Hristova’s opening essay, “Articulating Race: Reading Skin Colour as Taxonomy and as Numerical Data.” This chapter is a robust anthropometric study that retraces the history of skin color measurement tools and how they were deployed as technologies of surveillance. More concretely, Beatty and Hristova review biological and scientific constructions of race, such as the Chromatic Skin Colour Scale crafted by nineteenth-century anthropologist Felix von Luschan. In their critical assessments of historical taxonomies of race, the authors uncover how these instruments were used to not only articulate “race” but also to condemn it.

After an intimate introduction to biodata as a surveillant technology, the next essay featured in part one examines racial surveillance from a bird’s-eye view. In “Government Surveillance: Racism and Civic Virtue in the United States,” Mary K. Ryan weighs in on the use of drones to perpetuate violent racial surveillance. As Ryan submits, state domination is inherent in drone usage, and from these practices meanings about citizenship and governance are formed. As she clarifies, “Domination is twofold: the state deploys violent practices against particular groups or individuals, and the state also rationalizes, legitimizes, and makes sense of these different relationships of domination by appealing to strivings for equality and human rights” (46). As xenophobic calls to build walls around US borders reach a fever pitch in the Trump administration, Ryan’s chapter joins a chorus of crucial interventions for government accountability.

Perhaps one of the more captivating takes on surveillant technology in the section, “Sample Sirens in the City of Los Angeles: Sound Effects and Panopticism on the Contemporary Black Screen,” proposes a sonic redress of the panopticon. In a subtle tease to the content in the anthology’s second part, “Screen,” James Millea revisits films from “New Black Realist Cinema,” including *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993), to identify sonic surveillant technologies. Within these visual texts, Millea detects “sounds of sonic supervision and scrutiny” (63). Such sonic resonants resound as loudly as Frantz Fanon’s (1967) “Look! A Negro!” refrain in *Black Skin, White Masks*. From the use of hip-hop music to the cacophony of helicopter blades and police sirens, Millea argues that film soundscapes “controls the bodies of those characters onscreen by controlling their subconscious, their soul, through its crafting of the panoptic machine” (74). This chapter vividly expands conceptions of surveillant technologies with considerations of the sonic, thus opening up new pathways of convergence between surveillance studies and other disciplines like sound studies and film studies.

Part one in the collection culminates with Susan Flynn's essay, "Medical Gazing and the Oprah Effect in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2017)." This chapter serves as both the conclusion and the bridge to part two of the collection. Like the previous essay, Flynn uses film as her primary unit of analysis. She revisits the cinematic adaptation of Henrietta Lacks' life and legacy and the impact of the "Oprah effect" in the film's reception. Although the film does acknowledge the racial inequity and medical gazing that ultimately led to Lacks' death, Flynn argues the film fails to address the power structures that enable these outcomes.

The four essays in part one provide a substantial foundation for the rest of the collection. In documenting how surveillant technologies are fundamental to cultural productions of race, the editors proceed to investigate how these cultural manifestations take effect on "Screen," which is the theme and title of part two.

Jonathan Wright leads the second section with his essay, "Images of Black Identity: Spaces In-Between." This chapter deviates slightly from the American context with its focus on the 1989 British film *Looking for Langston*. Wright analyzes how race, gender, and sexuality are performed in varied textual locations within the film. Toward this end, he argues that "looking for" and "watching" race in film as a praxis can also be a form of surveillance (117). Wright insists the film can be regarded as a model for disarming essentialist and colonial tropes of racial identity.

After taking on the big screen, the second essay in part two moves to the little screen. In "Knowing the Double Agent: Islam, Uncertainty and the Fragility of the Surveillant Gaze in *Homeland*," Alex Adams presents a critical reading of the spy thriller television series *Homeland* (2011–2020). In some respect, this chapter rehashes the concerns of the essay in part one on drones in its cinematic exploration of surveillance as a means of control. Adams' analysis of *Homeland* points to the racial othering and policing of Muslims encouraged in television programming. As Adams writes, "Homeland constitutes Muslims as surveillable subjects by showing that not only is it necessary to detect Islam but that Islam is in continuous need of interpretation, explanation, and containment" (127). Such observations prove pervasive in Western television series, including shows like Prime Video's *Jack Ryan* (2018).

The third essay in part two confronts screen depictions of racial surveillance within the realm of science fiction. In "Allegories of 9/11 and Apartheid: Abjection, Race, and Surveillance in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*," Frances Pheasant-Kelly interrogates the relationship among post-9/11 conceptions of race, power, and surveillance in the 2009 film *District 9*. Building upon Adams' observations of anti-Muslim sentiments in television programming, Pheasant-Kelly relies on theories of abjection, racism, and exclusion to illuminate the film's account of racial othering. In particular, the essay demonstrates how modes of surveillance enable the presence of the "abject other" (146).

The final essay in part two considers the mobile screen. In "Intersectional Digital Dynamics and Profiled Black Celebrities," Francesca Sobande examines celebrity responses to the gaze on their bodies. This chapter recounts the state surveillance of prominent Black women artists such as Solange Knowles, whose hair was searched during a TSA security check. As Sobande understands, surveillant technologies promote environments whereby Black people, including those who occupy higher class statuses, "may be treated as 'aliens' occupying 'elite' social spaces" (175).

