

Failure to Enroll: The Blurring Rhetorical Power of Anonymizing Tools and Photographs in Making In/Visible Black Lives

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Article abstract

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Article

Failure to Enroll: The Blurring Rhetorical Power of Anonymizing Tools and Photographs in Making In/Visible Black Lives

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Abstract

As Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests surged in response to the continued murders of black men and women, state surveillance practices, too, have increasingly monitored, tracked, and prosecuted protesters. Among the growing surveillance arsenal are facial recognition technologies (FRT), which authorities use to identify protesters, often leading to the mis/recognition of black and brown people, false arrests, and blacklisting from public spaces. In response to the prevalence of FRT, protesters and photographers are urging and employing anonymizing blurring technologies to evade state and citizen surveillance. I argue that these technologies materially and rhetorically disrupt the racialized surveillant gaze. I employ Simone Browne's (2015) term "dark sousveillance" as a framework for understanding how blurring technologies enable evasion from state violence and promote ethical photography practices. Such practices challenge the relationship between whiteness and the law enforcement surveillance regime.

Introduction

The Pulitzer-Prize-winning photograph of Edward Crawford throwing tear gas in the middle of a street during a protest in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 13, 2014, became an iconic image of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The image shows Crawford wearing an American flag, with long dreadlocks sprawled across his face in mid-lunge, preparing to throw an ignited can of tear gas. Following the release of this photograph, Crawford was identified and charged with assault and interfering with a police officer (Williams and Eligon 2019). Many of the reports about the image claimed that Crawford was throwing the can at police officers, but his father claimed he was throwing it "out of the way from children" (Coleman 2020). Along with the attention from authorities, his newfound recognition had strangers asking for his autograph and people wanting to take selfies with him (Williams and Eligon 2019). In 2017, after Crawford expressed to friends in the backseat of a car that he was "distracted," he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound (Aggeler 2020; Bell 2015). Crawford is one of six men with connections to protests in Ferguson, MO, who have recently died (Salter 2019). Between 2015 and 2021, at least 135 unarmed black men and women were fatally shot by the police in the United States (Thompson 2021). As the need for protesting violence and advocating for systemic change persists, so too does the need to ensure that those who take up the call are not further targeted with prosecution and violence. The stakes of protecting the identities of those who do are too high.

From 2020 to the present, masks have become the new standard for many Americans to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Masks also help ensure safety while at protests. Facial recognition technologies (FRT) have increasingly become part of the surveillance arsenal targeting protesters, many of whom have recognized

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the need to cover their faces for their health and livelihood. As BLM protests surged in response to the continued killing of unarmed black people, the use of surveillance tools, including FRT, to (mis)identify, monitor, and infringe on First Amendment rights also surged. In the days following Michael Brown's murder, for example, police circulated locations of vigils and maps of "civil unrest," originally compiled by Reddit users (Joseph 2015; u/jandrewweb 2014). A year later, when Freddie Gray died in police custody, the Baltimore Police Department employed technology company Geofeedia to "run social media photos through facial recognition technology to discover rioters with outstanding warrants and arrest them directly from the crowd" (Geofeedia 2016: 2). In response to the murder of George Floyd, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) was granted permission to "conduct covert surveillance" nationwide (Shea 2020). Surveilling black lives is not new, persisting from the days of slavery and Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement and BLM protests (Joseph 2015; O'Reilly 1989; Parenti 2003). And still, how violence is inflicted through surveillance continues to evolve along with its technologies. In other words, FRT is only a continuation of the history of surveillance techniques meant to stifle black resistance.

FRT uses algorithms and photo databases (some obtained from social media) that, for people of color, can lead to false positives whereby an individual is identified by a photo and/or video that is not of them (Grother, Ngan, and Hanaoka 2019). This was the case for Robert Julian-Borchak, who was wrongly identified in a surveillance video and arrested for larceny (K. Hill 2020). The use of surveillance technologies on protesters infringes on one's right to protest for fear of retribution and, like police violence, targets black people. After multiple protests in Memphis, Tennessee, for instance, law enforcement officers (LEO), based on surveillance by a police officer, began blacklisting black arrested protesters from entering City Hall without an escort, including some protesters who had not even been arrested (ACLU 2017; Thomas 2020). In short, the use of technology does not reduce bias; it automates it (Eubanks 2018). In the case of FRT, bias can result in the misrecognition and arrest of protesters.

The problems that FRT create for democratic protests have become an opportunity for technological and rhetorical invention. Protesters in the United States are taking a page from Hong Kong's protesters (Smith 2019) and the Zapatistas protesters in Mexico (Bratich 2007), who concealed themselves with umbrellas, masks, balaclavas, and protective gear to collectively counter and target state surveillance technologies with anonymizing tools to blur their faces and erase their metadata. There are different variations of this technology, but its function manipulates the pixelation of an image until the result is blurred (Blur.me 2022), making it more difficult for FRT to identify individuals. Signal, one of the larger and most secure end-to-end encryption applications for messaging and calling, offers a blurring tool that creates a "fuzzy trace" over any part of an image. Individuals like Sam Loeschen (2020), Everest Pipkin (2020), and Noah Conk (2020) are sharing their software with the public either openly or upon request with capacities ranging from blurring faces to "scrubbing" metadata. Scrubbing metadata is just as important to evading surveillance technologies, as it eliminates metadata on images, such as the location and date the image was taken. Blurring images is not new, as television shows like *Cops* and other networks have historically done so to protect subjects' privacy. In the wake of newer FRT and their use by authorities during the BLM protests of 2020, however, the more recent availability and ethical discussions about civilian use of these technologies to protect oneself or others have proliferated (Hodor-Lee and Berman 2020). This is not an exhaustive list of interventions as many people are developing, sharing, and encouraging the use of anonymizing software for protest images.

