

RACE AND SURVEILLANCE BRIEF

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Introduction

With the growing adoption of new digital technologies and access to mass data, surveillance has been increasingly used to monitor and control communities globally. It is essential to ask: “Surveillance of whom?” Throughout history, surveillance has been used to police Black communities and other racialized groups. These patterns persist today from the disproportionate presence of security cameras in non-white neighborhoods in New York City, to the deployment of facial recognition technology targeting ethnic minority Uyghur Muslims in China. Such issues are especially acute in urban areas, where factors such as density, segregation, migration, economic inequality, and real estate speculation together drive significant investment and innovation in surveillance technologies.

Given these differential natures of surveillance, we were interested in researching the intersection between race and surveillance. As part of this work, we hosted a panel titled “Surveillance and Cities,” featuring scholars and community organizers focused on issues of surveillance. During the panel, we discussed the impact of surveillance technologies on racialized groups and explored community organizing efforts to challenge surveillance systems in cities. In Section 2 of this brief, we present key takeaways from this panel.

Section 3 includes a literature review on race and surveillance, where we conclude with key open questions for researchers and community members interested in engaging in this domain. Although surveillance is becoming increasingly digitized, the practice of surveillance is not new. In this section, we discuss the ongoing uses of surveillance and delve into how it historically has been used to control and extract value from marginalized groups. Our aim is to prompt critical discussions and investigations on how surveillance perpetuates systemic oppression, as well as work towards alternative systems that center social justice and community safety.

This brief was developed by the Technology & Racial Equity Initiative at the Stanford Center for Comparative Studies in Race & Ethnicity. This initiative is working to advance racial justice in the analysis, production, and deployment of new technologies.

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Simone Browne, Associate Professor of African and African Diaspora Studies, UT Austin

Lilly Irani, Associate Professor of Communication, UC San Diego and Organizer, Tech Workers Coalition

Tawana Petty, Director of Policy and Advocacy, Algorithmic Justice League

Shakeer Rahman, Lawyer and Community Organizer, Stop LAPD Spying Coalition

2 Key Takeaways from the Surveillance and Cities Panel

In April 2023, the Stanford Center for Comparative Studies in Race & Ethnicity hosted a panel titled “Surveillance and Cities” featuring esteemed speakers Simone Browne, Lilly Irani, Tawana Petty, and Shakeer Rahman. The panel brought together academics and community organizers committed to examining and countering surveillance systems in cities and our society more broadly. Our discussion was guided by a fundamental understanding that surveillance systems are racialized, and we were interested in exploring practical strategies to resist these systems.



Below are five key takeaways based on our discussion during the Surveillance and Cities panel.

A. Exercising Power from the Outside

Challenging surveillance systems requires making change from a position *outside* the powerful institutions that deploy these systems, such as the police and the state apparatus that surrounds policing. Shakeer Rahman, a lawyer and community organizer with the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, shed light on challenging the traditional models of engaging with these institutions. While advocacy often entails making requests and appeals to those in power, organizing involves exercising power through avenues like political education, community-based research, direct action, and fostering cultures of resistance. As one example, at police oversight hearings, organizers with the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition will defy convention by turning the podium around. Instead of facing the public officials in an attempt to appeal to the powerful, they will engage with the community, transforming the political space into a space for organizing, analysis, and power building.

B. Leveraging Informal Channels on the Inside

While effecting change from the outside is essential, engaging with individuals on the inside can also be helpful. Lilly Irani, an Associate Professor of Communication at UC San Diego and an organizer with Tech Workers Coalition San Diego, highlighted strategies for exercising community power when working with powerful institutions. Instead of appealing to the prominent figures or top dogs who operate “above the table,” we can engage with the often-overlooked people who operate “below the table.” It is important to realize the power of informal channels through these less visible figures who may themselves have reservations about state action. An illuminating example arises from Irani’s organizing work to challenge the “Smart Streetlights” surveillance system in San Diego. Compared to engaging with politicians, Irani found that building relationships with city council staffers played a vital role in learning about and scrutinizing the surveillance system. Leveraging these internal channels served as a strategic approach that complemented other efforts to build community and labor power outside the system.

