

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5919-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-5938-8 (paper)

Surveillance States and the Possibilities of Diaspora

Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* is situated at the intersections of black studies, science and technology studies, cultural studies, and feminist theory. The book offers scholars in a range of fields several exciting new theoretical vocabularies with which to rethink one of the most important concepts of our time: surveillance. And it is with the idea of new intellectual trajectories in mind that I would like to begin. Throughout my own academic training—and I'm sure for many others as well—Frantz Fanon has loomed large. On any given syllabus one might find Fanon as that consummate figure of anti-colonial struggle, preeminent theorist of violence, both proponent and critic of Marxist philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. However, in an arresting first move that opens her book, Browne reintroduces Fanon to us. In her introductory chapter we find Fanon not as reverberating theoretical abstraction, but as man grappling with his own corporeal finitude (p.3). Furthermore, we find Fanon in his last days under constant surveillance by the US government. And while evidence of this surveillance comes to us in the forms of letters and notes written by Fanon and his comrades, Fanon's presence in an official archive of state power remains obscured. As Browne tells us, this rendering of Fanon staring down his own premature death while under constant watch serves to "cue surveillance in and of black life as a fact of blackness" (p.6). By reacquainting ourselves with Fanon in this way, we can observe how the hierarchies of racial difference and racial ordering that structure our modern world are undergirded by the assumed hypervisibility of blackness, but also its lingering imperceptibility and a willful erasure of its effects and affects.

I begin with Browne's re-introduction of Fanon to highlight what I find most compelling about this text. That is, the ways it stands as both an invitation and a provocation. An invitation to look anew and a provocative critique of the ways we have been trained to see and the forms of entitlement that seeing presumes. I think this dual invitation and provocation is best represented

Antipode

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by the question that animates Browne's epilogue: "What happens when blackness enters the frame?" (p.161). At first glance, this question might appear simplistic, but as Browne convincingly argues throughout her text, centering blackness in surveillance studies stands to unsettle some of the field's most entrenched assumptions.

To briefly list some of these moments of unsettling and upending the field, I think of Browne's brilliant "interruption" of Michel Foucault's take on Bentham's panopticon and histories of punishment (p.38), and her narration of a new genealogy of the modern passport and state practices of border control through the *Book of Negroes*, an 18th century travel ledger which documents the United States to Canada migration of formerly enslaved persons following the US War of Independence (p.83). I also think of the ways Browne reroutes popular culture on and as surveillance through slavery. She gives the example of an episode of the television show *Mantracker*, where two black men from Toronto attempt to evade a white man on horseback in a rural area of Canada while singing Negro spirituals. The entire episode is maddeningly bizarre. But given this example, I am intrigued by how this era of "mass surveillance" is also marked by a whole series of media depictions of slavery in which flight, capture, and subverted identities take center stage. Here, obviously, a number of films and texts come to mind: the internationally-acclaimed *12 Years a Slave*; the rebooted version of *Roots* on the US History Channel; and the current US television show *Underground*, among others. Following Browne's instructive lead, then, we might ask: What is the appeal of narratives of black fugitivity at the precise moment when state surveillance practices are presumed to be at their most pervasive? Her text invites us to contemplate the ways our contemporary anxieties about the breadth of surveilling infrastructures are accompanied by and, at times, rendered through popular renditions of slave life.

The rival spatial logics at work in Browne's framing of the state and diaspora challenge us to think these categories anew. Despite—or maybe because of—the transnational character of surveillance regimes in the present, these practices are often taken as modes of consolidating and enforcing forms of state power. When we encounter the term "surveillance" these days it is often

Antipode

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attended by the word “state”, denoting the marking of government territory through surveillance strategies. Browne complicates this relationship between states and surveillance in Chapter 4 of the book, entitled “What Did TSA Find in Solange’s Fro?”. As Browne illustrates, on the one hand, black women airport travelers are disproportionately selected for strip searches and pat downs (p.132). On the other hand, the trope of the black female TSA agent is often caricatured as emblematic of state overreach—or as the television show *South Park* would have it “reach arounds”—where the invasiveness of an ever-present and perpetually looking state is given a particularly raced and sexualized inflection. This is what Browne calls “the eroticization of security, where it is the black woman’s hands that probe the white traveler’s body” (p.151). Thus Browne concludes, “While the black and sassy TSA agent might be a signifier of state power, that power is merely perceived. She comes to stand for something specific about working in the airport service sector: she might not be able to access the very thing that she is tasked with protecting—in the words of the TSA’s mission, vision, and core values here—‘freedom of movement’” (p.152).

Lingering here, with blackness as suspiciously out of place and routinely out of frame at the gateways of global travel, Browne gestures toward the multiple sites of blackness that, I suggest, recall the most promising possibilities of a black diasporic tradition.¹ While I acknowledge that the term diaspora is eminently contestable, using Browne’s concept of “dark sousveillance”, I would like to figure diaspora as a darkly sousveillant *geographic* practice. Browne defines dark sousveillance as “a way to situate 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 undersight” (p.21). She continues, “I plot dark sousveillance as an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices. Dark sousveillance, then, plots imaginaries that are oppositional and that are hopeful for another way of being”. Thus, I would like to suggest

¹ There are longstanding debates about the contemporary contours of blackness, diaspora, and transnationalism. For a small sampling see: Brown 2009; Edwards 2003; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Scott 2013; Singh 2004.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

that we can find in diasporic practices versions of blackness that, yes, admittedly, at times reify state authority, but also a blackness that confounds, defies, and usurps official territorial circumscription. This is evident in Browne's own expansive archive of blackness, as she utilizes examples from the US, Canada, Jamaica, Germany, Kenya, and many other places.

As I conclude, I want to think of how diaspora as a darkly sousveillant geographic practice is being explored specifically in visual culture. Artists figure prominently in Browne's text, from what she calls the "transnational disruptive staring" in the photographs of South African artist Robin Rhode's work *Pan's Opticon* (p.59) to the talking column that talks back in Adrian Piper's *What It's Like, What It Is* (p.62). Given the place of visual art in Browne's book, I want to offer up the work of Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, recently on display at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, as another example of the darkly seeing, subverting possibilities of blackness.² Hinkle's "Kentifrica" is at once country/territory/nation/continent, and still all of these geographical monikers fall short. Kentifrica is a diasporic place that is both defiantly real and gleefully fictitious. For Hinkle, if one were to attempt to locate Kentifrica on a map, it would fall somewhere between Africa and America, with latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates ever yet to be determined. Like Browne's text, the indeterminate location of Hinkle's Kentifrica invites us to question the ways we surveil our world, but, more importantly, it leaves open space to one day more carefully and more hopefully look again.

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² For more on Hinkle's work, see: Anyaeqbuna 2015; Darling 2014; Hinkle 2016.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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