This essay focuses on the rhetoric surrounding the use of anonymizing technologies in protest photography and anonymized protest images to oppose the racialized surveillance state. Specifically, I argue that blurring technologies that anonymize protestors disrupt state surveillance activities and, therefore, create spaces for marginalized people while challenging the relationship between whiteness and surveillance. I use Simone Browne's (2015: 164) "dark sousveillance" as the underlying framework for how blurring practices help us understand "possibilities for fugitive acts of escape, resistance, and... productive disruption that happens when blackness enters the frame." "Dark sousveillance" draws on Steve Mann's (2013) concept of "sousveillance," a form of watching back at authorities conducting surveillance (see also Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003), to account for the ways in which one is rendered "out of sight" (Browne 2015: 21). These blurring technologies allow blackness to enter the frame while evading state surveillance because FRT

would be unable to enroll the image into the system. The inability of FRT to read images by converting a “face image to a template” in the system results in a “fail to enroll” (FTE) (Ngan, Grother, and Hanaoka 2020), hence the title of this essay. In doing so, anonymized protest images, as I will demonstrate, challenge the surveillance state that reifies whiteness and its ways of looking.

The remainder of the essay proceeds as follows: First, I demonstrate how countering FRTs is a form of “dark sousveillance.” In the following analysis, I illustrate how the rhetoric of citizen surveillance extends the state’s surveillance of protesters via citizen “reporting.” This section demonstrates that state surveillance, which targets black and brown people under its purview, seeps into civilian practices online. This gaze reifies state surveillance and its violence through citizens’ rhetoric on protesters. A surveillant gaze makes anonymizing technologies integral, as they are a way to evade it. Then, I explore how rhetoric circulates about responsible photography practices at protests, forming what I call a “collectively ‘dark’” ethics for participating in documenting protest(er)s, whether by representing them responsibly and/or prioritizing black photographers’ work. Finally, I argue that the civic act of participating in blurring protesters’ faces challenges the reifying nature of surveillant practices to uphold whiteness. I conclude with implications for “recognizing” black lives and the future of critique for state and citizen sousveillance practices.

Anonymizing Technologies as “Dark Sousveillance”

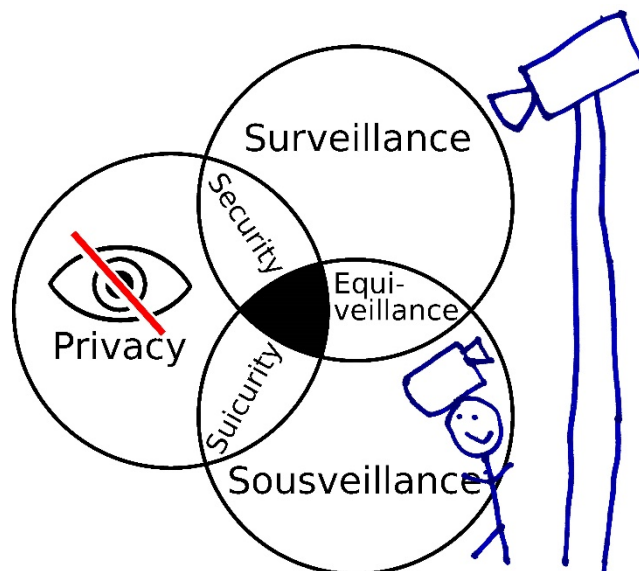


Figure 1: Diagram of sous/surveillance (Mann 2014; Mann et al. 2018).

The term “sousveillance,” originally coined by Steve Mann (Figure 1), refers to the “observation or recording by an entity not in a position of power” (Mann 2013: 3; see also Mann 2020). This action is usually directed at authorities such as in businesses or in public places where surveillance is conducted. Sousveillance attempts to level the unilateral relationship that underscores state surveillance (Andrejevic 2007). Sousveillance, however, does not neatly account for how blurring technologies disrupt state surveillance. Here, it is helpful to put Mann’s (2013) concept of “sousveillance” in conversation with Browne’s (2015) notion of “dark sousveillance.” Dark sousveillance tactics “render oneself out of sight, and [are] strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of undersight.... [I]t is a site of critique, as it speaks to black epistemologies of contending with antiblack surveillance” (Browne 2015:

21). Blurring technologies “obfuscate” metadata of protesters’ geolocation and impede FRT capacities to recognize and input image data (Brunton and Nissenbaum 2015: 46). As a form of sousveillance, it is necessary to think of the “watching back” of authorities both literally and figuratively, as both a visual practice and form of critique of antiblack surveillance, whereby dark sousveillance mobilizes a “critique of racializing surveillance” (Browne 2015: 21). While “dark sousveillance” renders one who employs such tactics as “out of sight” while often in plain sight, the sousveillance nature of this practice critiques and disrupts the logic of looking—a logic of domination and control that targets marginalized groups (Monahan 2015: 14).

