BY LINDSAY BEYERSTEIN

Tracking Blackness
A Q&A with *Dark Matters* Author Simone Browne

We tend to think of mass surveillance as a relatively new phenomenon, a byproduct of the digital revolution. Examples of high-tech surveillance spring readily to mind, including the NSA scooping up our emails, Samsung televisions picking up living room chitchat along with your voice commands, and Oral Roberts University collecting data on its entire student body via Fitbit activity trackers. But, as it turns out, our high-tech surveillance society had lower-tech precursors.

Simone Browne, an associate professor of African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, describes her new book, *Dark Matters: On The Surveillance of Blackness,* as a conversation between Black Studies and Surveillance Studies—the latter a young discipline devoted to investigating the technological and social dimensions of surveillance. Browne's research shows that surveillance was an essential part of transatlantic slavery, a system that held millions of people against their will and tracked them as property. And she argues that slavery created an ongoing demand for technologies to monitor Black bodies. The day-to-day enforcement of slavery raised familiar-sounding questions: Is this person who they say they are? Are they allowed to be here? How do we know? Dramas of surveillance and countersurveillance played out constantly.

If surveillance is the state watching the individual, sousveillance is the individual looking back at the state. The history of slavery is full of examples of both kinds of watching. Slave catchers hunted down runaway slaves for money. The catchers were themselves carefully watched, and the news of a slave catcher's whereabouts could also spread rapidly through the Black community. Abolitionists also circulated handbills warning free Blacks and their allies to be on guard against slave catchers.

Surveillance still goes both ways today, as activists counter police oversight by recording interactions on their own cameras and protesters at rallies for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump film their own attacks, not trusting event security cameras to hold anyone accountable. [1]

The long history of mass surveillance in the United States began with slavery. Slaves sought to free themselves by escaping to free territories or impersonating free people, and the system had well-developed mechanisms to thwart them. Slave traders branded the flesh of their captives to mark them as slaves. Further, slavery in the United States was so thoroughly racialized that being Black was tantamount to proof of being enslaved—skin color becoming evidence of legal status. Slaves who gained their freedom by "passing" as White had, in effect, eluded the biometric profiling of their day.

To this day, communities of color are subject to intensive surveillance, both public and private. Police helicopters are a familiar presence in some neighborhoods. Young men of color are overwhelmingly more likely to be selected for stop-and-frisk police encounters. Browne argues that awareness of being under constant surveillance is an enduring condition of Black life.
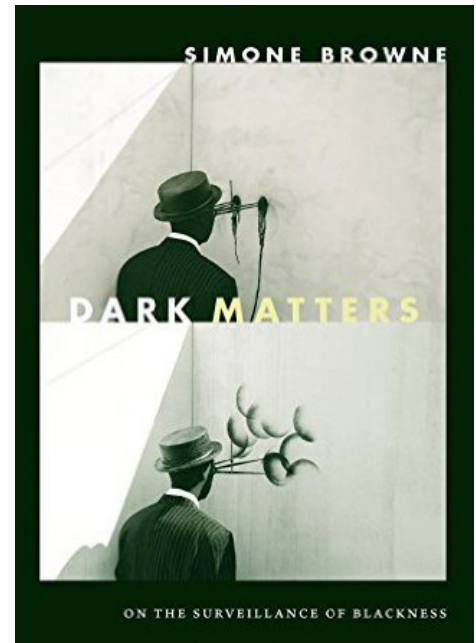
This March, Lindsay Beyerstein interviewed Simone Browne about *Dark Matters* and what it says about surveillance in our current political climate.

Dark Matters: On The Surveillance of Blackness, was *published by Duke University Press in October 2015. Photo: Duke University Press.*

How did you come to write this book?

I was working on my dissertation on Canadian/U.S. border security and I got into reading the Surveillance Studies literature. One thing that I found that was missing was a discussion of the archive of slavery because it seemed so important to situate surveillance as a key practice that underwrote transatlantic slavery. So, when it came time to write my own book, I wanted to put Surveillance Studies in conversation with Black Studies.

An enslaving society does a lot of work to keep track of people as property. How does that technology and expertise carry forward into our modern surveillance society?

I didn't want to make the link that they are one and the same, but that some of the practices that we see happening now have earlier articulations or iterations. There were a few instances that I looked at: Mainly biometric technology, but also tracking people with passports, which we still use now. Also, the ways in which bodies and people become disciplined by way of light. That is, how

illumination can make bodies visible, trackable, countable, and controllable. I looked at branding and biometric technology. I also looked at the *Book of Negroes*, a record of Black Loyalists, former slaves who were eligible to leave the U.S. to settle in Canada after serving in the Revolutionary War, as an early passport to cross the Canada-U.S. border.

There were also lantern laws. These were 18th century laws in New York City and other places that said that Black and Indigenous people had to carry a lit candle after dark if they weren't in the company of White person. Lantern laws existed in other times and places but there was something specific about the regulation of Black people on the move that I saw as a way to think about how certain technologies become supervisory devices.

