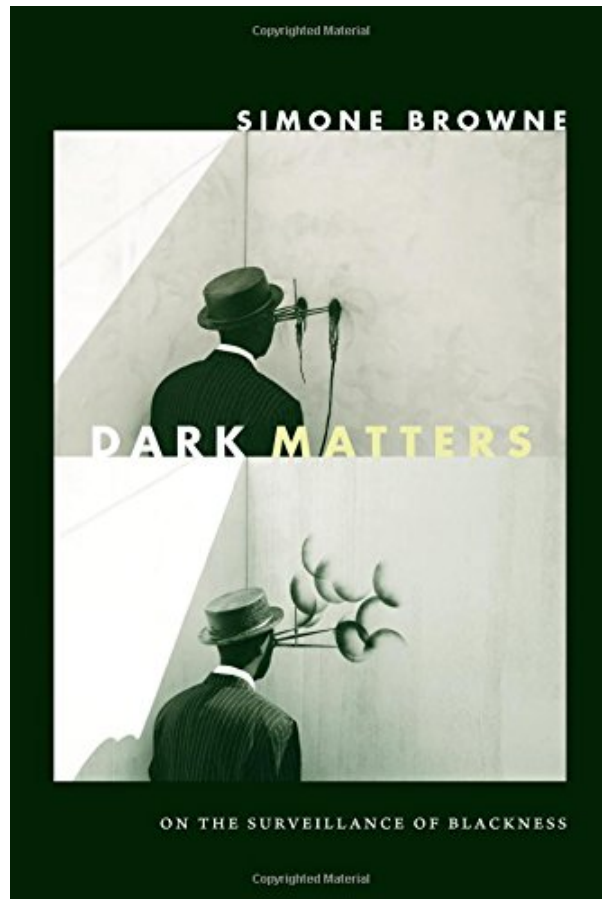


DARK MATTERS: ON THE SURVEILLANCE OF BLACKNESS BY SIMONE BROWNE

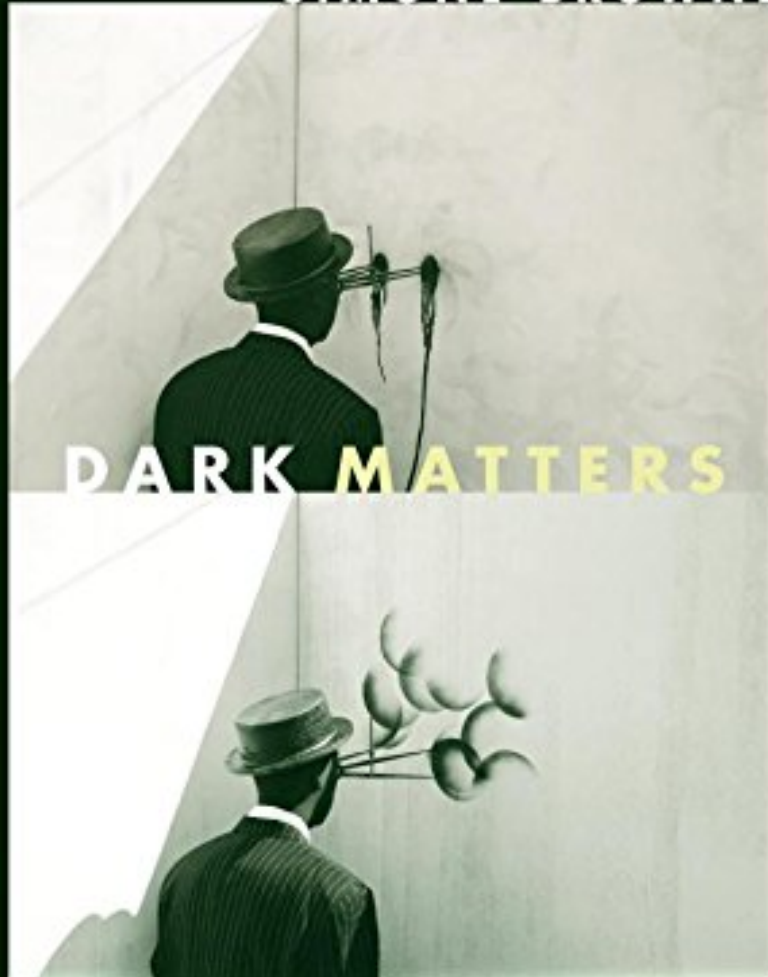


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Review

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DARK MATTERS: ON THE SURVEILLANCE OF BLACKNESS BY SIMONE BROWNE PDF

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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About the Author