Dark sousveillance is not only about evasion but also about critiquing the dominant mode of looking that permeates surveillance against marginalized people. Dating back to chattel slavery and continuing to the present, escaping and evading are the central aims of dark sousveillance tactics within the anti-black surveillance state. Browne (2015) provides many historical examples illustrating how evading surveillance while in “plain sight” functions as a critique of the surveillance logics of control. For example, a runaway slave advertisement from 1783 called for a wanted fourteen-year-old fugitive slave. In the description, it notes that she goes by a different alias and evades “surveillance through makeup, wicked tricks, and hiding in plain sight expos[ing] the one-drop rule [of that time] as a social construction that, for some could be subverted by performing whiteness” (Browne 2015: 54). In the example Browne (2015) discusses, the “one drop” rule, a reference to blood quantum in which scientists attempted to connect African physiological features and non-human status and, therefore, determine social status across generations based on how black one was (Jordan 2014: 100–101). By disguising supposedly physically observable traits, Sall, the fugitive slave here, evades surveillance and critiques the logic underscoring its control. In another example of dark sousveillance, Torin Monahan (2020) employs Browne’s (2015) concept to analyze Claudia Rankine and Will Rawls’ (2018) dance, “What Remains,” demonstrating how the performance does not succumb to “white audiences’ contentment” with theater conventions and interrogates the “dehumanizing logics of... surveilling” (Monahan 2020: 578). Anonymizing technologies that blur faces and scrub data disrupt the function of surveillant technologies to operate as they should while drawing critical attention to the way in which certain groups are marginalized by them and the regime of visibility they perpetuate.¹

Not being seen or, specifically, being seen through the violence of state surveillance, is integral to creating space for critiques of and being within the surveillance regime. Mann’s (2013) notion of “sousveillance” as watching back amplifies the risk to the person “sousveilling.” While the action aims to foster “another way of being” for which surveillance is less unilateral, at stake is who can “sousveil” within a racialized culture (Browne 2015: 21). As Mann, Nolan, and Wellman (2003: 345) note regarding experiments Mann conducted while performing “sousveillance,” the action was met with some objection. This risk is not impartial to those who watch back and is more likely to affect people of color. Arthur Reed (2017), founder of Stop the Killing—an organization dedicated to creating positive living environments through community engagement—understands this risk as he declines to reveal his group members who have participated in recording police violence. In an interview about recording police brutality with Justin Carissimo of *The Independent*, he stated, “We’re at risk every day; we’re going against licensed killers” (Reed qtd. in Carissimo 2016). Still, this does not mean that enacting sousveillance tactics is not without its merits.

Blurring technologies act as tactics of dark sousveillance by providing anonymity that lessens the risk to those watching/evading and communicates that the right to privacy disrupts the ability for state and citizen surveillance to function as it could and would. Dark sousveillance tactics are crucial in a world where surveillance is inescapable (Brunton and Nissenbaum 2015: 47), allowing individuals to slip through the grasps of state violence. While this technique can be and is utilized by various ethnicities and races, from Hong Kong to Mexico to the United States, I argue that it is “dark sousveillance” in the context of US protests that needs our attention, as black and brown people are continually affected by the violence of state and citizen surveillance. In the following sections, I illustrate the need for dark sousveillance tactics to resist

¹ Monahan (2015: 14) notes that countervisuality projects should resist logics of domination and control that severely affect marginalized groups in “The Right to Hide?”

the surveillant gaze, demonstrate how advocates and protesters promote responsible protest photography by being collectively “dark,” and argue that these anonymizing technologies challenge whiteness and ask those viewing these images to reflect on their role in state violence.

From State to Citizen: Disrupting the Surveillant Gaze

The state is not the only entity that uses surveillance images to target and retaliate against protesters. Civilians, too, are doing “their part.” The circulation of unblurred/unscrubbed images reifies state surveillance practices and aligns viewers with the violence of surveillance against protesters because how one is expected to “see” people of color is already racialized. This has become an increasingly normalized practice online, as there is an abundance of footage where civilians use images and key aspects of protesters’ identity to establish seemingly authoritative videos. In this section, I demonstrate how the rhetoric of citizen surveillance of protesters depends on analyses of identity, how that extends to the racialized gaze of state surveillance, and why and how anonymizing blurring technologies disrupt this gaze.

