



The arresting gaze: Artistic disruptions of antiblack surveillance

Torin Monahan

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Abstract

This article analyzes a range of art and performance pieces that unearth and problematize the racist cultural underpinnings of surveillance. Drawing upon recent black studies scholarship, I probe the ways that contemporary creative works disrupt dominant signifying regimes that would position racialized surveillance/violence couplings as historical and exceptional rather than as foundational and routine. I argue that such aesthetic disruptions achieve creative vitality by holding in tension exclusionary regimes of white liberal personhood, on one hand, and articulations of hope that depart from those regimes, on the other. Whereas the gaze of surveillance seeks to silence and arrest subjects, creative expression can undermine authorized forms of visibility by focusing on survival and community that persist in spite of it.

Keywords

art, disruption, police violence, race, surveillance, visibility

Surveillance depends upon looking, whether literally or figuratively. Through various forms of measuring, calculating, and sizing up, surveillance strives to assert dominance over a field and the bodies within it (Gandy Jr, 2009; Lyon, 2001; Mirzoeff, 2011). It is about fixing subjects in place and rendering them compliant to the dictates or whims of others, regardless of the legitimacy of those assuming positions of dominance (Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015). Through institutionalization, surveillance evacuates possibilities for contesting the terms of assessment because those terms bracket context and protocol in

Corresponding author:

Torin Monahan, Department of Communication, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, CB# 3285, 115 Bingham Hall, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3285, USA.
Email: torin.monahan@unc.edu

advance, the ground upon which one could gain leverage for change (Andrejevic, 2014; Magnet, 2011). In this respect, surveillance is a scientific, patriarchal practice that generates *unmarked* knowledge and disowns its particularistic investments in the regimes it produces (Monahan, 2009).

Surveillance-based exercises of visual power are never entirely stable or disembodied, however. Indeed, the threat of ‘eyeballing’ the person in a position of assumed authority – and the predictable violent reactions to such insubordination – illustrates the ultimate fragility and interpersonal intimacy of these control dynamics (Wall and Linnemann, 2014). Insubordination, in this sense, directly undermines racial, class, gender, or other hierarchies that glue repressive systems in place; it is literally rejecting one’s assigned status as subordinate to the other, which is why such challenges unleash some of the worst retaliatory abuse. The gaze of surveillance, especially in intimate, person-to-person encounters, seeks to arrest subjects in their places, freezing both them and the status quo.

Given this, it is worth exploring how aesthetic disruptions to these regimes of looking operate and asking what they say about contemporary cultural politics. While surveillance may have discrete manifestations in classification systems or visualization technologies, awareness of these instantiations may in fact distract one from recognizing the deeper discriminatory roots of such systems, as well as the continual physical and psychic damage perpetrated by them. I suggest that two viewing logics work in concert to enforce racial hierarchies in contemporary Western societies. The first is that of *pornotroping*, which Alexander Weheliye (2014), drawing upon Hortense Spillers (1987), describes as ‘the enactment of black suffering for a shocked and titillated audience’ (Weheliye, 2014: 90). Through the consumption of images of racial violence, such as depictions of police brutality against nonwhites, viewers are interpellated and positioned within visual scenes such that they may recognize their respective roles as nonwhite, for whom police threats on their lives may be conceivable, or as white, for whom such experiences would be unlikely and exceptional. Pornotroping normalizes racial hierarchies through tacit reference to a hidden social register, within which one can imagine his or her assigned place. The second viewing logic is that of surveillance, which both constitutes and enforces racial hierarchies through its application. In that contemporary surveillance apparatuses impose differential forms of visibility and control based upon one’s presumed value or threat, they segment populations and seek to hold them in their prescribed places. In conjunction, the normalizing of racial hierarchies (via pornotroping) and the policing of racial hierarchies (via surveillance) solidify cultural and social dimensions of racism. Surveillance, therefore, is both a symptom of racist social orders and a mechanism by which they reproduce themselves.

Cultural studies provides a contextual orientation to power relations that affords critical inquiry into surveillance, racial violence, and art. In particular, scholars such as Paul Gilroy have underscored the centrality of racial oppression and exclusion in the formation of national cultural histories, where notions of universal aesthetic taste have depended – from their inception – on the presumed inferiority of black creative expression and aesthetic capabilities (Gilroy, 1990). In the process, not only has the work of black artists been disparaged, but assumptions about natural racial hierarchies have been solidified through the decisions of cultural institutions and judgements of art critics.