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

Most helpful customer reviews

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

A Critical Intervention that Focuses on the Emergence of Modern Surveillance through Anti-Black Racism in Canada and USA

By Amazon Customer

Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* is a fascinating interdisciplinary book that provides a critical intervention into the field of surveillance studies by bringing it into conversation with a diverse set of disciplines, including Black feminist thought, critical race theory, sociology, geography, criminology, and cultural studies. Throughout *Dark Matters*, Browne advances the carefully constructed argument that contemporary surveillance practices and technologies emerge from historical and contemporary conditions of anti-black racism in the United States and Canada. Browne skillfully critiques the under-theorization of race within surveillance studies without ever suggesting an outright dismissal, rather she shows readers how such a limitation can be addressed by providing an overview of developments in American surveillance practices and procedures as informed by historical and ongoing anti-black racism similar to a genealogy. To reveal the manner in which anti-blackness has informed modern surveillance, Browne delves into what she refers to as the archives of the Atlantic Slave Trade and its Aftermath beginning with the Door of No Return, a figurative and literal door leading to ships intended to transport enslaved bodies to American and British colonies. From there, *Dark Matters* deftly moves across a number of sites and spaces over different time periods, including Brooks (1789), the plantation, the streets of New York City, eBay.com, and airport terminals and planes.

To better explain certain racialized surveillance practices, policies, and technologies, Browne introduces some very interesting theoretical concepts throughout the book that I found helpful. For example, dark sousveillance, Browne explains, is a praxis that allows readers to critically engage with surveillance technologies implemented during slavery that persist today. Racial baggage is another critical concept that bears relevance across different academic disciplines and, further, holds the potential to be used in everyday discussion. According to Browne, racial baggage refers to the burden resulting from the discrimination at the airports against certain travelers who look or act a certain way. These are just two of the many concepts I found useful. More generally speaking, I found the author's perspective and voice to be innovative, unconventional, and lively.

Perhaps one of Browne's more significant and engaging decisions was to include lengthy and in-depth

analysis of various responses to racialized surveillance. The entire book demonstrates a powerful command of hegemonic state surveillance practices, still I have to emphasize how much I appreciate her examination of resistance and response strategies. The significance, to my mind, is the recognition that while state surveillance is hegemonic, it's not totalizing or infallible –there are opportunities to subvert racist surveillance. By acknowledging opportunities to subvert or respond to these systems, Browne points to possibility for change. Responses, as Browne shows, occur in small and large gestures, in/actions, conversations, and productions. For example, on ships transporting the enslaved, the layout organized people by presumed sex. According to Brown, even in these unimaginably restrictive spaces, she points to ways queer people could take advantage of the heteronormativity of the ship plans. Elsewhere, Browne provides reveals how the enslaved could undermine legal and social constructions of race in order to escape. For example, some people used their fair skin or ability to read as escape strategies. I was absolutely tickled by Browne's creative selection of artistic responses that include an episode of South Park, a Twitter hashtag initiated by Solange Knowles, Mendi + Keith Obadike's Blackness for Sale (2001), and Hank Willis Thomas' Priceless #1 (2004). On a final note, when Browne took up a discussion of Desi Cryer and Wanda Zamen's HP Computers are Racist (2009) Youtube video, I couldn't help but think about other people mention how poorly Snapchat captures darker complexions than it does white faces.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Dark Matters from start to finish. As an Indigenous feminist studies scholar working outside the field of surveillance studies, I was surprised to find myself completely engrossed by this book and gaining insights relevant to my own research projects. More specifically, I was intrigued by Browne's discussion on the manner in which the Atlantic Slave Trade and its Afterlife contributed to the development and consolidation of Canada and the United States, two white settler societies. In addition to boasting fascinating analysis and content, I was particularly struck by the way Browne structured the overall book and chapters. I appreciated that her literature review in the introduction carefully outlined salient discussions, themes, arguments, and insights of surveillance studies in conversation with scholars focused on Blackness and critical race. Each chapter follows a fairly consistent format that begins with historical context and analysis, contemporary surveillance practices, and responses/resistances to anti-black surveillance policies and practices. Overall, I believe Simone Browne's Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness provides a significant contribution to surveillance studies among many other fields! Read it!

