Racialized Surveillance – A Militarized and Securitized Response to the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States and Canada

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In this paper, I hope to call attention to the hidden nature of modern forms of state power and coercion, which act as systems of control for Black communities. By focusing on the strength of "self-surveillance", computer mediation and social networks, as well as the racialization of crime, it is my attempt to emphasize how American and Canadian surveillance strategies and technologies interact and coexist with racial capitalism. I would like to thank Professor Douek, who's storytelling, caring teaching and inspirational perspectives have had a key impact from my first to final year of study at McGill, and who's insights have made this piece possible. My partner Thien Van has been amazingly supportive and involved, and our conversations have energized me into writing this article. I am eternally grateful to my friends and family, especially my late grandmother, who's proud example has kept me going. I hope you enjoy reading.

Abstract

The multiple instances of state violence towards Black communities in recent years in the United States and Canada spark the following question: why does Canada and the United States engage in securitizing and militarized strategies as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement? This paper first argues that the United States and Canada have incentives to engage in the production and protection of a racialized hierarchical order. In doing so, it becomes apparent that race and class go hand in hand in caring for the survival of capitalist interests. The paper then focuses on the surveillance mechanisms and strategies that the American and Canadian states use to protect this White supremacy that is so necessary for capitalism to thrive, and studies the ways in which the American and Canadian states generate and promote a context of perpetual self-surveillance on the BLM movement and on Blackness in general. This transitions into an examination of the strategies of the two states in engaging in surveillance capitalism, or computer mediation, as a way to deter and restrict Black association in the context of the fight for justice. Lastly, this paper analyzes the rhetorical characterization of BLM as a racist discourse that seeks to weaken the fight for Black freedom's popular support.

Introduction

In July 2013, George Zimmerman, a "neighborhood watch volunteer" was acquitted for the fatal shooting of seventeen-year-old unarmed African-American Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. As anger rose within Black communities in reaction to the event, three women organized collective frustrations about ongoing institutional racism, gun violence and discriminatory policing practices around a grassroots movement building project called #BlackLivesMatter (BlackLivesMatter.com 2021). With the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown at the hands of the Ferguson police in 2014, the movement then grew to be more than a social media hashtag – peaceful protests and riots came about, sparking a vigorous debate about the relationship between law enforcement officers and African Americans. Facing the establishment of curfews and the deployment of riot squads to maintain order, this debate expanded to the militarization of police. For example, during protests in Baltimore in 2015, the state of Maryland called in the National Guard, and, in 2020, the George Floyd protests across the United States, including in the nation's capital, were met with tear gas, violence and arrests (Chavez 2021). The 2016 BLM Toronto protests, following the clearing of the police officer who fatally shot Andrew Loku, were revealed to have been monitored through social media, while its most prominent organizers had been surveilled by the police (Davis 2018). Likewise, throughout Canada, the protests following the deaths of George Floyd in Minnesota and Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Toronto were monitored by Canadian military intelligence. Moreover, a section of their report on BLM was titled "Hostile Foreign Actors" (Pugliese 2021)—clear evidence that the Canadian state felt the need to engage in securitization as a response to the events.

These instances of violent reactions by the state spark the following question: why does Canada and the United States engage in securitizing and militarized strategies as a response to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement? This paper argues that the surveillance of the BLM movement specifically, and the surveillance of Blackness in general, act as a system of control which works to protect racial capitalism in the United States and Canada. Thus, racialized surveillance strategies, which encompass securitized and militarized tactics, carry themselves as guardians of American and Canadian capitalist

power. They rely on racial exploitation as they work to monitor, control and restrict the movements and rights of Black Americans and Canadians. To illustrate these concepts, it is necessary to revisit the historical origins and processes of racialized forms of surveillance and covert violence in the United States and Canada that have come about in order to be able to draw conclusions about the present and future. Then, to demonstrate how the surveillance of BLM protects ongoing forms of state power, one must look at the state interests that demand for Black movements and rights to be controlled, thus providing an analysis of how the two states incentivize engaging in securitizing and militarized strategies when facing popular social movements like BLM. The paper then attempts to make legible the layers of surveillance that shield American and Canadian capitalist and anti-Black power from challenges to the status quo. It does this through revealing how self-surveillance works to preserve and perpetuate Black subjugation. It then continues its study by offering an overview of computer mediation and social media networks surveillance as deterrents of the freedom to associate. Finally, the criminalization of BLM and of Blackness as a tool of White supremacy and capitalism is discussed.