So, the lantern was a piece of technology that was mandated because Black people were deemed more suspect than everybody else?

That's one way of putting it. It was a form of identification. Other people would have been walking with lanterns, too. But the idea was that that any White person would be deputized to seize that Black/enslaved person who was walking without a lantern. You can think about the ways in which White people become deputized through White supremacy today around Black bodies in and out of place. I'm thinking of a Trump rally. Even with people who go to a rally as protest or as observation might be marked as out of place there and subjected to violence. Being

Our high-tech surveillance society had lower-tech precursors. Photo: Jonathan McIntosh via Flickr. License: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/.

Black, wearing a hijab, other markers of being out of place at a Trump rally, and then being subjected to violence from police or Trump supporters.

You talk about slave branding as a precursor to modern biometric ID. How did that work?

There was branding for identification, but also as a form of punishment.

I looked at the ways that the body becomes a mark or a measure of enslavement. If you think of biometrics simply as marking or measurement. How we use it today as identification, verification, or automation, thinking of iris scans, face scans, finger scans…All of those ways in which the body is reduced to parts, pieces, and performances for identification and verification purposes. I wanted to see if there were moments when those get racialized. Branding became a racialization process during transatlantic slavery.

You write about the hearings at the Fraunces Tavern in New York City and the creation of the Book of Negroes, a document that listed 3,000 Black Loyalists who served with British during the American Revolution and who sought to be evacuated to freedom after the war. What happened?

This was something that happened around the British evacuation of New York City [after the American Revolution]. Many people who had answered the call to fight with the British had entered into a bargain with them. These were people who had escaped slavery. They'd worked with the British as soldiers but also as support staff: cooks, spies, laundresses, and so on. Also at this time you had slave catchers coming to New York to seize former slaves who were set up on ships ready to leave the country mainly bound for Canada or Europe. People would be seized on those ships and taken to New York's Fraunces Tavern every Wednesday from May to November to argue for their freedom by demonstrating that they were behind British lines at time of occupation and therefore entitled to go free.

What was the process of arguing for one's freedom?

The tribunal was tasked with adjudicating claims under Article Seven of the Provisional Treaty of Paris, which said that the British could not leave with Patriot property, namely "Negroes," and that that "no person is permitted to embark as a Refugee, who has not resided Twelve Months within the British Lines, without a special Passport from the Commandant."

The British created the *Book of Negroes*, which was basically a record of the loss of human property. It was a record of who left [the country]. They would record their names, where they were born, who had enslaved them, how they ran away, information about their bodies, how they were branded, racial descriptors, and so on.

[The people pleading their cases at the Fraunces Tavern] had claimed their freedom. At that moment, you had slave catchers or others deputized to "take them back." We're using the term "property" but these were human beings.

You talk about the difference between surveillance and sousveillance. Would it be fair to say that surveillance is the powerful watching the powerless (like the NSA opening our emails) and sousveillance is the powerless watching the powerful (like citizens filming police brutality)?

There's a graphic in the book designed by surveillance scholar Steve Mann. For Mann, sousveillance is the b-side of surveillance. Surveillance is mainly oversight, governing, policing, and the protection of private property. Mann sees it as almost always repressive. The b-side would be about undersight, about looking back—often through wearable computing, like body cameras and cellphone cameras.

There are other forms of surveillance and sousveillance. Uberveillance is surveillance through bodily data, like a chip. Dataveillance is the use of surveillance through aggregate data algorithms. In the book, I also coined the term "redditveillance" [to talk about crowdsourced review of surveillance] using pub-

licly accessible CCTV, Flickr, and 4chan. You saw redditveillance, for example, during the Boston bombing, but there it misidentified [innocent] people.

So for me it wasn't particularly useful to think of surveillance as always repressive or always liberatory. It's not necessarily good or bad.

There was a low-tech equivalent of "redditveillance" during slavery where people would be "open-sourcing" which slaves had escaped lately, right?

Yes. Collective eyes and watching. Of who's really Black? Or who's passing? Or who's meant to be enslaved? You can also think of that in terms of women fighting online harassment. Women are being doxxed and being "swatted" (law enforcement teams maliciously sent to a person's house through collective sousveillance online).

When Black Lives Matter protesters bring their own cameras to Donald Trump rallies to document abuses, is that sousveillance?

Dark Matters *author Simone Browne discusses modern biometrics and Black bodies, how these devices are calibrated, and what they see and don't see. Photo via YouTube.*

I think it would be. The other question is: To what end?

You sent me a story about Adedayo Adeniyi, [2] who wasn't even a protester. ***(Author's note: Adeniyi is a Black Nigerian student who attended a Donald Trump rally in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in March 2016. He was unfairly ejected by security after two strangers started arguing next to him, but not before 70-year-old Trump supporter Jason Wilton Wetzel hit him in the face. Adeniyi recorded the assault on his cellphone.)*** I watched the video. I could hear him saying, "That's not me, I'm not with them. I don't even know those people." And he still got punched by a Trump supporter.