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Exposing Dark Matter

By V. M. Ricks

This book provides new eyes to a subject that is rarely discussed. Well, it is most often discussed as we talk about the internet and what happens to private data from our lives and business. However, as with most things in the United States, there is a dark side most often suspiciously addressed to the dark people in our midst. Yes, I'm talking about history, the beginning of the country and slavery. In the United States, the Africans were always watched: Are the blacks doing what they are suppose to be doing? Are the blacks where they are suppose to be? To know all this requires deputizing everybody, most often whites, but also the non-white Africans and native Americans, in the service of this agenda. I learned a lot. From lantern laws to passports, so very much in our everyday life goes back to the need to know where the Blacks are and what they are doing. Now that all are enslaved via credit, the surveillance state has evolved and intensified so gradually -- like a simmering pot that boils. Thank you for giving us new insights into the "how" and the "why" of our present surveillance state. Through the Lens of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A Disruption, Analysis, Conversation, and Invitation

By Amazon Customer

Simone Browne's "Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness", is a beautifully written disruption, analysis, conversation, and invitation. Browne carefully moves through archive of the transatlantic slave

trade and its afterlife to provide a critical and necessary intervention into surveillance studies.

I came to this book with little background on surveillance studies, but Browne generously provided a clear and engaging overview of the major principles and scholars of this study. In this book, Browne identifies a gap that exists in the discipline: dark matters. Dark matters is about understanding how race has historically, and continuously, structured surveillance practices. Browne approaches this work through a racialized and critical lens, arguing that when Blackness enters the framework of surveillance, it troubles how this discipline has been, and continues to be, theorized. As she describes it, “Drawing a black line”, Browne uses Black feminist scholarship to re-interpret and complicate surveillance studies. Moreover, Browne considers dark sousveillance as the ways that surveillance is resisted, challenged, and responded to. Browne’s focus on sousveillance sheds light on how surveillance practices are subverted and refused. From escaping enslavement to contemporary art pieces, Black people continue to talk back to a surveillance state. To me, this is what Black Twitter aptly calls a “clapback”.

What I found especially refreshing about this book was how Browne clearly, but thoughtfully, approached concepts. This is a book for the academic and non-academic alike. She works with highly theoretical concepts and speaks to academic work, but situates it in historical references, contemporary examples, stories, and anecdotes. Current examples of how Black bodies exist under state-sanctioned surveillance are historicized and contextualized. Browne’s use of clear language is wonderfully accessible, which can be hard to find in academic work. Additionally, the use of tweets, media, literature, and art allows this piece to be relatable. As a Black woman, I saw myself and my experiences reflected in the text. Simultaneously, my understanding of surveillance as a mechanism of social and political control grew. Each chapter explores surveillance through different spaces and time. From the internet to airports, from the Book of Negroes to current census data collection, Browne shows how surveillance is enacted differently on different bodies. For example, the specificity of how Black women are subjected to hyper-surveillance.

“Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness” provides new ways to understand and engage with surveillance studies. Browne approaches rich content with care, disseminating and communicating it so that it is accessible to a wide range of audiences. I recommend this book for people interested in surveillance, the transatlantic slave trade and its afterlife, black epistemologies, and stories of disruption and resistance. As I mentioned in my opening line, this book is a disruption, analysis, conversation, and invitation. Brown disrupts surveillance studies, bringing Blackness into the framework. She analyzes archive to draw out how surveillance practices can be understood in slavery and its afterlife. She brings this analysis into conversation with current racialized surveillance techniques. All the while, she invites us to consider methods of interruption, of responding, of dark sousveillance – of clapping back.

And my invitation to you would be to read this worthwhile book. Enjoy!

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