From this vantage point, Gilroy encourages scholars to attend not to bounded national contexts but instead to shared communicative networks that expand across the African diaspora, even as differential experiences of trauma remain (Gilroy, 1988, 1993). In a complementary vein, Stuart Hall (2006: 23) also insists on the importance of situating black diaspora visual arts in their historical and political contexts such that one can trace ‘chains of causation and conditions of existence’, and thereby avoid simplistic treatments of such work as homogeneous or apart from their objects of critique. Engaged in this way, critical readings of art can discern, and assess, the capacity of creative works to open up semiotic fields and reveal latent indeterminacies that have been camouflaged by ideology. As Kobena Mercer (2015: 82) relates, in his discussion of Hall’s work, ‘art is a kind of counter-cut that punctures openings into the smooth surfaces of hegemonic formations that want to close up or suture the signifying chain so that the world appears fixed and finalized’.

This article builds upon these cultural studies insights to analyze contemporary artistic treatments of racialized surveillance and violence. In a moment marked by growing awareness of police violence against minoritized groups, artworks that challenge such relations hold potential for disrupting signifying chains and fabricating new cultural codes, new ways of orienting bodies to each other and the state. I engage with a selection of recent visual artworks and one performance piece to analyze the ways that such works grapple with the destructive politics of visibility regimes. These pieces were chosen for their explicit interrogation of the relationship of black and brown bodies to the state or to a white supremacist society more broadly. Predominantly, I rely on close interpretive readings of the works, but recognizing their inseparability from the contexts of their production and circulation, I selectively supplement these readings with details about the artists’ motivations or the works’ reception. While the creative works span roughly a ten-year period (2008–17) and were materialized in different settings, they were chosen for their complementarities, for how they each perform disruption by stressing continuities in experiences of racial violence across space and time.

Raising up

I begin with Hank Willis Thomas’s 2013 sculpture *Raise Up*, which was displayed at the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2014 as part of a solo exhibition titled ‘History Doesn’t Laugh’. This sculpture presents ten bronze-cast, dark-skinned men facing away from the viewer with their arms extended over their heads (see Figure 1). Only their heads, arms, and hands are visible, as the remainder of their bodies is swallowed in a bright white shelf, which serves as the base for this artwork. The figures are grouped together and adopt similar poses of accessibility to spectators, yet they betray unique qualities: they are different heights, some wear bracelets, some turn their hands slightly sidewise, some of their bald heads are bisected by the white shelf while others extend further up, revealing their necks or muscular shoulders. This is a stark piece, devoid of context and much color variation, rendering a sterile tableau where the reflection of sculptured body parts on the glossy white mantle offers the only nuance of shading within the piece’s white-brown extremes.



Figure 1. Hank Willis Thomas, *Raise Up* (2013).

Source: © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Although *Raise Up* was created for a South African exhibit and takes its inspiration from an Apartheid-era photograph of naked black miners presenting themselves for invasive search (Ober, 2014), it clearly resonates with the visual economies of surveillance of and violence against black and brown bodies in the US context. As Andrew Culp (2016: 8) observes of the piece, ‘After the Michael Brown shooting of 2014, it would certainly be easy to imagine it paying homage to the activist [refrain] “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot”!’ Certainly, some of Thomas’s other works, such as the *Branded* series, which depicted a Nike logo branded on the side of a black model’s head, offer direct critique of the legacies and the wake of slavery in the US context, including various forms of ownership and control – even through market-based ‘self-branding’ – that mark men of color today (see Browne, 2015). The title of the work, *Raise Up*, signifies, therefore, the ever-present even if unspoken police command, an injunction for voluntary, anticipatory submission with the full threat of death for any perceived lack of compliance. It is this line of interpretation that has led scholars like Culp (2016: 8) to call the sculpture an ‘embodiment of black social death’. However, the title may also suggest a call for action: to lift oneself, others, or society up from the manacles of racist oppression, to achieve a higher plane. Given the work’s historical referent of the overthrown Apartheid regime in South Africa, *Raise Up* simultaneously points to the potential of and need for rebellion and insurgency (Ober, 2014).

Whereas the original photograph that informed *Raise Up* presented men in a state of complete nakedness, as dehumanized and docile objects for pornotropic consumption and manipulation by the presumably white foremen, the sculpture consciously eschews such portrayals. It thus follows in the path of Saidiya Hartman (1997), who, in her book *Scenes of Subjection*, notably refused to reproduce yet another gratuitous description of the grotesque whipping of Aunt Hester – the passage that launches Frederick Douglass’s autobiography – thereby allowing Hartman to break the cycle of normalizing

representations of black suffering (see also Weheliye, 2014: 91). In the case of Thomas's artwork, the submerging of the figures in a sea of white also covers their naked bodies, preventing pornotropic consumption of their anatomies while encouraging readings that extend beyond those of mere submission.