The ability of citizens to produce and circulate their own content is, on one hand, promising for democracy and, on the other hand, a potential avenue for state surveillance practices to seep their way into the fabric of everyday life (Usher 2011). This is particularly evident in the wake of the BLM protests across the country. In the aftermath of another shooting of a black man, Jacob Blake, on August 23, 2020, BLM activists took to the streets to protest continued police violence. During the protests, seventeen-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, armed with an AR-15, shot three men, killing two and injuring one. One YouTube commentator, “Donut Operator,” posted a video analyzing the footage found online and titled it “Kyle Rittenhouse shooting breakdown: murder or self defense [sic] (2020)?” (Donut Operator 2020). At the beginning of the video, Rittenhouse claimed that he was protecting people and businesses (McG 2020), implying that BLM movements are violent by nature. This is a misconception touted and circulated in the rhetoric of media and civilians online: the BLM movement, made up of a diverse group of people and allies, is violent and in need of control. In contrast to this notion, Roudabeh Kishi and Sam Jones (2020) from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) found that “in more than 93% of all demonstrations connected to the movement, demonstrators have not engaged in violence or destructive activity.” Rittenhouse’s rhetoric reinforces the logic that surveillance tools are needed to monitor protests while his actions of being there function to preserve white interests, such as property, over black lives. Such phrasing in the rhetoric of the BLM movement criminalizes black people, warranting LEO to, as Robin Kelley (2020) claims, “demand bigger budgets” to combat criminals. By proclaiming the need to protect businesses, Rittenhouse reifies the narrative that the BLM Movement is composed of “looters,” which warrants increased control of protesters by authorities and civilian vigilantes (Chasnoff and Christenson 2005: A1).

While this type of rhetoric frames protesters as in need of surveillance and control, civilian commentators like Donut Operator (2020) use Rittenhouse’s identity and that of the victims he shot to justify the use of violence. First, he reframes the media’s depiction of Rittenhouse as “obsessed” with Blue Lives Matter saying: “to me he just looks like he supported law enforcement.” But Donut Operator (2020) moves beyond framing Rittenhouse’s action to conducting his own investigation, claiming that he will go through all three of the individuals Rittenhouse shot and give their background from “multiple angles.” He shows one victim, Joseph Rosenbaum, in the video yelling a racial slur and says that the internet is claiming that he is a sex offender but could not verify the information. He states, “That might be B.S. I don’t know I’m just here to give you the facts” (Donut Operator 2020). Showing a white man using an atrocious racist slur alongside “facts” about the victims’ felonies, fuels, as one reporter called it, the “ideological ammo” that Rittenhouse defended himself and serves to justify the violence (Darkbloom 2020; Lee 2020).

The rhetoric that frames violence done unto victims as warranted through their background is a hallmark of the surveillance state’s practices towards BLM victims and protesters (mostly black, sometimes white like above). When Michael Brown was gunned down in the streets of Ferguson, MO, police, and civilians, circulated rhetoric about the victim’s identity and surveillance videos showing that Brown had conducted criminal behavior prior to the altercation with Officer Darren Wilson. News media first claimed that Brown

had been involved in a “strong-armed robbery” at a local convenience store (Ferguson Police Department 2014), while later surveillance footage indicated that Brown was seen giving a “small bag of marijuana to store employees and receiving cigarillos” (Smith 2017). Despite the opposing stories or how Brown acted in front of Officer Wilson to “pose a threat,” Calvin Smiley and David Fakunle (2016: 12) found that “the larger theme of associating the posthumous Michael Brown with robbery became the broader narrative.” Civilians, too, frame BLM protesters and victims as acting in ways that warrant surveillance of and violence towards them. The Plain View Project, dedicated to identifying published social media content by former and current police officers, captured one user sharing a news article from the *US Chronicle* with the post stating, “BLM released demands to be met for them to stop blocking highways.... You won’t believe how stupid this is. Hit like if you think Black Lives Matter should be classified as a terror group” (Bocchinfuso 2017). The suggestion that BLM is a terrorist group justifies the violence against black men and women.

I use these examples to demonstrate the prevalence of citizen surveillance of protesters and show how that surveillance predominantly supports white narratives and violence targeting black and brown people. The way we “see” each other is wrapped up in histories of racism that state surveillance upholds and, consequently, in the way in which we are invited to watch each other (Andrejevic 2004). In this section, I have argued how citizens’ and state surveillance of protesters reify white, racialized technologies and narratives that seek to identify, prosecute, and, ultimately, justify the resulting violence done unto black and brown people, whether through stereotypes, incarceration, or death. Nicholas Mirzoeff (2017: 85) argues that “seeing is a point of intersection between what we know, what we perceive, and what we feel; it is a collective way to look, visualize, and imagine.” The way of seeing perpetuated by the surveillance state is racist. My goal in this section has been to articulate how that is extended through a surveillant gaze that civilians and authorities reify via practices of viewing, discussing, and justifying the violence done unto BLM protesters and victims of police brutality. In the next section, I analyze how protesters and advocates promote responsible collective participation in dark sousveillance and how that challenges the surveillance state.

Collectively “Dark”

Against the state surveillance that enables violence under the guise of “law and order,” blurring tools, their developers, and their users are fostering participation in collectively dark sousveillance. Dark sousveillance tactics have historically been used to resist the racialization of the surveillance state while in plain sight: from escaping slavery and evading recapture via the use of makeup and aliases to performances in surveillant spaces (Browne 2015; 54, 80–81). The rhetoric about using blurring technologies extends dark sousveillance tactics by suggesting that people should enact proper protocols to ensure not only the protection of oneself but also others. Photographer and filmmaker Ligaiya Romero (2020) stresses that, “As photographers/filmmakers, we need to ask ourselves, is this image sousveillance (from the bottom point up, holding power-holders and oppressors accountable) or are we furthering surveillance (from the top pointing down, adding to a history of violence and surveillance of Black, Indigenous, and POC bodies, and creating a document that can be used to further that violence)?” Self-reflection is critical, but it depends on a collective effort by not just photographers but also by any person documenting the protests.

