Book Review

Browne, S. 2015. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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Megan M. Wood

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US.
megwg@live.unc.edu

With *Dark Matters*, Simone Browne delivers a theoretical tour de force to the field of Surveillance Studies by bringing blackness, black life, and the black subject—*dark matter*—into focus. Utilizing black, feminist, and postcolonial theories, Browne puts surveillance into conversation with the archive of transatlantic slavery to breathe new life into worn theoretical foundations and assess the ways in which surveillance is structured by processes of racialization. Browne's work is a must-read for those interested in examining the complexities of surveillance and attendant ongoing, embodied, political struggles.

The book is guided by the concepts of *racializing surveillance* and *dark sousveillance*. Racializing surveillance is Browne's term for the ways in which technologies, policies, and practices of surveillance are ordered by and reify boundaries, borders, and bodies along discriminatory and deleterious racial lines. Racializing surveillance is countered by dark sousveillance—an extension of the concept sousveillance,¹ the practice of 'watching the watchers.' Dark sousveillance describes engagements with racializing surveillance where critique of and resistance to it is sustained through strategies of "rendering one's self out of sight" (21), such as the obscuration tactics used by slaves en route to freedom. Dark sousveillance also includes anti- and counter-surveillance practices, such as artistic critique of surveillance experiences, appropriation or repurposing of racializing surveillance systems, and other freedom practices. These two ideas—racializing surveillance and dark sousveillance—are held in dynamic tension throughout the book, as Browne works with an astounding amount of archival and contemporary examples to situate blackness as a primary site through which surveillance is rationalized, practiced, fixed, and resisted.

In several of the chapters, Browne challenges the absencing of blackness from Surveillance Studies by offering for consideration alternative 'views' found in the archive of slavery. In Chapter 1, the reader is asked to consider "the view from 'under the hatches'" (32) of the British slave ship *Brookes*—a sea-bound prison that prefigures Bentham's Panopticon and complicates Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary institutions (1979). This view from under the hatches exposes the simultaneous prescription of sovereign and disciplinary power in the racializing surveillance that reduced slaves to expendable property. Browne deftly demonstrates the extension of this power logic to plantation management, census design and implementation, Jim Crow legislation, and contemporary service sector work disproportionately ascribed to black women. She offers the *disruptive stare*, a form of black looking (hooks 1992) represented by

¹ See Mann, Nolan and Wellman (2003).

South African artist Robin Rhode's *Pan's Opticon*, as a dark sousveillance strategy for contesting racializing surveillance. In Browne's analysis, Rhode's 15-panel photo installation depicts a Tsotsi-styled, masculine, black subject with caliper needles for eyes, gazing interrogatively upon the architectures of surveillance (walls, corners, shadows). Browne considers the images in their specificity, illuminating how the representation of the subject's gaze denotes what bell hooks calls "a gesture of defiance" (62). The chapter's critical reinterpretation of the panoptic schema is a provocation for future scholars to consider the panopticon and other normative conceptual rubrics in Surveillance Studies when racializing surveillance is brought to bear.

Chapter 2 offers the view from 'under the light'—a perspective illuminated by lantern laws that required slaves to carry lanterns at night, the *Book of Negros* that named those slaves allowed to flee Manhattan for Canada in 1783, the artificial lighting of solitary confinement, and camera flashbulb and reality TV shows that document violence against black bodies. Each of these 'lights' are technologies of visual terror that function through what Browne calls *black luminosity*, or the condition of the black body made legible when forms of high visibility are exercised upon it. Browne amply counters the violence of illumination with moments of dark sousveillance—she tells the story of the *Book of Negros* and of lantern laws as technologies of visual terror *through* stories of escape, passing, and contestation found in documents from the archive of slavery.

Constructed from the diaries of slaves, runaway notices, and images sold on eBay.com, Chapter 3 offers an alternative view on the cultural practice of branding—one that considers "the making, marking and marketing of the black subject as commodity," beginning with the literal branding of black bodies for sale on the ports of the transatlantic slave trade (91). This chapter is theoretically rich, as Browne builds on the work done by Stuart Hall (1996), Paul Gilroy (2000), and others with Franz Fanon's theory of *epidermalization*. Epidermalization describes the phenomenological experience of race imposed on the body, and the process by which racial identity is differentiated and massified through the inscription of race on the skin. In her exploration of the racialized and gendered operations of branding in the transatlantic slave trade economy, Browne provides a genealogy of contemporary digital epidermalization, connecting the history of slave branding to the development of biometric information technologies today. Such technologies are designed according to a logic of prototypical whiteness, and imbued with assumptions about the categories and qualities of race and gender as identifiable, measurable and therefore productive for the exercise of racializing surveillance. For example, looking at contemporary biometric Research and Development (R & D) documents, Browne discusses how facial scan technologies produce higher fail rates for darker-skinned users, citing the ways in which image-based technologies have long been calibrated to favor lightness, or whiteness (114). The position offered in this chapter calls us to think critically about our biometric present in light of a biometric past. This chapter best evinces the recuperative nature of Browne's work, demonstrating how the historical and contemporary conditions of blackness are not outside of or apart from those of surveillance.

Moving beyond the archive of slavery, the final analysis chapter offers a view from the center-stage of security theater as enacted at airports and on borders—a view which accounts for the measures and performances of national security both before and after September 11, 2001. Browne recounts narratives of air travel and aviation security told by media, legal, and governmental institutions, popular and artistic media, and travelers themselves to highlight the racializing surveillance instantiated in the name of airport and border security. She advances a theory of *security theater*, which accounts for both the roles that travelers must play to perform trustworthiness and avoid suspicion, detention, or criminalization, as well as the airport itself as a military theater of operations, wherein TSA agents and airport employees are endowed with discretionary and discriminatory power over travelers in the form of denying service, imposing challenges to travel, or subjecting travelers to hostile examination. Browne introduces the concept of *racial baggage* here, which explains how the bodies and activities of black women and other marginalized travelers weigh them down in spaces of surveillance (132). The way that this baggage must

be carried through the space of the airport and put under scrutiny (during interactions with airport staff and movement through screening technologies) illustrates the ways in which security theater reifies the boundaries and borders of race. Twitter hashtags, moments of security failures, and provocative art installations are all examples of critical questioning of the oft-opaque racializing politics that are part of security theater. These interruptions of the façade of security theater create possibilities for disrupting racializing surveillance.

Dark Matters should be understood as a productive disruption of theorizing-as-usual in Surveillance Studies. Browne highlights as untenable analyses that posit as ahistorical, generic, or universal the bodies, spaces, and practices of surveillance. Her work also highlights how attention to such bodies, spaces, and practices opens up new possibilities for understanding, resistance, and change. Though her vast archive can make her organizing logic a bit difficult to follow at some moments in the book, Browne's work is both accessible and theoretically robust. *Dark Matters* should be widely taught, and deeply engaged as a rich history of the present that makes possible new lines of inquiry at the intersection of identity, surveillance, and power.

References

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