The overwhelming, almost blinding whiteness of the background for this work calls out for additional interpretation. On one hand, the oversaturation of whiteness may signify the defining, containing, and absorbing properties of white supremacy, which serve as the only basis for the emergence of liberal personhood. From this perspective, the reflection of heads and torsos on the white shelf is one where recognition is achieved only through distorted representations on the white body politic, always in relation to the foundational or dominant other. The absence of white bodies in this relational schema harmonizes well with the racialized status quo that views whiteness as transparent, normal, and unthreatening, not in need of definition, radically unlike nonwhites who seemingly demand enfleshment and visibility (Hall, 2015). This is a core component of racialization, which Weheliye (2014: 3) explains as operating 'not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans'. Thus, whereas full (white) humans may have presumed presence and status, nonwhite others struggle with achieving such absorption into the fictional, amorphous white norm, while also seeking to escape from those symbolic constraints.

On the other hand, the hidden bodies in the *Raise Up* sculpture also speak to the hidden labor and violence of slavery and oppression upon which the modern liberal order was built. 'The slave is the foundation of the national order,' Hartman observes, but 'the slave [simultaneously] occupies the position of the unthought' (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003: 184–5; quoted in Danylevich, 2016). The occluded bodies in the sculpture mimic the erasure of slavery and settler colonialism from the history of nation states like the US. These presumed present but undetectable bodies, like the subjugated bodies to which they refer, are relegated to the realm of the unthought and unacknowledged. As such, modern states are riven with contradictions at their core: much-heralded universalism is pitted against its repudiation in the form of slavery and racialized violence – the former made possible by the latter, and the latter done in the service of the former. At the same time, hints of liberation draw upon that fractured but whitewashed foundation as elements of what Christina Sharpe (2016) might call 'wake work': representational practices that concentrate not on assimilation or resolution but instead on 'inhabiting *and* rupturing this [white liberal] episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives' (2016: 18). The arms and heads lifting up out of the sculpture create an outside to that white static totality, suggesting emergence, continuance, and solidarity in spite of severe conditions and arresting gazes.

Facing police violence

Other artists problematize the relationship between surveillant vision and police violence more directly. For instance, Dread Scott's powerful installation *Stop* takes as its content the social fact of minority men being stopped routinely by police for no reason other than their physical appearances or neighborhoods – or because of perceived mismatches



Figure 2. Dread Scott, *Stop* (2012).

Source: Dread Scott.

between racial minorities and the spaces they inhabit, as witnessed with the disturbing preponderance of irrationally fearful white people calling the police when minorities rent Airbnb properties, tour college campuses, use public parks, and so on (Chappell, 2018; Criss and Vera, 2018; Herreria, 2018). This video installation appeared at the Rush Arts Gallery in New York in 2012 as part of Scott's larger collaborative project, 'Postcode Criminals', which revealed similarities in the surveillance and profiling of minoritized individuals in the US and UK.¹

Scott's installation juxtaposes two video walls facing each other, with life-sized videos of three young, dark-skinned men from Brooklyn on one wall and three from Liverpool on the other (see Figure 2). A wide space opens between the two video walls, allowing viewers to walk between them and be confronted, and surrounded, by the stares and statements of the men. The hairstyles and clothing of the men, while varied, harmonize well overall with the semiotic expectations for 'urban' youth: dreadlocks, baseball caps, hoodies, shiny parkas, basketball sneakers, baggy clothes. Over the course of the 7:16 minute video, the men stand confidently, cross their arms or put their thumbs in their jeans' pockets, and mostly gaze directly at the camera as if asserting the right to look back at those who might stereotype them. There are long pauses of potentially uncomfortable silence as the men shift slightly but continue to look straight into the lens, into the eyes of viewers. Then, at intervals, the silences are punctuated by the men speaking in measured tones, saying how many times they have been stopped by the police: 'I've been stopped sixty or more times', 'I've been stopped by the cops a hundred-and-fifty times, probably a little bit more', 'I've been stopped and searched more than a hundred times', 'I've been stopped about twenty times', 'Get stopped by the cops every

day, but a hundred-and-fifty's – that about sums it up', 'I've been stopped seventy times', 'I've been stopped by the police thirty times or more'.