Even as journalists and programmers share technologies freely for individuals to use on themselves or others, so too is information shared to direct protesters on how to participate in documenting protests more ethically. One *Wired* journalist, Jess Grey (2020), among many others online (Aushana and Pixley 2020; Grey 2020; Hodor-Lee 2020; Leung 2020; Miller and Asbury 2020; Romero 2020), asks potential protesters to be self-reflexive: “Do not do attend a protest just to say you were there. Protests aren’t photoshoots, and the people in the streets venting their anger and frustration at systemic injustices aren’t there to pose for your Insta.” She goes on to give explicit considerations for photographing protests: “Do not get in anyone’s face: Be respectful. Ask if you can take a photo before you do, especially if you’re close to your subject.... As a photographer, you also have an obligation to keep others safe.... Do not post to social media without thorough editing.... You must keep in mind that your photos and videos can be used to harm your fellow protesters” (Grey 2020). Although some journalists may have professional and ethical standards for

photography and reporting, the same cannot be said for other citizens. The emphasis these journalists place on ethical documentation of protests perpetuates that those participating are collectively responsible for the safety of protesters from the potential violence of the state and citizen surveillance. Whether one is more at risk of being targeted by state or citizen surveillance, this must be a collective effort and one done in solidarity through ensuring the anonymity, if not protection, of identities exposed through photography. (Bratich 2007: 49; Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 277–279).

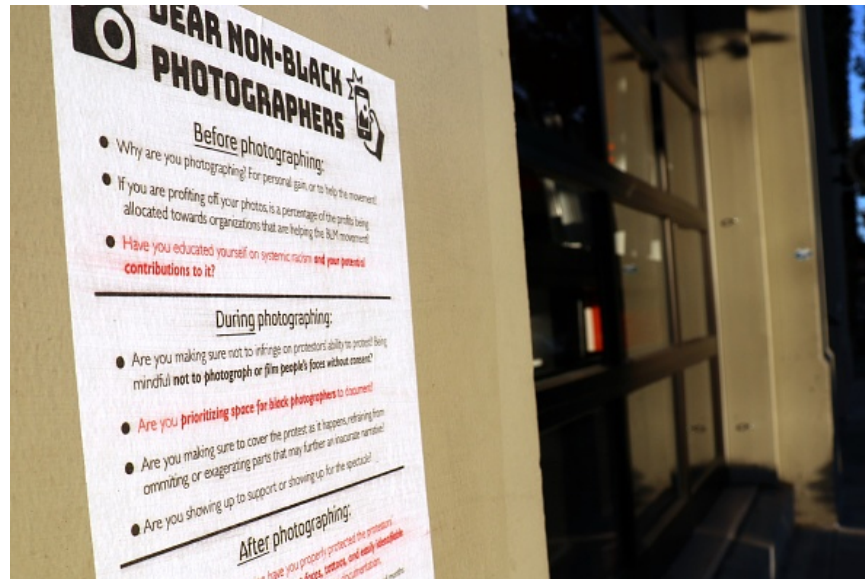


Figure 2: Photograph of sign on apartment building in Seattle, Washington's Capitol Hill Anonymity Zone (Scott, 2020).

While various online sources ask prospective protesters to reflect on their reasons for participating and photographing, some sources give explicit directions for non-black photographers. A sign (see Figure 2) was posted on an apartment building in Seattle's Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ). The sign asks for "non-black photographers" to: consider why they are photographing; donate to BLM if they are gaining a profit from their pictures; and to educate themselves on systemic racism and their "potential contributions to it" (Scott 2020). The sign recommends obtaining consent for photographing or filming people's faces, "prioritizing space for black photographers," and refraining from spectacle. On the right-hand corner of the sign, it stresses photographers should "properly [protect] the protesters" identity, noting potentially covering faces, tattoos, and other identifiable markers. The sign's rhetoric reflects awareness and promotes the protection of vulnerable people from surveillance. It is not only black men and women responsible for their own evasion from the violence of state surveillance but also the collective responsibility of those who advocate for escaping anti-black surveillance. Browne (2015) illustrates this historical effort in Theodore Parker's, a white abolitionist, advertisement to "colored people of Boston" to "keep a sharp lookout for kidnappers" who would act as slave catchers under fugitive slave laws that federalized antiblack surveillance" (Browne 2015: 21; Caution! Colored People of Boston 1851). Today, collective effort is paramount in the calls for ethical photographic practices at BLM protests. By making such considerations explicit, protesters are invited into a collective space to enact dark sousveillance tactics against state surveillance and its violence.

