On August 1, 2016, 23-year-old Korryn Gaines was shot and killed by officers from the Baltimore County Police Department who fired at her during a close to seven-hour standoff at her apartment complex in the Randallstown community in the state of Maryland. The police were there to serve Gaines with a bench warrant for failure to appear in court due to charges surrounding a traffic stop that occurred earlier in March. I witnessed some of this standoff with the Baltimore County tactical unit, as parts of it were uploaded in real-time by Gaines to her Instagram account, before these videos would eventually be taken down at the request of the police by way of Facebook’s law enforcement portal where demands can be made to deactivate user accounts if under exigent circumstances. Her Instagram page is still up and with it thousands of Gaines’ posts remain, mainly selfies, pictures of her loving her children, some inspirational quotes, and many posts in reaction to police violence against black people and black communities. Three days before she was killed she posted a meme critiquing the death penalty and the police extra-judicial killings of Samuel DuBose (missing license plate), Walter Scott (broken taillight), Troy Goode (“acting strange”) and Sandra Bland (no turn signal). “Smh could’ve been me, still can, but im aware nd prepared,” Gaines wrote, to accompany that post. In another, I watched her load a shotgun, possibly the one she held during the standoff that police say she legally purchased. Watching it, I could see that she did this while wearing pants patterned with the comic hero Wonder Woman. In one of her last Instagram posts from the day of the standoff with the police outside her apartment door, she asks her five-year-old son what the police are trying to do. He answers her with “they’re trying to kill us”. #KorrynGaines was a trending Twitter topic that night, along with the hashtag #SayHerName, which is a consciousness-raising movement launched by the African American Policy Foundation in 2015 to recognize the gender specificity of racialized state violence and surveillance.

I begin this short piece with the killing of Korryn Gaines as one of what could be many entry points to this special section of articles that attend to race, informants, and the effect of surveillance on and within particular communities as their sites of inquiry. In the days after Gaines’ death, many people questioned the role that Facebook played in aiding the police by deactivating her social media posts. Later reports surfaced that Gaines had possibly suffered from childhood lead poisoning due to toxic housing conditions; a trauma that affects black households in Baltimore more than other groups. The questions I have around Gaines’ life and her death point to the absolute necessity of intersectionality as an interpretive framework and methodology in the study of surveillance. Such an approach, one that attends to what Patricia Hill...
Collins has termed “intersecting oppressions” (2000), should guide surveillance studies as a field if it is to continue to make critical interventions to research and thinking on surveillance and society. Videos from the day that Korryn Gaines died still remain on social media sites, as a visual record up for public consumption. It makes one wonder what to make of the ensuing trauma that comes for many from repeated viewing and hearing of gunshots and then dead black and brown people.

In “Racialization as a Way of Seeing: The Limits of Counter-Surveillance and Police Reform,” Lyndsey P. Beutin examines anti-black police violence in the US and questions the limits of bystander video of such interactions with the police. Applying the concept “racialization as a way of seeing,” which Beutin names as the historical formation that takes “slave patrols as an important origin of American policing” and that points to the significance of nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific discourses on race that linked blackness to criminality in coding the contemporary notion of visual evidence as objective, Beutin asks that we question what is at stake when the racist state recuperates the discourse to film the police, by way of police body worn cameras? This tension between object taken as evidence and the racialized logic of police power is further examined in this special section with Andrew Merrill’s “Life of a Gunshot: Space, Sound and the Political Contours of Acoustic Gunshot Detection.” Drawing on actor-work theory and feminist interventions in surveillance studies, Merrill expands Haggerty and Ericson’s “surveillance assemblages” by attending to acoustical surveillance and the role of the technological non-human in this detailed study of the implementation of an acoustical gunshot detection system.

Of the various executive actions signed by the 45th President of the United States during his first week office, Executive Order 13767, calls for, among other things, the expansion of the already existing border wall along the US-Mexico border, building detention facilities near the land border with Mexico, and the hiring of 5,000 more border patrol agents. A different executive order signed on the same day as E.O. 13767 called for the hiring of an additional 10,000 enforcement and removal officers, an end to sanctuary cities, and the expedited deportation of undocumented immigrants who have been convicted of a crime, including misdemeanors. Legitimate fears of targeted ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids, mass deportations and panic ensued as news reports, such as that of the deportation of Guadalupe García de Rayos within 24 hours of routine checking-in at the ICE office in Phoenix, Arizona, were all over the news and social media sites. García de Rayos, a mother of two US-born children, entered the US in an undocumented fashion when she was only 14 years of age. As a result of a worksite raid at an Arizona amusement park in 2008 García de Rayos was charged with criminal impersonation for using a false social security. She was detained for some months and later released on the condition of scheduled check-ins with ICE. On the night that she was taken into custody to be deported, protesters attempted to block the van scheduled to take her to a removal point, chanting “hell no, deportations got to go” and “No una más deportación” (no more deportation). Watching the media coverage of García de Rayos’ deportation it seemed like a state orchestrated spectacle of terror. Once in Mexico, she was taken to a migrant shelter in Nogales, Sonora run by the Kino Border Initiative.