Stop achieves much of its impact from its clever audio pacing. Initially there are pauses of 18 seconds or more between the men's voices, but the temporal gaps gradually close so that eventually the men speak over each other. The piece audibly performs an experience of the compounding repetition of being stopped, until it culminates in a kind of background noise echoing the lived hum, for the men, of constant scrutiny and judgement by police and others. Then, near the end of the video, gaps begin to form in the enunciations, mirroring lived experiences of unwanted police attention, not subsiding so much as becoming normalized, expected, routine, and comprehensible. In these ways, *Stop* conveys a slice of the everyday reality for minority men in many Western cities across the world, but it cannot capture the indignity and violence of such encounters or the affective burden of these constant threats. Nonetheless, the piece establishes a relationship between viewers and these men, or many other men like them, exposing the viewer to the strong gazes of others, their matter-of-fact sharing of everyday subjection, and silences within which viewers might critically assess themselves when they face the other.²

By collaborating with young men in Brooklyn and Liverpool, as well as with other artists as part of the Postcode Criminals project, Scott traces the intentional replication of zero-tolerance policing strategies and their discriminatory effects across different national and cultural settings. Just as companies in the global security industry contract with cities to implement militarized security infrastructures and policies as 'best practices' for crime control, mega-events, or urban renewal (Boyle and Haggerty, 2009), so too do police agencies share tactics and technologies globally. One result of such sharing of zero-tolerance policing strategies in the 1990s, as Scott (2012) explains, is 'that youth in Liverpool and in New York were further criminalized and have been drawn into an unusual symmetry by police and governmental forces'. As a global phenomenon, targeted, discriminatory police surveillance spreads, reproducing as 'normal' conditions of black suffering such that these conditions resist recognition as problematic. In Weheliye's (2014: 11) words, 'Because black suffering figures in the domain of the mundane, it refuses the idiom of exception.' *Stop* underscores the embodied experience of living in the aftermath of slavery – being exposed to and normalizing racialized state violence. What *Stop* performs, then, is a tracing of these lines between racist policing practices across territories, semiotic and pornotropic constructions of black male threat, and the troubling normality of constant, expected surveillance that fuels the prison industry and threatens premature death. From the boundaries of this sketch, the voices of the men issue forth, asserting their presence and humanity.

Another of Scott's works, *Blue Wall of Violence*, is an installation designed to expose the racially corrupted perspectives of police who may be predisposed to view all black bodies as – always already – armed and dangerous (see Figure 3). The piece, exhibited at Brooklyn's Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in 2008, contains a number of interrelated elements. There are six police target-practice posters, the kind displaying silhouetted black bodies with concentric white ellipses indicating the value of the shot. From each poster emerges a plastic molding of an extended black arm with a supposedly threatening object held in each hand (e.g. a candy bar, a wallet, a squeegee).



Figure 3: Dread Scott, *Blue Wall of Violence* (1999).

Source: Dread Scott.

These held objects correspond to actual items held by unarmed individuals when shot by police who ostensibly misidentified the items as guns or other dangerous weapons. Above each poster is a black sign displaying in bold white letters the date of the actual shooting by police. Next, an austere wooden coffin rests on a table directly in front of the posters, a neat blood-red tablecloth spilling downward beneath it. Finally, three police batons, poised on mechanized stands directly in front of the coffin, strike it loudly every 10 seconds, sending discordant echoes throughout the room.

While some of the symbolism of this work is straightforward, such as the red tablecloth conveying the blood of the victims or the black targets representing black bodies, the implications are more nuanced. *Blue Wall of Violence* can be seen as an unflinching critique of racialized state violence: the artwork draws attention to the fusion of police surveillance and threat assessments with sedimented racist cultural beliefs, leading to systematic and disproportionate deadly violence against black people (Lowery, 2016). This is a commentary on the institutionalized ‘professional vision’ of police, which is inculcated through training for use of force such that police are primed to see and respond to threats and to ignore (and later erase) uncertainty (Goodwin, 1994). Determinations of threat are obviously infused with racial bias, but in ways that can be masked by the supposed objective nature of discrete training scenarios for police use of force, such that even police may be ignorant of the existence of such bias (Goodwin, 1994; Nix et al., 2017). Then again, as has been empirically documented, police subscribe to a ‘blue wall of silence’ (in reference to the color of their uniforms) that keeps them from reporting colleagues’ infractions and even encourages them to assist one another in covering up instances of abuse (Chin and Wells, 1997; Huq and McAdams, 2016). Scott’s installation