Although CHAZ was eventually dismantled by the Seattle Police Department three weeks after its inception (Burns 2020), rhetoric, like that on the sign, promoting collectively dark sousveillance tactics while documenting protests still emanates on and offline. In an article by Louryn Strampe and Lauren Goode (2020) in *Wired*, among the many suggestions for protesters, are considerations for ethically taking photos. A key consideration is to "avoid taking photos of protesters that clearly show identifying information like

their tattoos, since those photos could make [one] vulnerable to abuse or retaliation.... law enforcement may also respond with force if you point the camera at them, even though it is well within your rights to film their actions” (Strampe and Goode 2020). Here, the authors both refer to the vulnerability of being surveilled and promote a collective responsibility for one another in the face of sousveillance authorities. FRT is predominantly unilateral in that it mostly targets protesters rather than police. As photographer Lynsey Weatherspoon reflects, “I don’t agree with facial recognition... why just use it on people who are in the midst of the protest rather than using facial recognition on police as well? It can be one-sided. I usually try to get the side or the back of people...” (Lynsey Weatherspoon qtd. in L. Hill 2020). Instead of amplifying the risk of visibly performing sousveillance during protests, acts of dark sousveillance such as blurring faces and scrubbing metadata work to level the unilateral violence of surveillance technologies.

The rhetoric perpetuating collective responsibility to perform dark sousveillance tactics is paramount to evading the surveillance state and promoting protection over prosecution and retaliation. It is imperative for white photographers, if they photograph protests, to not reify the violence they have long contributed to. Photographer Gioncarlo Valentine (2020) provides an example of how Phillip Montgomery’s (2020) photo essay in *Vanity Fair* irresponsibly exposes protesters’ faces and, by placing a white photographer’s story at the forefront, normalizes who still is best to tell black peoples’ story. Valentine (2020) stresses, “we are now witnessing the irresponsible legacy of this framing carry over to the coverage of these protests.... [N]o one forces white photographers to accept assignments that involve lofty and intricate racial sensitivities.”

Some white photographers echo these imperatives through self-reflection and through actionable steps. Grace Stillman (2020), a photographer covering the protests in Minneapolis, Minnesota, published an op-ed on Photography.com with a list of responsibilities she follows as a white person covering protests. Some of these include not filling “space that would be better served filled with faces and voices of color” and to “ask permission to photograph, post, and respect the wishes of my subjects without ego or resistance” (Stillman 2020). Photographing and documenting protesters—what they say, the number of people, and accurate documentation of nonviolent protests (versus hyperboles about violent BLM protesters as rioters and looters)—is important for growing the movement. Even so, it should be done responsibly, especially by those less at risk of technologies reproducing violence through the surveillance of shared images and data. Echoing Armond Towns’ (2015) argument that the circulation of videos from body cameras of police killing black people further spectacularizes antiblack violence, so too does the call of being collectively “dark” ask photographers and participants to be wary of sharing images that further enable and promote the surveillance and prosecution of black and brown protesters. In the following section, I explain how anonymizing protest images rhetorically challenge the whiteness that underscores state and citizen surveillance. In doing so, blurred photographs ask onlookers to consider their relationship with surveillance and violence.

Challenging the Whiteness of Surveillance

In a tweet urging Massachusetts Governor Karen Spilka to improve regulations for facial recognition technologies, Celtics basketball player Jaylen Brown (2020), tweeted “Face surveillance is dangerous when it works, and when it doesn’t.” Indeed, the use of FRT by state authorities and civilians is a two-edged sword. On one hand, the technical capabilities of the technology can lead to inaccuracies that account for false positives, as was the case with Julian-Borchak’s arrest for a crime he did not commit. Patrick Grother, Mei Ngan, and Kayee Hanoaka (2019) of the The National Institute for Standards and Technology has found that these discrepancies are linked to the ability of the technology to account for a variety of skin colors:

False positive rates are highest in West and East African and East Asian people, and lowest in Eastern European individuals. This effect is generally large, with a factor of 100 more false positives between countries. With domestic law enforcement images, the highest false positives are in American Indians, with elevated rates in African American and Asian populations.

The FRT accuracy also decreases when masks are worn, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM protests. They found that the color of masks degraded the accuracy of the algorithms; specifically, that of black versus surgical blue masks, where black showed further degradation (Ngan, Grother, and Hanaoka 2020). On the other hand, there has been a push to improve diversity and inclusivity in the workforce so that the development of these technologies begins with a potentially less-biased approach (Kimble, Griffin and Buckner 2022: 6). Yet, as my arguments about FRT have proven thus far, it is how the state weaponizes potentially improved FRT systems and how civilians reify these practices in their rhetoric that illustrate how these tools criminalize black and brown people by targeting them. In this section, I will show how FRT racialized surveillance is produced through blackness and how anonymizing blurring tools challenge this logic, asking onlookers to reflect on their relationship to state surveillance

These systems are inherently racialized in terms of how they are programmed to detect humans. Systems like FRT depend on what Browne (2015: 110–111) calls “prototypical whiteness” to refer to “the ways biometric information technologies are sometimes inscribed in racializing schemas that see particular biometric systems privileging whiteness, or lightness, in the ways in which certain bodies are measured for enrollment.” Through prototypical whiteness, FTE is “calibrated to cull matches only from within specified racial and gendered groupings, leading to high FTE rates for some groupings” rather than others (Browne 2015: 114). Furthermore, images captured by cameras are often not set to capture darker skin tones, skewing the quality of images in databases (Vangara et al. 2019). Through FRT and citizen surveillance, blackness becomes entangled in limiting experiences of humanity that are reduced to violence. Drawing on Michael Lechuga (2017), the blackness of bodies becomes more intensive as that which is differentiated by surveillance technologies. For example, because whiteness is better accounted for in the creation of FRT, it is through the technological capabilities of (not) accounting for darkness that those bodies become more intensively subjects of both prosecution and misrecognition.