In their article, “Sensors, Cameras, and the New ‘Normal’ in Clandestine Migration: How Undocumented Migrants Experience Surveillance at the US-Mexico Border,” Bryce Clayton Newell, Ricardo Gomez, and Verónica E. Guajardo provide a necessary, qualitative analysis of the experiences of clandestine migration across the Mexico-US border. Through their in-depth interviews at the Kino Border Initiative migrant shelter in Nogales, Mexico, Newell, Gomez and Guajardo fill a gap in much of the research on surveillance at the borderlands, specifically answering how people from Mexico and Central America who are attempting to cross into the US consider the role of “the Wall” and of other surveillance technologies such as camera towers, border patrol body-worn cameras, ground sensors, helicopters and drones. In seeking to understand how their research informants (migrant-aid workers and volunteers, people who had been recently deported from the US, and those recently arrived at the border who were preparing to make their crossing) make use of their information-sharing networks to overcome dangers, smugglers and other experiences of vulnerability, the authors make a valuable research intervention at a time US government is
expanding surveillance measures that could see the current administration surpass the previous one’s deportation record of over one million people, which earned former president Barack Obama the title “Deporter-in-Chief”.

Sara Kamali’s contribution, “Informants, Provocateurs, and Entrapment: Comparing U.S. Surveillance Practices on Christian Patriots and Muslim Americans,” is a detailed historical analysis of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation’s post-9/11 surveillance of Muslim American communities and that agency’s PATCON program, an intelligence and infiltration program from the early 1990s that targeted Christian Right militants and other white nationalist organizations. With a focus on points of convergence between these surveillance histories and practices, Kamali closes this article by dwelling on the need transparency and accountability “because of the increasingly complex circuitry between transparency, secrecy, and intelligence creating counter-terrorism policies in the United States.”

With “Towards Cities of Informers? Community-Based Surveillance in France and Canada,” Anaïk Purennne and Grégoire Palierse take a comparative approach with their analysis of how and why residents of two neighbourhoods apply community-based surveillance and anti-crime strategies to people whose presence in their neighbourhoods are deemed troubling by those residents; a category of presence often occupied by those who are already socially excluded from the neighbourhoods studied (in some cases, homeless people, “youth of immigrant origin”, racialized people). Frequently, such “If You See Something, Say Something” approaches by concerned neighbours through, for example, neighbourhood listservs and message boards, can be a form of community-making by way of that very surveillance where, as one study of a predominantly white, upper-middle class neighbourhood in Austin, Texas found, community members construct themselves as progressive and color-blind while race and racism remain “central to how they imagines criminal threat and their own safety” (Lowe et al. 2016: 12). Purennne and Palierse argue that not all such initiatives need lead to “a culture of generalized suspicion”(p.1) as their research questions if “participatory surveillance” is “necessarily associated with exclusion, stigmatization and racism?”(p.12). Importantly, Purennne and Palierse highlight the productive possibilities of “collective reflection” when it comes to disrupting “us vs. them” exclusionary community policing practices.

Also in this special section is Justin Mann’s focus on the 1984 shooting of four black teenagers in a New York subway by a white male vigilante, Bernhard Goetz, with his article “The “Vigilante Spirit”: Bernhard Goetz, Batman, and Racial Violence in 1980s New York.” By focusing on the speculative fiction of The Dark Knight Returns and the Subway Vigilante case, Mann traces “the vigilante spirit” as one form of security imaginaries, that which, as he writes, “translate imagined sources of insecurity as they exist in culture and discourse into real world manifestations of security policy and practice”. In this way, Mann points to the role of literary fiction as an important mode of inquiry when it comes to questioning how power and race structure understanding of crime and urban spaces. In “A First Line of Defence? Vigilant Surveillance, Participatory Policing, and the Reporting of “Suspicious” Activity,” Sebastian Larsson also examines “If You See Something, Say Something” initiatives, but at the site of vigilance campaigns by US Homeland Security and other western state security agencies that task citizens to report unusual acts and suspicious objects. Examples of such programs include Eye on Awareness™ that trains hotel housekeeping, front desk workers and other hospitality employees to monitor hotel guests for suspicious situations (see Ritchie 2015), or campaigns aimed at passengers and workers to be watchful in public transportation spaces (See Monahan 2010; Molotch and McClain 2012; Arbona et al. 2016). Larsson explores reporting processes, the workings of distrust of strangers, fusion centers and the “purposeful gaze” of the flâneur-figure as amateur detective on the look out for potential acts of terrorism in analyzing the violence that such forms of “soft surveillance” enable.

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References