alludes directly to this self-protective police culture in calling his work *Blue Wall of Violence*; in so doing, he reroutes the signifying chain, stripping any sense of honor or admirable solidarity from the ‘wall of silence’ and instead underscoring the ignoble acts festering within. He calls out institutionalized couplings of surveillance and violence, but, as with Thomas’s sculpture, refuses to reproduce images of victims’ dead bodies for pornotropic consumption; by foregrounding shooting-target posters instead, the emphasis is placed on the racist interpretive frames of police.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the disruption caused by this piece extended beyond the noisy baton hits in a single room of Brooklyn’s Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts. It was decried in the media as a ‘cop-bashing art exhibit’ (Sederstrom, 2008), and the police union quickly called for city defunding of the museum, which did not occur (Muessig, 2008).³ Mirroring the resignifying moves of the supposedly offensive piece, Scott responded by attempting to shift the terms of the debate: ‘These works are against police brutality and murder. . . . What should be controversial is these killings, not this artwork’ (Muessig, 2008). Effective artistic interventions, according to performance studies scholar James Harding (2018), should not remain relegated to safe, sanitized spaces but instead ramify out into the world, challenge established orders, and, when necessary, do damage. If blowback alone is any measure, *Blue Wall of Violence* succeeds on these fronts.

What remains

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman writes of the vital role played by tenuous constructions of community within slave plantation cultures and beyond. Through shared dance, song, and stories, in fleeting spaces apart from the toil and terror of slave work, an essential semblance of community could be achieved. Hartman (1997: 60) writes:

The pleasure associated with surreptitious gatherings was due, in part, to the sense of empowerment derived from collective action and the precariousness and fragility of ‘community’ These practices were important because they were vehicles for creating and experiencing supportive, enjoyable, and nurturing connections. They were enactments of community, not expressions of an a priori unity.

While Hartman is clear that one should not romanticize such notions of community, which were marked also by antagonism and disparity, they direct attention to the significance and resilience of black expressive cultural forms, like dance, which can channel shared experience under the harshest conditions. In this respect, these enactments of community are forms of wake work that assert meaning and insist on survival within dehumanizing structures but apart from their logics.

The contemporary dance piece *What Remains* operates in this idiom, seeking to ground current modalities of antiblack surveillance within a historical context of slavery that carries forward and continues to inflect the present. Created by director and choreographer Will Rawls, poet Claudia Rankine, and visual designer John Lucas – and staged in multiple US venues from 2018 to 2019 – *What Remains* interrogates the power and influence of ‘the void’, a radically empty space of nonexistence that positions black life

as invalid yet also offers some cover for survival and meaning making.⁴ Rawls eloquently explains: ‘The inspiration for this project is the rather dark desire to contour the space of erasure that is foisted upon people of color across cultural, legislative, and social fields in the U.S.. . . The void is a space of potential energy, one that is both deathly but also charged with liveness and willpower’ (Gallagher-Ross, 2017).

Existing within ‘the already dead space’ of the void, as Rankine (Burke, 2017) describes it, is itself a major accomplishment for people of color in a white supremacist society. Surveillance inflects this process as nonwhite bodies are continuously placed under conditions of hostile scrutiny and erasure, such that internalized self-surveillance and -correction become necessary tools for survival. As Rankine relates:

That’s one thing about being black in America . . . You have to curtail your movements, to live in such a way that what the white gaze projects upon blackness will not end your life. So you’re always thinking, can I walk at night? Can I hold Skittles in my hand? Can I have my cellphone out? If it glitters, will somebody think it’s a gun? At what point can I just be? (in Burke, 2017)

From this view, whiteness serves as a pervasive background condition, a normative force field that modulates the lives and potentialities, the possibilities and impossibilities, of all bodies within its reach. Dance and other forms of creative expression can symbolize and enact lines of flight from such overdetermined conditions. As Rawls conveys, dance ‘really is the body insisting on its own presence, over and over and over, from second to second, minute to minute’ (Burke, 2017).