C. Valuing Artistic Expression as Intellectual Work

Art can play a critical role in resisting surveillance systems. Artistic work encompasses not only visual expression but also poetry, dance, and choreography. Simone Browne, an Associate Professor of African and African Diaspora Studies at UT Austin, shared how artists, activists, and everyday people offer us a different way of thinking outside the anti-Black surveillance state. Browne brought attention to the artist Sadie Barnette, who explores Black life and unearths the personal and the political in her work. Barnette says that, “You can surveil all the actions. You can’t surveil our souls and our love.” Notably, one of her recent projects reclaims a 500-page FBI surveillance file compiled on her father, the founder of the Compton chapter of the Black Panther Party. The creative output of artists like Barnette is intellectual work that empowers us to envision a different future in the present moment.

D. Cultivating Safety in Communities

Challenging surveillance systems requires us to cultivate safety within our communities. Tawana Petty, the Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Algorithmic Justice League, highlighted the presence of a fear economy, where it is profitable for us to be afraid of one another. As long as fear pervades our

communities, it becomes challenging to gather political will to dismantle mass surveillance systems. Thus, fostering a sense of safety and trust within our communities is essential.

E. Embracing Identity in Community Work

Activism and organizing are deeply connected to our identities, especially as they relate to solidarity with our neighbors and communities. During the panel, Tawana Petty shared a poignant poem reflecting on her experience growing up in Detroit.

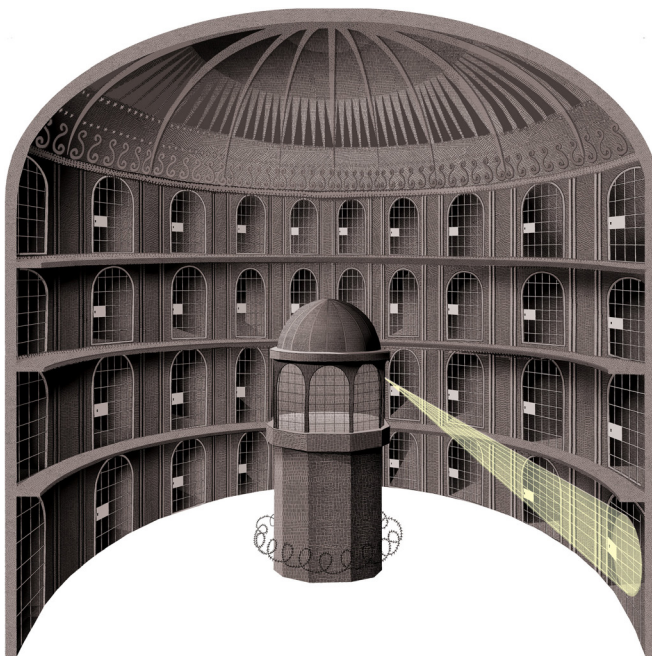
*Plagued by deteriorating neighborhoods and a convoluted history,
You were never supposed to bloom from your ashes...
Yet, you keep rising, clinging to vitality.
You refuse to allow statistics to dictate your destiny.*

Petty challenged the prevalent narrative that leaving Detroit was necessary for success. She refused to accept the portrayal of her hometown as a place of despair for Black people and has spent much of her life respiriting herself and young people in Detroit. Petty's story highlights the importance of community identity—a sentiment echoed by our panelists. Our histories and rootedness in community serve as sources of knowledge and resilience that can offer insights into the remaining work needed to move beyond surveillance.

3 Literature Review on Race and Surveillance

A. Defining Surveillance

We consider surveillance to be a systematic observation of communities in order to exert control over them. In this definition, “communities” refers to groups of people with shared identities and activities. A surveillant gaze tends to view groups of people as populations to be studied and observed, while we understand them as communities with whom we are interconnected. By “systematic observation,” we refer to the collection and processing of information about communities, thereby enabling practices such as tracking, profiling, policing, and governance (Browne 2015, Haggerty and Ericson 2006, Lyon 2001). In recent years, new technologies such as facial recognition systems, social media monitoring, and data analytics have been increasingly used to surveil communities. However, surveillance has not been created by these technologies, but rather has been a long-existing practice of control before contemporary digital technology (Browne 2015).