To counter or enact dark sousveillance, protesters and/or photographers who blur faces and therefore identifying markers evade being captured within a system of misrecognition or becoming state targets for prosecution (see Figure 3). Thinking of bodies as matter that technologies are programmed to (not) account for emphasizes that it is not black people’s humanity that whiteness is built on, but the materiality of color that whiteness is dependent on. Towns (2018: 354) re-articulates Franz Fanon’s (2008) iconic interaction with a small white child who identifies him as a “Negro” illustrated how “blackness was a tool, a technology that served a function not for Fanon but for the utility of White self-conceptions.” If this is the case, and I agree with Towns (2018), then the racialized surveillance state and civilian practices reify white perceptions of their humanity rather than the dehumanization of black people. What anonymizing technologies do, by blurring faces, is make visible not the identity of black people, as technologies and the surveillant gaze seek to do, but the relationship whiteness has with the surveillance state.

These anonymized images challenge viewers to “see” black people as untethered from whiteness and the violence it inflicts. Such a tactic is an evasive one of dark sousveillance that operates through anonymization and blurriness. This anonymization interrupts the alignment of black bodies with the underlying whiteness of surveillance. It does so by shifting the perspective away from surveillance and challenging one’s capacity to “see,” target, and criminalize. In doing so, blurred and anonymized images challenge onlookers to question their alignment with the state and to reflect on their role in its violence.

Here, surveillance technologies and civilians’ (in)abilities to categorize and classify their subjects collide with affect theory. Surveillance practices depend on ordering what is (mis)represented in its line of sight. Affect, on the contrary, considers the bodily senses that, for some prominent affect scholars such as Brian Massumi (2002: 24–25), cannot fully be captured, liberating it “from organizing systems of representation” (Colebrook 2002: 22). In representational schemas from media to surveillance, representations of blackness tend, as Herman Gray (2015: 1109) posits, to “affirm diversity and intensify the visibility of Blackness as a marker of social difference, making it the object of distinct sentiments and attachments, including negative and charged emotions of fear, threat and danger.” From violent responses by police officers to claims of black men like Trayvon Martin as “suspicious” to sympathizers emphasizing victims’ backgrounds of

criminal behavior as justification of the violence enacted towards them, blackness tends to be represented as a threat and dangerous (Gray 2015: 1109). Indeed, much of the rhetoric I have discussed thus far demonstrates how surveillance reinforces the limited caricature of blackness. When images are anonymized, the affective potential for black humanity is untethered from narrow categorizations and representations of the black body as a site for violence and prosecution.



Figure 3: Edited version of “A young woman wearing a mask and Black Lives Matter t-shirt during a #BlackLivesMatter public demonstration in Cincinnati” (Garvie 2020; Wan 2020).

This affective potential shifts the onlooker’s alignment from seeing and feeling with the state. Surveillance ways of (white) looking are dependent on affect, or as Marnie Ritchie (2015: 193) argues, “feeling for the state,” which means “experiencing certain bodies as out of place... to encourage state action.” The use of blurring and scrubbing technologies makes visible the violence of state surveillance on black lives and viewers’ implicit connection to it. While BLM protests are in response to the police killings of black men and women all around the country, these blurred images certainly speak to the larger goal of the movement to “to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” by altering the visual capacities of the state and others (Black Lives Matter n.d.).

By making visible the violence of the surveillance state, the images change the affective dimensions of viewers’ relationship to the surveillance of black lives. These blurred photos make the fear of being surveilled, too, a visible conduit in the violence against black people. They force viewers to, as Victoria Gallagher and Kenneth Zagacki (2007: 116) posit photographs may do, “look at subjects [who] have otherwise chosen to ignore” and “imagine [oneself] in their situation.” By blurring black and brown people’s faces in protest images, viewers are forced to consider why they would need to blur themselves (i.e., for safety from wrongful prosecution and violence). The images are less about representing (“I see you”) and identifying (“I know you”) protesters and more about affectively expressing what Gray (2015: 1109) suggests is “public and collective feeling about race and what it feels like to live in racialized social spaces.” One does not need to know the identity of protesters to understand the anxiety of racialized public spaces that target those documented in photographs. By being anonymous, the individuals in the images communicate that this is not only about them but also about all those affected by the violence of the surveillance state.

