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BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* by Simone Browne (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015)

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Surveillance studies is having a moment. This is a good thing, because the same socio-political factors that cohere in the study of technology, society, and power are also driving urgent protests surrounding civil liberties, civic participation, and freedoms surrounding individual agency in a post-Snowden world. Artists, activists, and academics are variously turning to surveillance studies (and elsewhere – science fiction, for example) for a theoretical vocabulary that can both describe and offer tools for navigating structures of monitoring and control. As Bossewich and Sinnreich (2014) have argued, individuals typically have less information about themselves than the institutions that cater to them through financial, cultural, and social platforms. And given the imbalances between the individuals who produce data and the institutions that control data, surveillance studies helps us to ask, “In what relationship do we live with the technologies that watch us?” With *Dark Matters*, Simone Browne makes two fundamental, intertwined contributions to surveillance studies as a field that is growing in range and significance. Her book argues

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persuasively that surveillance studies consider race fundamentally in its accounting of technologies of control and monitoring, and a historical accounting of the technologies that have been used to monitor racial blackness and subjugate people of color in the United States.

Browne begins with a narrative of her attempt to gain access, via Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) inquiries, to CIA and FBI files on Frantz Fanon. The example is apt in its portrayal of the stakes of surveilling black bodies: the incommensurability of lived realities between people who are monitored and those who do the monitoring, and the paradoxical ways in which someone can be surveilled and yet still be rendered invisible. Moreover, Browne's FOIA inquiries tidily illustrate the key tensions of *Dark Matters*: the systemization of surveillance as dehumanizing while also being illegible. One could describe Browne's book as an anthology of surveillance as a set of processes, and specifically those processes that are used to monitor, control and restrict the movements and rights of people of color. Her examples—lantern laws in nineteenth-century New York, branding as a form of identification, and modern TSA security screening—span centuries of control mechanisms in the United States that are intimately bound up with race. It is a marker of the book's success that after reading it, it's almost impossible to imagine a surveillance studies project that is not decidedly attentive to the ways that socio-technical assemblages are shot through with racism and race.

Importantly, Browne also accounts for methods of evading or repositioning surveillance, which she gathers under the phrase "dark sousveillance." Dark surveillance refers to "the tactics employed to render one's self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of oversight.... Dark sousveillance is a site of critique, as it speaks to black epistemologies of contending with antiblack surveillance" (p. 21). In addition to writing about the socio-technical processes that catalog, control, and delimit black bodies, the cataloging of "dark sousveillance" offers an agenda for coping with and subverting structures of control.

The case studies that comprise the core of this book are compelling in their breadth, as is Browne's unflinching attention to technologies of intense cruelty. Cultural studies sometimes has a tendency to talk about the social construction of bodies and subjects in ways that abstract the stakes for those under discussion, such as referring to the violence of language or discourse in a manner removed from physical harm. In *Dark Matters*, there are no metaphors for such violence, only violence. Indeed, if the chapter on branding feels somewhat uneven in its structure, it is perhaps because no abstraction of branding (for example, the relationships between violence and celebrity at work in the careers of successful black men like Will Smith and Michael Vick) can live up to the horror of physically claiming people as property through metal and fire.

Although Browne doesn't label her work as a project of science and technology studies (STS), there is a familiar dynamic of tracing uneven distributions of power across different socio-technical landscapes. For example, Browne describes lantern laws in nineteenth-century New York, which demanded that enslaved blacks walking the streets at night use lanterns to stay visible, part of a logic of control enforced by whites who sought to surveil black bodies and, more particularly, to prevent them from gathering. When, at the book's conclusion, Browne addresses the Hewlett Packard face-tracking camera that correctly identifies a white woman but fails to detect the face of her black coworker, the historical portrait of policing black people emerges as simultaneously coherent and complex, alternately demanding and refusing to see black bodies while consistently denying subjectivity and agency. I've seen the "HP Computers are Racist" (2009) YouTube video cited in a number of papers and talks over the last few years, which is perhaps unsurprising given the video's immediate illustration of the capacity for artifacts to have racist politics. [Perhaps the HP Computer is the digital version of Robert Moses' Long Island overpasses (Winner, 2006)]. But Browne's use of the video is particularly effective because she foregrounds it in a sustained, discriminatory campaign of illuminating and obscuring blackness.

Throughout *Dark Matters*, the accounting of surveillance processes is frequently coupled with art exhibitions as provocations for identifying and reworking relationships to mechanisms of identification and monitoring. I view this as a means of mitigating an issue that often arises in STS work, which is to critique assemblages of power without providing guidance on how these assemblages could be otherwise. Although I appreciate the move to go beyond critique itself to point to possibilities for dialogue and change, I sometimes found Browne's suggestion that artistic projects can interrogate structures of surveillance a little thin. For example, would interacting with "The Keeper of the Keys," a machine that reads and provides documentation of but does not archive one's biometric data, really trigger substantive reflection on one's relationship to the monetization and marketing of our data? Perhaps this discrepancy is simply the result of surveillance structures being so deeply integrated into everyday life—between those who are monitored. These differences are so vast as to dwarf any single attempt at intervention.

Although I began this review by invoking government surveillance, there is a separate but related set of political concerns that makes this book so timely. Indeed, it is impossible to read *Dark Matters* outside of a political climate of police brutality and anti-racism activism. With her provocative review of different episodes in U.S. history in which people of color have been systematically dehumanized and disenfranchised, Browne provides a language for talking about technologies of violence and discrimination while also condemning the structures of power that continue to shape the contours of social and economic possibilities for people of color. *Dark Matters* is a powerful book, which stems partly from the subject matter and partly from Browne's simultaneously lucid and forceful writing. It is also a book that feels increasingly necessary, helping us to ask not only about the policies, processes and technologies that govern civil liberties, but also about whose bodies and freedoms are most controlled and curtailed.

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Bio

Jessa Lingel is an assistant professor at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. She received her PhD in communication and information from Rutgers University. She has an MLIS from Pratt Institute and an MA from New York University. Her research interests include information inequalities and technological distributions of power.