State interests in controlling Blackness

Before gaining an understanding of the strategies used by the United States and Canada to surveil the BLM movement and Black lives in general, one must recognize the stakes held by the two countries in controlling Blackness and in limiting their Black citizens' pursuit of freedom and justice.

Racializing capitalist exploitation

To do so, we must first racialize capitalist exploitation: as Robinson (2020) theorized, the devaluation of Black and other non-white bodies is a central feature of how classed identities are imagined. Indeed, culturally and socially constructed differences such as race, gender, region, nationality create more ways in which capitalists can accumulate more power and profit than otherwise would be possible. Thus, for the United States and Canada, racialized surveillance techniques act as guardians of the capitalist status quo that benefits Whiteness, since Black activist organizations (like BLM) pose a serious threat to both the international influence as well as to the economic prosperity of Whiteness. For Western nations, the white supremacist state they created and promoted through the devaluation and demonizing of Black and brown bodies in the context of colonization and in the Transatlantic slave trade is the apparatus that built their wealth and power then and now. Thus, with the anticolonial liberation movements of the Global South emerging in the years following the Second World War as well as through the civil rights and Black liberation movements overturning Jim Crow style racism in the United States and Canada, the legitimacy of this hierarchical racial order started to be seriously threatened (Maynard 2017, 125).

Threatening economic supremacy

However, with the loss of popular support for the eugenicist justifications protecting racial discrimination from sanctions also came a dangerous threat to the very global economic system that has kept European and North American nations so rich and powerful - that is, capitalism. In fact, the use of race and racial hierarchies to justify unequal power relationships and to make them appear natural pinpoints exactly where and why the concepts of race and class converge, thus defining the concept of racial capitalism (Robinson 2020, 17). To illustrate this, one can look at the adoption of the *Multiculturalism Act* as Canadian immigration policy in 1971, an ideology for celebration of cultural diversity has now become a symbol that the Canadian state internationally prides itself upon. In this context of multiculturalism, although "difference" is said to be celebrated, preservation of "culture" acts as an excuse not to enact meaningful policies that would otherwise work to explicitly combat racism and discrimination. White supremacy and devaluation of racialized groups thus

remain untouched, which allows for White wealth to continue to be accumulated at the expense and economic subjugation of non-White individuals and groups (Maynard 2017, 131).

Preventing the decline in legitimacy of White supremacy thus becomes imperative for the survival of capitalist exploitation. Again, a hierarchical order of race presents as a necessary condition for the survival of capitalism because, in the famous words of W.E.B. Du Bois, it provides a psychological wage of Whiteness or a "compensation" for White individuals being exploited by the organization of capitalism. In *Black Reconstruction in America* (Du Bois 2017), the author unites the Black planter and the poor White by the low wage they receive but differentiates the lower class Whites with the sort of compensatory public and psychological "wage" that elevates their social status in a way that unites them with the elite and capitalist Whites. Maintaining capitalism as the economic system of choice thus provides important incentives for the United States and Canada to uphold White supremacy. Consequently, racialized surveillance strategies on the BLM movement serve to maintain White dominance across all aspects of Black life, while also ensuring the continuity of the United States and Canada's capitalist power and wealth as we currently know them. As dark-skinned people endanger the profit margins of corporations, they automatically become controlled and surveilled.

Self-surveillance

The first layer of surveillance of the BLM movement is 'self-surveillance,' which works to control and restrict Black individuals in their thoughts and actions. In a manner reminiscent of Fanon (2018), the complex ways in which the BLM movement (and Blackness in general) is constructed and produced by the United States and Canada today are a tool for the preservation of unequal power relationships that capitalist power relies on.

The Panopticon

Jeremy Bentham's 18th century *Panopticon*, a project for a prison system with the goal of monitoring a maximum number of prisoners with the fewest guards possible, worked by having a central tower for the guards be surrounded by a ring of prison cells. In this design, guards have a complete view of every cell, thus making prisoners always vulnerable and visible. Prisoners themselves never know exactly when they are being observed, but are aware of the presence of authority at all times. Through the commentary of Michel Foucault, this would later become a symbol for modern authority and discipline in the Western world, where citizens are to the social network what prisoners are to the panopticon (Browne 2015, 34). This concept of the sociological effects of the panoptical gaze can be applied to race. One can relate the prisoner being monitored by the guard without being able to see this latter one to, for example, a Black worker being expected to keep their head down when walking by their White boss. When examined through this lens, the result in the American and Canadian states is a racialized, disciplinary society (Browne 2015, 9).