The rise of the surveillance state has depended on citizens' participation (Reeves 2017). It was, for example, exactly this type of participatory citizen surveillance by George Zimmerman, who was part of his neighborhood watch program, that led to the murder of Trayvon Martin (Reeves 2017; Black Lives Matter n.d.). While surveillance is framed as a tool for gathering knowledge to keep people safe, for people of color, it more often does anything but that (Svenonius 2018; Towns 2019; Virilio 2008). By denying the state's right to detect protesters and, by extension, citizens' participation in that surveillance, blurring tools function as a practice to challenge white perceptions of humanity dependent on violence inflicted on black and brown people (Browne 2015: 83, 101).

The surveillant gaze is a racialized one built into technologies rooted in whiteness. Blurred images disrupt normalized ways of looking that are wrapped up in a history of racialized surveillance (Ahmed 2004: 31–32; Browne 2015). In doing so, the images also alter the affective embodiment of looking, shifting the alignment away from the violence of the state and towards reflection on one's role in violence onto marginalized peoples and vulnerability to state violence. By challenging the relationship between whiteness, state surveillance, and recognition, such a move is a move towards communication strategies that Towns (2020b: 79) suggests “reconsider[s] recognition on our own terms, on terms that criticize the linkage between Western structures of mutual recognition and correct overgeneralizations of humanity” predicated on the racialized violence of self/Other upheld through surveillance.

The Future is Blurry

There is a presumption of authenticity that is called into question when subjects of photography and video footage remain unidentifiable. One journalist, among others, suggests that “blurring images is a form of photo manipulation that makes them less true, and is generally an unacceptable practice for documentary photography” (McBride 2020). While the author's sentiment that these images are somehow less authentic may not be intentional, it underscores the power dynamic of racialized surveillance that privileges recognition and categorization, which disenfranchises people of color. Anonymizing blurring technologies challenge the ability of viewers to “know” and asks them to re-evaluate what is considered “authentic” when it is simultaneously violent.

My article does not seek to judge what is authentic or not, yet I do suggest that “authenticity” be unhinged from “knowing” to create space for communication strategies that challenge the relationship between state surveillance and whiteness. I have argued that examining the call for and use of anonymizing blurring technologies in protests illustrates the potential to disrupt and challenge normative, racialized modes of surveillance conducted by both the state and citizens. Additionally, the rhetoric about responsible protest photography collectively promotes dark sousveillance tactics that ensure protesters' safety by obscuring and hindering the violence of surveillance. This disruption asks onlookers to consider their own relationship to the violence of the state and their own humanity, which is susceptible to that violence. Towns (2020b: 78) offers a productive critique for thinking through a relationship untethered from surveillance and recognition: “What if a new definition of humanness was based not on whether or not a White person recognizes me—whether in their citation of my articles or by putting me on an editorial board—but on a shared decolonial fight against the overrepresentation of Western man as human?” This need not be an either/or condition. Rather, Towns' (2020b) critique in conversation with dark sousveillance and the rhetorical potential of blurring technologies promotes space for thinking through the collective potential of promoting secrecy by anonymizing images made public.

Publicity is equated with democracy and secrecy is often perceived as evil (Birchall 2021; Dean 2002). From some journalists claiming that images are more authentic if faces are recognizable to former President Trump's distrust of “anonymous sources” in the intelligence community and by reporters (Karl and Marshall 2017; Kelly 2019), revealing identities upholds this false dichotomy of good versus evil within a democratic society. Moreover, sharing information openly is not positive; as Claire Birchall (2021: 93–96) argues in *Radical Secrecy*, the practice of sharing to participate automatically involves one in a process of subjectivization that, in this case, results in the surveilled and targeted subject. We know that surveillance

has long been wielded to target engaged protesters; within the surveillance state, this logic upholds violence without creating space for communication strategies that challenge and promote alternative ways of engaging in collective protests. Anonymized images are one step, not an end all be all, to engaging in the critique of the surveillance regime and the whiteness that underscores it. As a form of public secrecy, it tells us, as Jack Bratich (2007: 52) argues, “that we do not always need to seek visibility and recognition to legitimize our publics.” The use and dissemination of anonymizing tools and images do not make protest images or engagement any less impactful, but they are critical to one’s safety and to resisting surveillance practices.

The discourse and critiques of surveillance technologies and protests are integral to a future in which safety is at the forefront for black people and other people of color. This will become increasingly important as surveillance technologies, such as FRT, are adopted by civilians. Many have begun to turn their cameras back on law enforcement officials. French artist Paolo Cirio (2020) published an online exhibit called “Capture” where 4,000 police officers were “profiled with facial recognition to ban the use of it.” Developer Andrew Maximov (2020) created a video doxing (revealing someone’s identity online) riot police in Minsk, Russia. He states, “For a while now, everyone was aware the big guys could use this to identify and oppress the little guys, but we’re now approaching the technological threshold where the little guys can do it to the big guys” (Maximov 2020). This threshold is an important one for not only are civilians anonymizing their identity through blurring technologies, so too do police don masks (as was the case with the Minsk officer) and cover their name tags (as did Portland, Oregon police) in fear of being doxed (Bernstein 2020). Although once-state-surveillance technologies are being used against authorities, I have argued that the risk of sousveillance affects people of color and going “dark” may be productive for countering that risk. As the battle for freedom from state violence ensues, the need to create spaces for dissent and critique is crucial, if still blurry.

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