After a vigorous review of surveillant technologies and cinematic representations of surveillance, the final part of the anthology is "Literature, Art, Performance, Action." This part will be of particular interest to performance studies, literary studies, and cultural studies scholars. Sarah Cullen initiates the discussion in part three with her essay, "Let Him Be Left to Feel His Way in the Dark; Frederick Douglass: White Surveillance and Dark Sousveillance." In her insightful rereading of Douglass' freedom narratives, Cullen brings the book's opening claims about surveillant technologies full circle. Cullen highlights how Douglass subversively employs his pen as a form of "dark sousveillance" to usurp the Hegelian master-slave dialectic in the plantation regime.

The collection moves from the plantation to the prison in the two essays that follow. While both essays have divergent thematic directions, both chapters are especially fruitful for examining the criminalization of African Americans in varied cultural contexts. In “Perceptions of Prisoners: Re//Constructing Meaning Inside the Frame of War,” Jaclyn Meloche conceptually constructs a bridge between surveillance studies, art history, and performance studies in her exploration of painting as a form of surveillance. Meloche revisits Fernando Botero’s contentious 2007 exhibition “Abu Graib,” which depicts images of the torture and humiliation of prisoners of the Iraq War. Meloche argues, “Through exaggerated animations of prisoners’ bodies and moments of homoerotic masquerade, the artist’s provocative anti-American statements translate into an act of racial surveillance” (223).

Antonia Mackay advances Meloche’s analysis with consideration of these reductive framings in reality television. In “*Cops* and Incarceration: Constructing Racial Narratives in Reality TV’s Prisons,” Mackay dissects portrayals of African Americans in the American reality television series *Cops*. As Wright previously argues in the second section, Mackay also suggests that there is an imbalance of power in watching the “criminal and punishable discourses” focused on African Americans. Much like the plantation regime encountered in Cullen’s chapter, Mackay suggests that through this gazing, “we position ourselves as overseers, perpetuating the visually framed gaze, and thereby position bodies within a matrix of power relationships from which they can neither escape nor access truth” (242). The questions raised in this chapter revisit the concerns raised by Nic Groombridge in his 2002 essay for *Surveillance & Society*, “Crime Control or Crime Culture TV?” As Groombridge (2002: 44) forewarns, “The consequences of this for studies of surveillance is that we cannot simply reject it as invasive when we seem to welcome invasion—or at least ride along with the invasion of others like the reporters on *Cops*.”

As Mackay and several authors in the collection have indicated, the panoptic machine requires several actors, not just the state. Viewers and witnesses of surveillant technologies are also found to be complicit in perpetuating racial surveillance. The final two essays in part three complicate this idea in their consideration of how the racial other is recruited to power the panopticon, especially to undermine social movements such as the Black Arts Movement and the Black Freedom Movement. In “Pan-African Pessimism: *The Man Who Cried I Am* and the Limits of Black Nationalism,” Richard Hancuff returns to the Black literary tradition in his analysis of John Williams’ *The Man Who Cried I Am*. This chapter explores the impact of Black revolutionary writing during an age of covert surveillance of Black intellectual and political thought. As Hancuff asserts, “the Black intellectual remains under suspicion, constructed not as a full citizen under the supposed equal protection of law, but rather in opposition to the security of the nation-state, retaining the qualities of an alien outsider who must constantly undergo surveillance, analysis, and control” (249).

Such hostile and antagonistic attacks yielded tremendous psychological impacts on Black people, especially those who were activists. As Max Gedig finds in the final essay of the section, “‘Woke up with Death Every Morning.’ Surveillance Experiences of Black Panther Party Activists,” surveillant technologies also assume “emotional” forms. In proposing the concept of “personal surveillance,” Gedig explains, “By applying this concept on the historical subject, the Black Panther Party, I identified an emotional dynamic that occurred when informers infiltrated the political communities of the organization... Both groups felt intense distrust of their environment, with disastrous consequences for the internal cohesion of the organization” (278). Gedig’s analysis invites possibilities for new and transformative understandings of FBI informants.

As the editors acknowledge in the epilogue, this collection is not exhaustive and there are some notable gaps in the sites of surveillance examined, including the absence of sports and gaming. Another notable oversight in the text is the lack of consideration of cultural texts that feature trans bodies of color. Trans people of color are especially targeted by surveillant technologies, which necessitates, at a minimum, consideration of this topic in at least one chapter.

Overall, *Surveillance, Race, Culture* is a dynamic, multifaceted text that, in addition to surveillance studies, can also find a home in various disciplines including literary studies, cultural studies, sociology, and African-American studies. The utility of this text knows no bounds.

In a 2005 *Surveillance & Society* editorial, Kirstie Ball and Kevin D. Haggerty ask two fundamental questions of the field. One question is “Who are we and why are we doing surveillance studies?” The other is “How are we doing it?” More than a decade after this inquiry was posed, *Surveillance, Race, Culture* offers a compelling answer.

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