‘What Remains’ traces an arc from the capture and enslavement of African people, to the devastation of the Middle Passage, to escapes and attainments of freedom, to persistent devaluations of black life in the present. Throughout this hour-long performance, four black dancers, three women and one man, dance, vocalize, and recite on the floor level of a small performance space mere feet from a mostly white audience (Rawls, 2017). Much of the piece occurs in darkened or shaded spaces, as the lighting establishes sharp monochromatic contrasts with only rare splashes of filtered dark blue or warm golden spotlights. An ambient droning sound provides an aural undercurrent throughout most of the performance, suggesting the muffled underwater sounds of the slave vessel that persist and carry forward, even as drum beats and synthesizer instrumentation add other sonic layers later in the piece. At intervals, a disembodied female voice intones selected lines from Claudia Rankine’s poetry:

Some years there exists a wanting to escape – / you, floating above your certain ache – / still the ache coexists. / Call that the immanent you – / You are you even before you / grow into understanding you / are not anyone, worthless, / not worth you. / Even as your own weight insists / you are here, fighting off / the weight of nonexistence. (Rankine, 2014)

The performance begins with four figures draped in black robes, standing with their backs to a grey cinderblock wall. They stand straight, facing the audience, as if on an auction block presenting themselves for scrutiny but not without a hint of defiance as they stare directly ahead. Almost imperceptibly at first, the dancers walk forward with highly controlled, slow-motion steps. Their movement has the effect of gradually transforming a seemingly two-dimensional space into three dimensions, their presence and



Figure 4. Will Rawls, Claudia Rankine, and John Lucas, *What Remains* (2018).
 Source: Photograph by Rachel Papo for The New York Times.

embodiment asserted through corporeal expression as they close the gap between performers and audience. Next, as if in recognition of their loss, the dancers repeatedly sing the word ‘you’ and other minimalist vocalizations, creating chant-like harmonies that eventually crescendo into louder, overlapping tones interspersed with moans and cries. They throw their arms backward, perhaps pointing to their place of origin, some of their faces contorted in anguish as the theater lights dramatically extinguish, plunging the dancers and audience into profoundly shadowed darkness. In this darkened space, one can barely detect the dancers’ shifting movements in front of a large projection of a silhouetted human head and torso. As deep undersea-hued blue lights fade in along with low organ-like tones, the three female figures move together across the stage, speeding up and slowing down, as they march and lunge with arms swaying back and forth (see Figure 4). The male figure has been lost along the way.

As the piece develops, the remaining female dancers occasionally touch each other tentatively as they proceed: here holding a hand, there placing a supportive arm around another’s shoulder. There are rare moments where their paths bring them into a warmer, golden-filtered spotlight – spaces of hope or perhaps happiness during their difficult journey. Before one can easily recognize it as such, the movement transforms into a collective, individuals that maintain their distinctness while moving as one. Together they run, duck, twist, and hide. They are separated and fall but not completely; their arms and outstretched legs support them just barely off the ground (see Figure 5). They violently bob and lurch into standing positions, carry each other, and huddle together before slowly moving apart. A voice speaks, ‘I thought I was dead.’ After this escape, the dancers shed



Figure 5. Will Rawls, Claudia Rankine, and John Lucas, *What Remains* (2018).
Source: Photograph by Rachel Papo for The New York Times.

their robes, at which point the male figure finally returns, emerging from the left, removing his own robes, and walking briefly into the light before moving on.

Next, the four dancers stand in a spotlight facing each other. Tentatively and cautiously, as if both embarrassed and worried, they sing and laugh before belting out in harmony, ‘I don’t want nobody fucking with me in these streets . . . Ain’t nobody got time for that shit.’ As the performance winds down, traces of the contemporary enter, with disco balls and drum loops, but the spoken words circle back to fraught articulations of devalued life and of the struggle of pushing back on those truisms: ‘In so many words, I’m already dead’, ‘I still count, she did say’, ‘“If anything were to happen to me, I could live with that”’. . . I think he means he could live with his own death, and I want to tell him that he doesn’t have to, you know? Thou art nothing’, ‘Our curious street fills with gaps created by the indirectness of experience. Thou art nothing.’ Eventually, the male figure departs while the three others dance again, flowing more freely than before. One by one they exit until only one remains, holding a pose with a palm facing the back wall, the past from whence they started. The remaining dancer turns off the digital soundtrack, picks up a disco ball, and leaves, drawing uncomfortable, tentative claps from the audience that is not certain whether the performance is over.

What does this complex, multilayered performance tell us about slavery’s wake and what remains? Certainly, a sense of longing and loss remains. Tense, uncertain, and difficultly realized existence remains. Compromise remains, perhaps necessarily so, as conveyed by articulations of being able to live with one’s own (social) death. Survival, song, dance, and poetry emerge from the darkness and push forward. Community is constituted and disbanded, hopefully to be reanimated again. As the performance cannot be divorced from its relationship with an audience, as it is defined by that relationship, a constitutive relationship with white society remains, along with all that that connotes: that one is subject to the visibility, judgement, authority, and violence implicit in such relations. Therefore, links between surveillance and pornotrope remain, leading to inter-

nalized discipline and – following from Frantz Fanon (1952) – the fabrication of corrosive split identities as a precondition for survival.