In the field of surveillance studies, the panopticon, introduced by Jeremy Bentham (1995), is a central concept used to theorize modern surveillance practices. As illustrated to the left, the panopticon is an architectural design for a prison in which inmates may be observed at any moment by a single security guard at the center. Bentham believed this design would result in self-discipline among the inmates due to the mere possibility of being watched at any point in time; because they could never be certain when the guard was inspecting their cell, they would be on their best behavior at all times.

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, French social theorist Michel Foucault (1977) uses the panopticon as a metaphor for discipline in modern society. He argues that public, violent

forms of punishment have transformed into more subtle mechanisms of discipline that are accompanied by increased surveillance—a shift, in contemporary terms, from the “stick” to the “carrot”. Foucault suggests

that both discipline and punishment serve the purpose of control, but the decline of punishment may indicate a shift towards controlling the mind rather than the physical body. In other words, people are influenced to regulate their behavior because they believe they *might* be surveilled at any given moment. Foucault believed this extended to all members of society, not only those who were literally imprisoned.

B. Racialized Surveillance

While concepts such as the panopticon continue to hold significance in surveillance studies, they often neglect the role of race. Racialized surveillance captures the surveillance practices that depend on racial hierarchies, which are then further reinforced by surveillance. This process is sometimes referred to as the co-construction of race and surveillance. As John Fiske (1998, 69) aptly notes, “today’s seeing eye is white.” Racialized surveillance adds complexity to Foucault’s view, acknowledging that different bodies experience discipline and punishment differently.

Racism is necessary for the very construction of surveillance technologies, which further reinforce the categorization of racialized bodies as “other” (Benjamin 2019, Jefferson 2020). As sociologist Simone Browne (2015) emphasizes in her book *Dark Matters*, the punishment of black bodies is made possible and persists through practices of surveillance, from slavery to post-emancipation. For example, in 18th century New York City, lantern laws required enslaved people to carry lit candles at night, which Browne compares to current practices of biometric surveillance that police black bodies (Browne 2015).

Case Study on Disciplinary vs. Punitive Surveillance

Broadly, surveillance systems can be categorized into two types: those that collect data about people in exchange for public or private services (the disciplinary “carrot”), and those that monitor individuals perceived as criminal for law enforcement purposes (the punitive “stick”). However, the line between them is blurry, as disciplinary systems often become punitive for racialized and marginalized groups.

An illustrative example is the electronic registry of the unhoused in Los Angeles. Emblematic of the “carrot” approach, the registry system intends to match unhoused people, the majority of whom are Black, to housing resources. However, the system functions with many obstacles and effectively categorizes individuals into the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor (Eubanks 2018). While some may overcome these obstacles and find housing, tens of thousands of unhoused people encounter an intrusive system that criminalizes them and prevents their access to resources (Eubanks 2018). For these individuals considered “too risky,” the system can become a punitive “stick.”

Because today’s digital surveillance systems allow for seamless data sharing across public and private sectors, a disciplinary surveillance system can easily contribute to punitive surveillance. For example, during his presidency, Donald Trump proposed including data on immigrants who used food stamps, housing aid, or Medicaid as a factor in deportation processes (Torbaty 2019).

Surveillance has been used to control not only racialized communities within nations, but also racialized people at borders (Chaar-López 2019, Muñiz 2022). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Muslim communities in the United States faced heightened surveillance, including mandated registration, data collection, as well as the detention and deportation of non-citizen Muslims (Alimahomed-Wilson 2019, Bayoumi 2006, Selod 2018).