The panopticon as a control by design used to intimidate and generate self-discipline within society can be related to BLM through the constraints that the context and environment of the movement puts on the movement itself. One scholar, Mirzoeff (2020, 1), introduces the concept of a White space where specific operations precede "seeing". That is, a space where Whiteness is both the place of organizing and the vanishing point to and from which "seeing" is directed under racial surveillance capitalism. By fostering this White space in the place of the central tower of the panopticon, the American and Canadian states ensure maximum production and minimum resistance, which secures space for the conquering gaze (Berger 2017, 184). As Fanon (2018, 84-86) puts it, this racist gaze fixes the identity of the other in a way that reduces Blackness to the level of the body, and thus renders it as the racist gaze's property. Through structuring Black life around Whiteness, the surveillance state

reminds Blackness of its second class position in American and Canadian societies while surveillance strategies let Black people know to what extent they can aspire to go. In other words, surveillance traces the line they cannot cross.

Post-Panopticism

Although the panopticon is a helpful analytical tool for the study of how Blackness is self-surveilled, it must be restructured to reflect the contemporary condition of BLM in the era of surveillance. Indeed, in the case of the BLM movement, observation is not the only element at play: instead, there is pre-visualization where simulation, profiling, and prevention occurs. We understand this in the context of BLM as the pre-emptive suppression of dissent by privatized and militarized police agencies, which we'll discuss in more depth in the section on computer mediation and social networks. In today's information economy, one must consider the panopticon's polarity, where the few are monitored by the masses. As personal data gets increasingly mined online and offline, society becomes progressively afraid that others aren't paying attention and thus we divulge mindlessly and overshare (Browne 2015, 39). As a result, racialized surveillance gets both facilitated and more specific for the American and Canadian states trying to protect racial capitalism.

Finally, we adapt the panopticon to our current societies that are shaped by consumption and enjoyment imperatives. Where individuals in the West generally consider mobility within society as an oxymoronically required luxury; the vanishing point of the panopticon is not in the middle, but at the margins (Boyne 2000, 287). In other words, a sort of border control that evaluates who is entitled to enter the sociocultural centre generates a self-surveillance of Blackness that impacts what the BLM movement feels it can aspire to change and do. This is best illustrated by W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" as well as Frantz Fanon's work in *Black Skin, White Masks (2018)*. For Du Bois, the African American (and Canadian) experience is marked by both "always looking at one's self through the eyes" of the racist White society and by "measuring oneself by the means of a nation that looked back in contempt" (Du Bois 2015, 17). Similarly, Fanon discusses how the violence of the colonizer, through the elimination of the colonized person's identity and culture as well as through the delimitation of spaces occupied by the two groups, automatically facilitates the violence of the colonized. Indeed, as an attempt to retrieve dignity and a sense of self and history, the subjugated engages in the anti-colonial struggle. This internal conflict experienced by a subordinated group in an oppressive society, such as the BLM movement, makes the fight for freedom and justice extremely complex and difficult to navigate.

Surveillance also corrupts the psyche of the Black individual, leading to internalized shame that restricts Black participation in freedom movements. An example of this is explored by Freeden Oeur, who argues that hyper-surveillance dehumanizes Black youth, leading them to strive for anonymity (Oeur 2016, 10) and preventing them from engaging with very public-facing movements like BLM.

Computer mediation and social media networks

Similarly, post-panopticism extends to contemporary online environments. The preemptive suppression of dissent goes much further than by only creating a "White space" that promotes Black Americans and Canadians to self-surveil – both nations also actively deter Black dissent through computer mediation and social media networks, which itself is made possible by state cooperation with privatized and militarized police agencies. To understand how this works, one must unravel another layer of the multitude of surveillance strategies that the United States and Canada employ.