Opacity does dangerous work in such a context. It hides the dancers and their referents, offering a space for survival but also a cover for atrocity. It discomfits the shifting audience, violating expectations for compliant legibility and thereby contesting the racial order, which is a practice that has brought swift, retaliatory negation in non-theater settings (e.g. from slavers, lynch mobs, police, vigilantes). At the same time, following the insights of Édouard Glissant (1997), the contouring and shading of the opaque deconstructs objective binaries, such as those between dark and light or survival and death. It productively obfuscates not only the performance but also linear temporalities that would position the past as remote, and racial semiotic codes that would position darkness as a site of nonexistence. In this reading, opacity has the capacity to support a recognition of the persistent presence of slavery's wake while also interrupting pornotropic voyeurism of racialized violence. Crucially, while dance within and out of the shadows asserts being through movement, the creative potential rests not with opacity itself but instead with the collective coming together that occurs within it. Thus, whereas the transient nature of live performances may afford political results to the extent that viewers are decentered and forfeit control over the conditions of representation (Phelan, 1993), performances such as dance may also make visible, even if fleetingly, the constitutive elements of social lives in ways that may 'leave a trace' and effect cultural change (Taylor, 2003: 143).

Conclusion

Dehumanizing violence lies at the heart of modern liberalism and its projects. Rather than seeing slavery and settler colonialism as exceptions along the road to universal freedom, fabricated racial hierarchies have undergirded modern liberalism, creating so-called uncivilized others against which white liberal subjects could be formed and assert their rights. This symbolic opposition between civilized and uncivilized, human and less-than-human, was deployed in the 18th and 19th centuries to justify the expropriation of labor and resources in the name of progress. As Lisa Lowe (2015: 6) explains:

the uses of universalizing concepts of reason, civilization, and freedom effect colonial divisions of humanity, affirming liberty for modern man while subordinating the variously colonized and dispossessed peoples whose material labor and resources were the conditions of possibility for that liberty.

In the contemporary context, the ideal of a rights-bearing subject is encoded with residual traces of these originary exclusions, which normalize unequal treatment even, and perhaps especially, in encounters with the state and its agents (Benjamin, 2019).

Whereas hopes for transformation, for the establishment of more equitable and just sociopolitical configurations, often congeal within tropes of resistance, this may be a false start. Resistance often presupposes, and appeals to, a legal and ethical order to which the abject may petition for entry. But if such an order is founded upon violent exclusions, whether acknowledged or disavowed, then such entreaties may unwittingly

shore up those (racist, patriarchal, capitalist) ideological edifices by renewing their authority to arbitrate claims of worthiness or belonging. At the same time, as Spillers (1987) relates, ostensibly liberated groups cannot escape their symbolic and material connections to conditions of slavery:

Before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh’, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. . . . Even though the captive flesh/body has been ‘liberated’ . . . dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation . . . (1987: 67–8)

The distinction between body and flesh introduces a conceptual challenge and a way of thinking differently about individuals’ relationship to ‘dominant symbolic activity’, as encoded in racist discourses, legal designations, or state institutions. The flesh precedes and exceeds the body; violences may be perpetrated on the flesh, such that the imprint of capture, maiming, and containment might transfer generationally (Spillers, 1987: 67), but it is apart from ‘the body’ understood as a discursively constructed, ideologically embedded subject. Instead of privileging acts of resistance, the artworks I analyzed here show that there may be more analytic potency in attending to accomplishments of freedom within legal and ethical orders that would deny the body and reduce one to flesh.

While Spillers deploys the concept of the flesh to trace the intersecting, iterating ramifications of slavery and patriarchy, Weheliye builds upon this theorization to claim moments of possibility and hope from the starting point of the flesh precisely *because* it operates outside the registers of ‘the body’ and liberal personhood. Weheliye (2014: 43–4) argues:

the flesh is not an abject zone of exclusion that culminates in death but an alternate instantiation of humanity that does not rest on the mirage of western Man as the mirror image of human life as such. . . . the flesh resists the legal idiom of personhood as property . . . [it is] simultaneously a tool of dehumanization and a relational vestibule to alternative ways of being . . .