Surveillance practices privilege whiteness, not only within nations but also on a global scale. These practices rely on racial hierarchies rooted in transatlantic slavery and European settler-colonialism. Many surveillance technologies trace their origins back to 19th-century colonial expansion and imperialist culture (Cole 2001). For example, during apartheid in South Africa, internal passports were issued to segregate people and restrict the movement of black workers (Savage 1986). In colonial India, fingerprinting was initially instituted as a means for overseeing social services, emblematic of a disciplinary “carrot” approach. However, the need for an objective identification system emerged from racialized beliefs of deceitful natives, as colonial authorities doubted that pensions were being collected by the intended recipients (Sengoopta 2003). In other words, the “problem” of governing a local community perceived as untrustworthy by default necessitated the development of a large-scale registration system. Once adopted more widely, fingerprinting became a colonial tool used to control and monitor Indians, while also contributing to the formalization of the caste system (Sengoopta 2003). Fingerprinting was also adopted in Argentina to track immigrants who were perceived as criminal and socially undesirable (Cole 2001). Similar to colonial India, the targets of fingerprint identification in Argentina were seen as racially distinct “others” (Cole 2001).

These imperial legacies of surveillance persist today, with some of the most powerful biometric surveillance systems being developed in former colonies of European empires (Breckenridge 2014). Moreover, many modern-day conflicts reflect elements of colonialism. For instance, the Israeli military uses surveillance as a colonial tool to control the Palestinian people and their land (Weizman 2007). Additionally, the Chinese state has built a surveillance system to detain over a million Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, effectively creating a penal colony (Byler 2021). In these cases, the use of surveillance more closely resembles a punitive “stick” approach to exerting control.

Furthermore, the harms of surveillance operate in an intersectional manner, perpetuating multiple forms of oppression and control, particularly upon marginalized and non-normative bodies. Surveillance not only helps define and perpetuate the category of whiteness, but also reinforces able-bodiedness, classism, patriarchy, and heterosexuality (Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015). For example, in the United States during the 19th century, classism was upheld through county poorhouses, where people living in poverty were quarantined and subject to surveillance (Eubanks 2018). Today, digital tools perpetuate surveillance of the poor, such as an electronic registry used to categorize and criminalize unhoused people in Los Angeles (Eubanks 2018). Racism and patriarchy persist through privacy invasions experienced by poor Black mothers seeking government aid in the United States (Bridges 2017). Able-bodiedness is sustained through India’s biometrics-based Aadhaar system. While the system can provide access to state services, such as pensions, food coupons, and subsidized fuels, it marginalizes laborers with degraded fingerprints and worn bodies that cannot be biometrically registered, thereby denying them access to public services (Jacobsen and Rao 2018, Lyon 2009, Singh and Jackson 2017). Each surveillance system discussed above uses a “carrot” approach to collect information about people in exchange for certain benefits, yet the same system functions as a punitive “stick” for those at the margins.

Moreover, surveillance has been especially aimed at marginalized communities working together to challenge state violence, since such solidarity and political organizing threatens state power (Mian 2020, Saito 2002). In other words, surveillance is more than a tool of the powerful against the vulnerable. The surveillance of an activist group can indicate their growing power. For instance, in the civil rights era, the FBI conducted a surveillance program called COINTELPRO, which infiltrated organizations like the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, the Brown Berets, and the United Farm Workers.

C. Surveillance Capitalism

While the scholars discussed thus far characterize surveillance as the targeted policing of marginalized communities, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) focuses on the seemingly ubiquitous surveillance that affects everyone. Zuboff examines how tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Amazon monetize people's data and use personalized advertising to shape their choices. She refers to this commodification of personal data as "surveillance capitalism." Within this system, individuals often perceive personalized advertising as a beneficial service. Rather than being subjected to punishment (the "stick"), they are subtly disciplined through incentives (the "carrot").

Zuboff broadens our understanding of surveillance by drawing attention to processes of data gathering that have often been overlooked in traditional notions of surveillance. She highlights a new stage of capitalism, where incentives and services are provided in exchange for user data, enabling companies to influence and nudge user behavior. However, Zuboff focuses her critique on the growing surveillance power of private companies, without fully acknowledging the relationship between companies and the state. Recent research and reporting shows how governments buy data directly from private corporations, enabling them to surveil people, including their own citizens, without obtaining a warrant or following typical legal channels (Cox 2020, Wang et al. 2022).

Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism emerged in the 21st century due to technological advancements. However, other scholars have illustrated how surveillance capitalism is a long-existing order that historically has been used to extract value from racialized bodies (Amrute 2020, Jooste 2021, Mirzoeff 2021, Wang 2018). Surveillance may be more prevalent today with the adoption of big data systems (Brayne 2017), and it creates the currency of data that can be exploited (Byler 2021, McMillan 2020). However, surveillance was not introduced by new technologies (Browne 2015). By viewing surveillance as an enduring practice, our attention shifts from technological advancements to historical and sociopolitical factors. It therefore becomes essential to factor in how racism shapes the present-day surveillance systems (Browne 2015), which both discipline and punish communities of color.

While Zuboff focuses on the impact of surveillance capitalism on an assumed universal middle-class consumer, the perspectives outlined in this brief help us examine the varying impact of surveillance capitalism on different groups. For instance, the racialized nature of data commodification becomes evident as law enforcement agencies, like Immigration and Customs Enforcement, buy data from private companies to track and deport undocumented immigrants (Wang et al. 2022). While most people may experience surveillance capitalism through targeted advertising, it is essential to understand how racialized groups disproportionately face material harms (Amrute 2020).

D. Racial Surveillance Capitalism

The concept of “racial surveillance capitalism” captures the interconnectedness between race, surveillance, and capitalism (Mirzoeff 2021). This term builds from Cedric Robinson’s concept of racial capitalism, which asserts that capitalism depends on the exploitation of racialized groups to sustain itself (McMillan 2020, Robinson 2020). Following Robinson, capital can only accumulate by creating and maintaining racial hierarchies (Melamed 2015), either based on the labor or land of racialized others. As Bhattacharyya (2018) articulates, racial capitalism functions through the use of control, both by coercion (the “stick”) and the manipulation of desire (the “carrot”).

As a tool of control, surveillance has long been used for the purpose of extracting value or capital from racialized bodies (Byler 2021, Mirzoeff 2021). For instance, the Chinese have been able to extract resources from Uyghur lands through their colonization of Uyghur Muslims; their capital accumulation depends on the racial othering of Uyghur Muslims (Byler 2021). In this context, the Chinese government’s surveillance system is a powerful tool that enables this exploitation of Uyghur Muslims and perpetuates racial surveillance capitalism. However, it is important to note that racial surveillance capitalism is not always as punitive as this example (Cottom 2020). For instance, tech companies expanding into the Global South to reach new users and collect more data can also be understood as part of this phenomenon (Couldry and Mejias 2019).

Racial surveillance capitalism is not a recent development. It has persisted since the surveillance-dominated cities of Spanish Mexico in the 16th century, to the commodification of black bodies during the transatlantic slave trade, to the system of mass incarceration that persists today (Browne 2015, Mirzoeff 2021). For a long time, the surveillance of the “other” has generated profit. As Zuboff highlights, this is now extending to broader segments of the public. In other words, what was common practice for the fringes of society has now reached the majority.

E. Conclusion and Open Research Questions

Surveillance practices have been a key instrument in producing division among people (Jacobsen and Rao 2018, Melamed 2015). As Xiaowei Wang (2020) writes, “surveillance has always been crucial in making criminality throughout history, drawing a line between those on the so-called right and wrong sides of society.” Surveillance has divided people across race, class, gender, and their intersectional identities.

The word “surveillance” itself means to watch from above, from a position of power. As illuminated during our Surveillance and Cities panel discussion, many community organizers are working to resist surveillance through practices of counter-surveillance and *sousveillance*, which invert this power dynamic and watch from below (Browne 2015).

Examples of *sousveillance* include the activist system Turkopticon, created by Lilly Irani and Six Silberman, which redirects the gaze towards the employers of Amazon Mechanical Turkers to hold employers accountable (Irani and Silberman 2013). Additionally, the community group Stop LAPD Spying Coalition has carried out impactful work through their practice “Watch the Watchers,” where community members monitor, document, and expose police abuses (Stop LAPD Spying Coalition 2023). The coalition also challenges and historicizes state repression, like the FBI’s COINTELPRO surveillance

program that targeted Black and Indigenous movements. As highlighted in the panel discussion, artists such as Sadie Barnette are also confronting such anti-Black state surveillance. This work to challenge state violence is integral to broader efforts to reclaim and defend property taken through slavery and land dispossession. These practices of resistance not only help hold state officials accountable, but also make a powerful statement about the political choices and stakes surrounding surveillance.