Identifying Black bodies

There is a long history of branding Blackness through biometric technology in the United States

and Canada. Biometrics is defined as the means of body measurement put to use to allow the body to function as identification. In the transatlantic slave trade, biometrics were the measure that defined slavery: marking and marketing Black bodies commodified the Black subject (Browne 2015, 26). Later, census and passes acted as "state stocktaking" as it rendered a population codifiable in racializing and gendering ways (Browne 2015, 56). Moreover, the modern information economy forces Black youth into anonymity, as discussed in the section on self-surveillance, which then deprives them of identity. In an attempt at recovering a sense of individuality, the need to overshare online is stimulated, which offers the US and Canada important and large amounts of scientific and mathematical data that they can turn into equations and algorithms to satisfy their surveillance needs. In the context of BLM, facial recognition and social media publications have become the biometric tools of choice for these oppressive states.

Several facial imaging systems, such as Amazon's Rekognition, are deployed by law enforcement despite reinforcing oppressive social relationships and enacting new models of racial profiling. During a demonstration in 2018, Amazon's technology falsely matched 28 congresspeople to images in mugshot databases, which are disproportionately populated with Black and brown individuals as a result of the over-policing and criminalization of Black and brown communities (Williams 2020, 576). Furthermore, these same systems are not coded neutrally and are thus shown to be worse at identifying Black faces. The technology that is most likely to be used on Black populations is less likely to be able to distinguish between Black individuals (Williams 2020, 577), enabling racial profiling.

Similarly, the use of third party software that targets specific social media posts' locations and hashtags makes it easier for the two states to identify and target participants and sympathizers of BLM. An instance of this racialized surveillance of BLM was reported by the Oregon Department of Justice (DOJ) when an investigator conducted a "threat assessment" on an African American employee of the DOJ after he found content related to #BlackLivesMatter on the employee's Twitter profile (Toor 2018, 311-12). Another example can be taken from the Ferguson demonstrations of 2014, when the US Department of Homeland Security collected information (including location data) on BLM participants' peaceful activities via public social media accounts such as Facebook, Twitter and Vine (Canella 2018, 385). These cases represent some of the many situations where surveillance technologies are being used by the state as instruments to measure the level of threat that a Black individual poses to the United States and/or Canada. Finally, biometrics are inseparable from the banopticon, a portmanteau of the words biometrics and *panopticon*, which indicates a technology that serves to determine who to place under surveillance (Browne 2015, 32). Thus, by understanding how Black bodies are digitally identified by the two states studied, how they are monitored online and offline through computer mediation can finally be considered.

Digital surveillance

Online biometric strategies facilitate the identification of the participants and sympathizers of the BLM movement, enabling Canada and the United States to put their surveillance techniques to work. Digital surveillance tools, enabled by online biometrics, instill fear in Black activists and discourage non-Black allies from joining the fight for social justice by exacerbating patterns of neoliberal policing and behaviours. The 'neoliberalization' of law enforcement refers to policies that privatize policing, corporatize public resources and commercialize physical and digital spaces in ways that criminalize dissent and pre-emptively suppress radical movements (Canella 2018, 379). In fact, public-private partnerships for the surveillance of BLM activities on public social media accounts acts as an intimidation tactic that effectively chills protest movements. The Fresno Police Department in Northern California illustrates

this. The agency/organization reportedly used third-party firms to conduct online surveillance of BLM using hashtags. The Baltimore Police Department, similarly, used geo-location on social media posts that came from local public demonstrations and marches which were specifically organized to combat police brutality and systemic racism (Canella 2018, 385). Communication technologies also have a diffusion effect on law enforcement tactics as they promote the sharing of best practices for policing protests. For the BLM movement and its supporters, this has translated into being disproportionately more surveilled than other social justice movements (Canella 2018, 380). These online and offline governmental surveillance strategies applied to BLM prevent social media networks from being platforms for creating expressive associations as they are supposed to be, and serve as a deterrent on the exercise of associational freedom.

The Criminalization of Blackness

Another powerful tool of the American and Canadian racial capitalist state is to, at best, promote an anti-Black racist discourse, and at worst, criminalize the very concept of Blackness in order to reduce or block popular support for Black justice movements like BLM. To justify this argument, an analysis of systematic mass arrests and the carceral state is necessary before exploring the racialization of crime as a method for delegitimizing BLM.