It's clear from the video [that Wetzel] must have known the camera was on him. The camera might have become an invitation. So the idea of having a recording is important, but it gets tricky for a couple of reasons, even with those videos, since there's still an anti-Black lens that those videos are watched through. Rodney King raising his arms to protect himself gets interpreted as a form of violence, as a hand about to hit. Ramsey Orta, who had recorded the killing of Eric Garner, there are reports of him being harassed by NYPD after Garner was killed and the video went viral. Last fall in Sacramento, a man recorded a SWAT team raiding a house across the street. Police shot him on his own property. They said the camera could have been a gun. [3] A camera can make a person the target of more harassment from police, or literally target practice for police.

You write about the ways in which surveillance changes our subjectivity. We start acting as if we're being watched. Do you think Wetzel felt like he had to perform White aggression because the camera was on him?

It's possible. We'd have to ask him what he felt. He later said he didn't know what came over him, that he's not a racist. So,

there was a performance of an excuse for it after the fact.

In the book I was talking about how Black hyper visibility shapes Black people's ways of being—shopping while Black, walking while Black, driving while Black—and what that might do to the psyche.

You write about modern biometrics and Black bodies, how these devices are calibrated, and what they see and don't see. Some devices read stereotypically White features with ease, reliably picking up on the subtle nuances that distinguish one blue eye from another, but failing to register stereotypically Black features. Being "legible" to a security system can make the difference between entering effortlessly and being shut out.

Think of biometrics doing a few things. Identification: Who are you? Are you enrolled in this database? Verification: Are you who you say you are? Are you the person whose biometric is encoded in this passport or Green Card? Automation: Is anybody there? Like a sensor on a faucet in a washroom.

In some cases you have certain bodies that, in biometric parlance, "fail to enroll" or "become illegible." Earlier technology would read light irises quite successfully but darker irises might not be read.

So the question becomes who is the prototype? I called it prototypical Whiteness. There's a famous video[4] of a sink in a convention center. You have a seemingly Black hand, and soap dispenser is not working. With a White hand, soap appears. How are these technologies designed to serve particular bodies?

It's interesting that racialized surveillance has made Black people more visible in some ways, but then you've got all these technologies that are decreasing Black visibility because they're calibrated to capture the nuances of White bodies.

That's the conundrum. It might be quite liberatory to be unseen by these technologies.

I close the book looking at a YouTube video[5] with about three million views. It was of two workers in Texas testing the face-tracking camera of an HP computer. One worker, he calls himself Black Desi, asks us to watch what happens "when [his] Blackness enters the frame." The camera doesn't pan or zoom or tilt to follow him. But when his White colleague enters the frame, it seemingly works just fine. I use the question "what happens when my Blackness enters the frame?" What happens when Blackness enters discussions of the discussions of surveillance, what does it do to those very discussions? ⊕

Lindsay Beyerstein is an award-winning investigative journalist and In These Times *staff writer who writes the blog* Duly Noted. *Her stories have appeared in* Newsweek, Salon, Slate, The Nation, Ms. Magazine, *and other publications. Her photographs have been published in the* Wall Street Journal *and the* New York Times' *City Room. She also blogs at* The Hillman Blog*, a publication of the Sidney Hillman Foundation, a non-profit that honors journalism in the public interest.*

Tracking Blackness, p. 16

1. Trump's campaign manager appears to have been caught assaulting a reporter on his own campaign's security system. "I'm rich," Trump told his supporters, "So, I have tapes." Trump claims his footage vindicates the campaign's version of events. Meanwhile footage was being posted, reposted, and critiqued all over social media. The police reviewed the tapes and charged the campaign manager with misdemeanor battery, but prosecutors ultimately dropped the charge. See: Eli Stokols, Hadas Gold, and Nick Gass, "Trump Turns Blame on Reporter in Battery Case," *Politico*, March 29, 2016, http://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/trump-campaign-manager-charged-with-misdemeanor-battery-221336. Also, Dylan Byers, Tal Kopan, and Tom LoBianco, "State will not prosecute Donald Trump's campaign manager," CNN, April, 14, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/13/politics/corey-lewandowski-donald-trump-charges-dropped/.

2. Shaun King, "Trump Supporter's Sorry Excuse After Assaulting Black Teen At Rally Undeserving of Sympathy," *New York Daily News*, March 14, 2016, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/king-charge-trump-supporter-assaulted-black-student-article-1.2563579?cid=bitly.

3. "Police Shoot Man For Recording Them With Phone, Claim They Feared For Their Lives," *Counter Current News*, September 12, 2015, http://countercurrentnews.com/2015/09/police-shoot-recording-man/.

4. Teej Meister, "Whites Only?," YouTube video, uploaded September 2, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHynGQ9Vg30.

5. Wzamen01, "HP Computers Are Racist," YouTube video, uploaded December 10, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4DT3tQqgRM.