In addition to this critical work on countering surveillance systems, we must also imagine and create alternatives. Questioning the culture of surveillance requires us to cultivate a culture of safety (Lewis et al. 2018, Wang 2020). As social justice organizer Tawana Petty illuminates, safety and security are often conflated. While surveillance systems are frequently justified as tools that improve security, they threaten the safety of black communities and other marginalized groups who are considered expendable—thereby granting security to some at the expense of others (Lewis et al. 2018). As an alternative to surveillance, many scholars advocate for a model of social and transformative justice, where we address underlying inequities and invest in education, housing, and community welfare (Benjamin 2019, Davis 2003, Vitale 2017). These essential services should be provided in a way that does not perpetuate surveillance through a “carrot” or “stick” approach, but rather cultivate practices of mutual aid and community care.

As the scholarship and resources on racialized surveillance continue to grow, we have identified key areas that need more attention. One major area is the racial dimensions of surveillance at the workplace, such as the grueling management of Amazon warehouse workers (Irani 2019). Another key area is the political claims that help sustain and expand surveillance. It is important to be alert about and scrutinize the narratives used to justify surveillance systems. As Shakeer Rahman reminds us, surveillance systems are rarely introduced with explicitly racist intentions. Nevertheless, they continue to proliferate, and many people and institutions are complicit in their growth. We must remain skeptical about discourses that blame isolated “bad apple” individuals or hyper-fixate on a specific technology or its accuracy (No Tech For Tyrants 2022). We must remember that surveillance operates systemically, and understanding its role in policing racialized communities is integral to its abolition.



Cracking Surveillance

Evani Radiya-Dixit, 2023

Acrylic and collage on canvas

While surveillance systems are often portrayed as improving security, these very systems track, police, and threaten the safety of Black and brown communities. This artwork *Cracking Surveillance* depicts resistance to surveillance through practices of community care, symbolized by flowering vines. Nurtured by the earth, sun, rain, and people, these vines crack and dismantle the cameras watching from above and create life beyond surveillance.

Our Recommendations

Based on our research and panel discussion, we call on researchers, civil society groups, and community organizers to explore these open questions:

1. **Research question:** How does surveillance uphold and shift power structures in communities with intersectional identities?

Community-specific questions: How does surveillance disproportionately impact intersectional communities in your local context, especially across race, class, and gender? How has this disproportionate impact manifested historically? How have these communities responded to the presence of surveillance systems?

2. **Research questions:** How does capitalism depend on and reinforce racialized surveillance? How do surveillance systems contribute to capital accumulation through dispossession or labor extraction?

Community-specific questions: What surveillance systems are companies selling to your local government? Who holds power in deploying surveillance systems (i.e., power mapping)? Historically, how has your local government collaborated with businesses and real estate developers to displace communities? How do places targeted for gentrification intersect with sites of surveillance? What levers can your community press to challenge surveillance systems?

3. **Research question:** How do surveillance practices enact disciplinary “carrot” or punitive “stick” models of social organization?

Community-specific questions: How do surveillance practices through a “carrot” or “stick” approach function in your neighborhood, workplace, school, and community spaces? What problems do such practices create in your community? What alternative models challenge these practices?

4. **Research question:** What political processes and discourses help sustain racial surveillance capitalism?

Community-specific questions: How are surveillance systems justified in your community? Have critiques of surveillance helped refine surveillance practices and made them more durable and, if so, how?

5. **Research question:** How do communities use art and organizing to resist surveillance, imagine alternatives, and build life beyond it?

Community-specific questions: What lessons has your community learned from its organizing efforts to resist surveillance systems? How do collaborations between your local community and national/international organizations strengthen resistance? What practices of mutual aid and care does your community envision and seek to build upon?

We hope this brief contributes to the existing resources on countering racialized surveillance and fostering communities that center safety and racial justice.

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