Systematic mass arrest and the carceral state

Sewell et al (2016, 288-89) relate the history of surveillance and over-patrolling of Black communities to that of the carceral state as a way of introducing the rationale behind criminalizing Blackness in order to protect White supremacy. In the United States, Nixon's war on drugs that harshly criminalized and controlled substances and incarcerated hundreds of thousands of Black men, Reagan and Bush's Anti-Drug Abuse Act that targeted low-income communities of color and gave police officers permission to "search and destroy" Black men, as well as the popularization and moralization of "stop and frisk" practices, through the myth of the deviant black male, are some powerful examples of the prevalence of hyper-surveillance of Blackness. The current state of unjustified shootings of Black men at the hands of law enforcement as well as of the disproportionate representation of Black men in prisons is thus a logical consequence of these hyper-surveillance attitudes. With higher incarceration rates also comes a loss of social well-being for Black communities: for incarcerated individuals, access to public housing, food stamps, federal education grants and loans, employment as well as the right to vote are all in jeopardy of being lost. These penalties extend to the families of those Black individuals as well: it strips Black communities of the human and financial capital needed to combat generational poverty. It also impairs social networks that work as sources of emotional, financial and social support (Sewell et al 2016, 291). Thus, as mass incarceration and Black poverty were created in the United States and Canada, holding a discourse of racism and making the socioeconomic situation of Black communities appear "natural" was convenient for the two states.

The racialization of crime

Through upholding a racist discourse on the mass incarceration of Black men, Lowe argues that the American and Canadian states were able to develop racialized notions of criminal threat that reinforce boundaries and reproduce the perceptions of Black men as criminals (Lowe, Stroud and Nguyen 2017, 35). Indeed, Sewell et al show that that is how the "Broken Windows" theory came to be popularized. This concept, which claims that minor criminal offenses, if left unrepaired or uncorrected by the police, will later contribute to the prevalence of more serious property and personal crime, is a way of justifying common arrests of Black men for nonviolent crimes (Sewell et al 2016, 290). Worse, this criminalization of Blackness can extend to the public attempting to justify police misconduct and homicide, as was seen during the

episodes that sparked the BLM unrests throughout the United States and Canada. For the BLM movement, the racialization of crime has a significant influence on which tragedy will matter and to what extent the BLM movement will have the support of the public. Therefore, Wang (2018, 261) argues that innocence becomes a precondition for the fight for civic rights.

To illustrate this point, she points to the case of a seventeen-year-old boy named Isaiah Simmons, who died in a Baltimore juvenile facility after counselors suffocated him and failed to call for medical assistance for more than forty minutes. Wang contrasts the (lack of) public outcry towards Simmon's death, due to him being in a juvenile facility, to the one of Trayvon Martin in order to show how "innocence" is used as a necessary foundation when addressing anti-Black violence. For the BLM movement, this criminalization and guilt by association is more true than ever. BLM is often portrayed by the media, but also by the two states studied, as agitators of social unrest, with former President Barack Obama saying that "[BLM] can't just keep on yelling at [elected officials]" (Shear 2016) and former President Trump calling BLM protestors "thugs" (Samee Ali 2020). Through this false narrative, the American and Canadian states attempt to discredit and demonize the movement in order to decrease its popular support.

Conclusion

In this paper, the incentives within the United States and Canada to engage in the production and protection of a racialized hierarchical order have been analyzed. In doing so, it emerges that race and class went hand in hand in caring for the survival of capitalist interests. Focusing on the strategies that the US and Canada use to protect. White supremacy that is so necessary for capitalism to thrive, how the American and Canadian states generate and promote a context of perpetual self-surveillance on the BLM movement and on Blackness in general was then studied. The paper then examined the strategies of the two states in engaging in surveillance capitalism, or computer mediation, as a way to deter and restrict Black association in the context of the fight for justice as well as how the criminalization of BLM as a racist discourse has been utilized to weaken popular support for the fight for Black freedom. With this knowledge, understanding why the United States and Canada engage in securitizing and militarized strategies in response to the BLM movement becomes clear – it is to defend their capitalist state power. To sum up, surveillance strategies like arranging self-surveillance, computer mediation and the racialization of crime are developed to control Blackness, to deter dissent and to demonize the BLM movement so that forms of state power that rely on racism (i.e. capitalism) would be protected.

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