Weheliye seeks to notice and credit as being important, even vital, the ways humanity asserts itself under the most degrading and dehumanizing conditions (e.g. the slave ship, the plantation, the prison, the concentration camp). He explains:

The particular assemblage of humanity under purview here . . . in contrast to bare life, insists on the importance of minuscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life. (Weheliye, 2014: 12)

As with Sharpe’s (2016) work, there is a focus on what survives terror and violence, what is not eradicated under the weight of oppression. Hope rests not on the project or possibility of full integration into regimes of liberal personhood but instead on elements of humanity that emerge from outside those regimes.

In the context of surveillance in particular, the process of securing humanity within conditions of violent abjection may hinge on disrupting the signifying regimes upon

which surveillance relies (Monahan, 2017, 2018). Simone Browne (2015: 21) describes such creative disruptions as forms of *dark sousveillance*: ‘tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery’. Such tactics might include forging slave passes, passing as white, sharing information about slave catchers (or the police or white nationalists in today’s milieu), or otherwise circumventing or appropriating existing systems of antiblack surveillance. Because the history of surveillance is inextricably bound up with the history of racism and slavery, as Browne (2015) convincingly illustrates, antiblack racism saturates and is reproduced by surveillance apparatuses. Creative disruption, through art or other means, offers a way of documenting legacies of racism that rupture the present, deconstructing the (techno)scientific basis for racist practices, and nourishing the resilient, generous humanity that points toward a different world.

Each of the art and performance pieces reviewed in this article stages forms of creative disruption. They do this by troubling dominant signifying regimes that would position racialized surveillance/violence couplings as historical and exceptional rather than as foundational and routine. Thus, Thomas’s *Raise Up* sculpture draws parallels between the violent subjectification of nonwhite bodies in apartheid-era South Africa and Western contexts today. By lodging that symbolic connection within a framework of oversaturated whiteness while suggesting (the need for) revolutionary acts of departure, Thomas underscores the lingering co-dependence of liberation efforts and persistent regimes of white supremacy. Scott’s installations *Stop* and *Blue Wall of Violence* similarly trace patterns in the dehumanizing experiences and deadly effects of police surveillance and assault on people of color across national contexts. That Scott’s works, based on empirical ‘facts’, have generated such public criticism reveals both the dominance and fragility of narratives of police virtuousness. Finally, Rawls, Rankine and Lucas’s dance performance *What Remains* expresses in a grand narrative form the obstinate reproduction of slavery’s social and human devastation across time. This piece’s refusal to offer redemption, especially not in the form of piercing luminosity or white audiences’ contentment, unsettles mainstream theater conventions and confounds easy conclusions about ways forward. Each of these works wrestles with the dehumanizing viewing logics of pornotroping and surveilling, of the corrosive normalizing of racial hierarchies and the severe policing of racial hierarchies, respectively.

The primary tension with such works is between regimes of white liberal personhood premised on the exclusion and abjection of minorities and the potential for alternative orders that depart from – or originate from beyond – those regimes. I do not intend to suggest a resolution to this dissonance, as perhaps resolution itself would miss the point: this line of inquiry achieves its creative vitality by holding these elements in tension and seeing what materializes. It inspires different ways of representing and grappling with the complexities of racial inequality and violence without reducing those complexities to ready-made solutions that could be measured against institutional practicalities (or ‘common sense’) and found wanting. The power of these artworks rests in their ability to express the unspeakable, manifest community, and challenge authority, especially authorized forms of visuality and surveillance that enable racial violence.

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Notes

1. Dread Scott's *Stop* project was partially supported by the Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation and other contributors (Scott, 2012).
2. In Hall's terminology, this can be read as a form of *transcoding* that recalibrates the relationship of (white) viewers to black images and introduces moments of productive tension wherein reflexivity and a recognition of complicity could emerge (Hall, 1997; see also Mercer, 2015).
3. According to a newspaper story discussing reaction to Scott's *Blue Wall of Violence*, the Council on the Arts and the city Department of Cultural Affairs did designate \$68,000 for the museum but these funds were not used to directly support Scott's exhibition (Sederstrom, 2008).
4. Some of the performance venues for *What Remains* included Danspace Project in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The primary analysis in this section is of a full video screening of the dance (Rawls, 2017), not of in-person attendance by the author.

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Author biography

Torin Monahan is a professor of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is co-director of the international Surveillance Studies Network and Editor-in-Chief of the leading academic journal on surveillance, *Surveillance & Society*. His recent books include *Surveillance Studies: A Reader* (2018) and *SuperVision: An Introduction to the Surveillance Society* (2013).