

# Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness

By Simone Browne

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In *Dark Matters* Simone Browne locates the conditions of blackness as a key site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated, and resisted. She shows how contemporary surveillance technologies and practices are informed by the long history of racial formation and by the methods of policing black life under slavery, such as branding, runaway slave notices, and lantern laws. Placing surveillance studies into conversation with the archive of transatlantic slavery and its afterlife, Browne draws from black feminist theory, sociology, and cultural studies to analyze texts as diverse as the methods of surveilling blackness she discusses: from the design of the eighteenth-century slave ship *Brooks*, Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*, and *The Book of Negroes*, to contemporary art, literature, biometrics, and post-9/11 airport security practices. Surveillance, Browne asserts, is both a discursive and material practice that reifies boundaries, borders, and bodies around racial lines, so much so that the surveillance of blackness has long been, and continues to be, a social and political norm.

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## Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness By Simone Browne Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"With flair, creativity, and intellectual breadth Simone Browne illuminates the historical and contemporary surveillance ordering of (presumed) biologically based racial identities. With an expansive interdisciplinary reach and drawing on helpful concepts such as racializing surveillance, dark sousveillance, epidermalization, and bordering, the book is a welcome contribution to an emerging field."

(Gary T. Marx, author of *Windows Into the Soul: Surveillance and Society*)

"Simone Browne paints a devastating portrait of the compounding work of racial surveillance—a process in which profiling serves as both the justification for information gathering and a defense of the heightened, disproportionate scrutiny this information is said to warrant. From the branding of flesh as stigmata of captivity to biometric markers as gatekeepers, *Dark Matters* transports us across space and time, illuminating how the sorting, counting, and surveilling of human beings was as central to the dawn of industrialization as it is to the information society. Browne's incisive, wide-ranging, and multidisciplinary meditation shows us the scale and persistence of surveillance culture, and especially its urgent stakes for communities of color. Her deft history of the present moment reveals how data becomes us."

(Alondra Nelson, author of *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*)

"*Dark Matters* reframes surveillance studies in a way that will spark interrogations regarding the historical, racialized origins of surveillance theory and practice, while presenting a robust entryway to the field's current debates for new readers. *Dark Matters* offers a model of interdisciplinary feminist scholarship for media scholars invested in critical race inquiry, visual analysis, and archival study. At a moment when surveillance practices permeate livelihood, Browne's contribution here is an invaluable resource for examining the contemporary moment of #BlackLivesMatter, police brutality, and strategies for future resistance."

(Racquel M. Gonzales *Feminist Media Studies* 2016-03-15)

"*Dark Matters* provides an invaluable perspective on surveillance and reminds us that the history of the surveillance of blackness has a unique and important roll to play in our understanding and analysis of contemporary surveillance."

(Jeramie D. Scott *Epic.org* 2016-04-15)

"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."

(Brittany Meché *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 2016-04-01)

"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. . . . Browne's work is a must-read for those interested in examining the complexities of surveillance and attendant ongoing, embodied, political struggles."

(Megan M. Wood *Surveillance & Society* 2016-09-01)

"Through her analyses of maps, newspaper articles, fugitive slave advertisements, slave narratives, personal correspondence, government documents, memoirs, and treaties, Brown exposes how blackness was shaped and produced through surveillance practices during slavery."

(Brandi Thompson Summers *Public Books* 2016-12-01)

"*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."

(Jessa Lingel *Catalyst* 2016-12-12)

"Each chapter of *Dark Matters* presents a different archive of racializing surveillance paired with reflections on black cultural production Browne reads as dark sousveillance. At each turn, Browne encourages us to see in slavery and its afterlife new modes of control, old ways of studying them, and potential paths of resistance."

(Daniel Greene *boundary 2* 2016-12-19)

"*Dark Matters* is an invaluable study that showcases how surveillance, historically and contemporarily, is rooted in anti-Blackness. Through utilizing a Black feminist methodology and centering the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the genealogy of surveillance, Browne demonstrates how the workings and technologies of domination, surveillance and governance utilized during slavery pre-figure and haunt the historical present. While the specific technologies have become far more advanced, the brutal fact of anti-Blackness remains the bedrock of surveillance practices to date."

(Tyrone S. Palmer *Souls* 2016-12-19)

"*Dark Matters* is of great importance not just because it illuminates historical and contemporary surveillance technologies of (anti)blackness, but equally because it opens up a series of questions around geography, race, power, and surveillance."

(Hidefumi Nishiyama *Theory & Event* 2017-01-31)

"Browne's *Dark Matters* is a groundbreaking and field-changing study important for cultural criticism broadly and surveillance studies in particular. Moreover, it is especially timely given the ways the issues she raises intersect with debates about police violence and mass surveillance, among others."

(Shaka McGlotten *American Journal of Sociology* 2017-02-28)

About the Author

Simone Browne is Associate Professor of African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

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