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Black Infrastructure:
Media and the Trap of Visibility[1]

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Surveillance

In a recent conversation with Robin D.G. Kelley entitled "Do Black Lives Matter?," Fred Moten used an intriguing word to refer to white police officers implicated in the policing, punishment, and execution of black men and women. He argued, "The *drones* that are sent into our communities represent a long standing tradition of brutal and violent technological innovation visited upon us in the most horrific ways."[2] Moten's identification of the drone as a mechanism for disciplining racialized life gestures to an implicit link between blackness, violence, and technological infrastructure.[3] These historical links find elucidation in works by scholars such as Simone Browne, who places contemporary surveillance studies in dialogue with practices of tracking and monitoring black bodies in the United States.

For Browne, the somewhat contradictory term "black luminosity" designates modes by which power seeks to know and police racial bodies.[4] Building on David Lyon's term, Browne observes that surveillance technologies create conditions for being "constantly illuminated"[5] and positions transatlantic

slavery as an antecedent to our contemporary moment.[6] In this understanding, the visibilization of citizens and subjects through identificatory documents such as the passport is linked to older techniques harnessed for the governance of blackness.[7] Black luminosity creates a condition wherein blackness is rendered permanently visible, knowable, and traceable through a range of technological prostheses. Today, as mechanisms of surveillance become sharper and more pervasive, the purchase of such an analytical lens is evident, both for its focus on technologies of governance and for its identification of blackness as the ground on which these technologies test their efficacy.

In what follows, I take these provocations seriously but diverge from them in one crucial sense. Pushing slightly against the grain of Browne's cultural studies–oriented approach, I want to question the efficacy of a politics of resistance premised on the manipulation of visibility. While the field of cultural studies has been methodologically useful for prying open a space to think through the materiality of technology, its approach to the politics of resistance perhaps needs further consideration. In Browne's work—as I will explain at the end—this issue surfaces with reference to surveillance systems supplying "both strategies of coping and critique."[8] Beginning with the relationship between blackness and transparency (a word that falls at an angle to Browne's luminosity), I offer a set of counter-provocations that speaks a little differently to the relations between blackness, violence, and technological infrastructure.

Transparency

In his revealing study of the evolution of cinematic lighting, pioneering cultural studies scholar Richard Dyer alerted us to the manner in which whiteness functions as an unmarked industrial standard. There, Dyer demonstrated how, even as the normative coordinates for "correct" lighting were established, the racialized basis of the norm was elided. Thus, white bodies became de facto exemplars of good lighting technique.[9] Following Dyer, I suggest that if whiteness evades description, blackness is saturated with signifiers. I am interested in the way that this excessive saturation functions as a regulative technology deployed to manage and control blackness. The fundamental contention in what follows is that blackness exists at the edge of thought,[10] and as such, is inassimilable within regimes of

(liberal) governance or social critique. The repeated and contradictory marking of blackness—from the literal violence of racism to the critical impulse to "enlighten" objects of analysis—is part of a set of "cultural techniques"[11] that grapple with the ontological priority of blackness and its recalcitrance vis-à-vis the politics of relation.

To label a space, object, or phenomenon "black" is to simultaneously evacuate it of representation and load it with meaning. Conventionally, whiteness is equated with transparency and blackness with opacity. While transparency hides the fact of mediation, opacity foregrounds it. The transparent appears as transcendent and without frames, whereas the opaque is always assumed to be caught in a wide network of flows that occlude visual access. As I stated above, even as visual analyses influenced by cultural studies like Dyer's and Browne's help us ground technologies in material relations of power, they also implicitly point to the futility of demanding "better representation" as a form of politics. However, far too often, this latter point remains implicit. This prevents a key question—when the apparatus is constitutively racist, what does an image of equality look like?—from being posed as sharply as it should be.

To focus on the image in the hope of producing a better model of social relations is to ignore the foundational asociality of blackness—that blackness is a regulative tactic of its own kind. Blackness comes prior to the social and refuses relationality. Alexander Galloway writes in his book on French philosopher François Laruelle that "the blanket totality of black . . . is the foundation of a new uchromia, a new color utopia rooted in the generic black universe."[12] As a "crypto–ontology" that is "absolutely foreclosed to being," blackness withdraws from color.[13] It refuses determination in relation to the regime of light, transparency, color, or whiteness. In other words, it strains against both representational and governmental conventions. At the same time, blackness is the foundational principle of the world—in Moten's sense, it incites power into existence. To make this point clearer, I will consider three mundane fragments of regulation from the landscape of global media that attempt to *mark* blackness as a mode of understanding it. In working through these fragments, I demonstrate how social figuration is a political response to the inability to incorporate the priority of blackness as ground.

Three Snapshots

1. The Salt Pit is a former brick factory, located northeast of Kabul in Afghanistan. It is a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) black site where "ghost detainees" apprehended in the United States' Global War on Terror are held captive and tortured for information.[14]

2. Pine Gap is the common name for a satellite tracking station located in Australia, southwest of the town of Alice Springs, run jointly by the CIA, the National Security Agency (NSA), and the US National Reconnaissance Office (NRO). Uninhabitable to large human populations due to devastating environmental conditions, this space is ideal for the blossoming of a small but crucial arm of the global security apparatus dedicated to signals intelligence.[15]

3. The Onion Router (TOR) is a Web browser designed to hide one's digital tracks. In the aftermath of Edward Snowden's revelations about NSA spying, as the usefulness of encryption and data obfuscation has became more apparent, TOR has garnered wide attention as a method for escaping the gaze of intelligence agencies.

According to popular discourses, entities like the Salt Pit, Pine Gap, and the TOR browser share a certain disposition towards blackness. Although they are located at opposite ends of the political spectrum, the Salt Pit and Pine Gap are part of a "dark" security infrastructure, whereas TOR allows users to "go dark" as a response to communication surveillance. They all gesture to the hidden, secretive, and invisible. Artist and cultural geographer Trevor Paglen refers to spaces like the Salt Pit as emblematic of a "dark geography."[16] Moreover, intelligence gathering is intimately linked to black sites and black operations, network culture uses the term "dark fiber" for unused fiber-optic cables, social theory decrypts black boxes, black markets proliferate globally, the clandestine portion of the Internet is referred to as the Dark Web, and political parties periodically announce the arrival of dark times.[17] Such references to blackness are paradoxical, because blackness ceases to be black in the moment we give it shape. When we invoke black boxes and dark geographies, we do so with an eye to the illumination of these spaces as a political response to their hiddenness. Such a move is structurally analogous to the belief that fairer (re)presentation can overcome the

inherent racism of apparatuses. Both logics play into the belief that making something visible is an adequately political act. By contrast, the recognition of blackness as ground helps show how such moves—no matter what their political proclivity—are part of a larger apparatus of governance and regulation. By saturating blackness with signifiers, security agencies, hackers, and social critics alike attempt to relate blackness to a regime of governance it does not accept. As ground, blackness determines this apparatus before it is determined by it.

Figure/Ground

The issue of grounding appears clearly in Marshall McLuhan's claim that the figure/ground distinction sustains how any object survives in the world. Our perceptual and interpretive apparatuses are trained to focus on only the figure, not the ground. The figure appears to be structured, and is thus subject to ideological, sociological, and contextual analysis, while the ground is overlooked as insignificant.[18] McLuhan's attempt to correct this flawed approach is summarized in his phrase "the medium is the message."[19] In simple terms, this formula alerts us to the error of thinking about the figure without considering the ground. Formalist analyses of cinema, fine arts, or other media often overlook infrastructure and engage only with the content or figure of a work. Recognizing the limits of such an approach, scholars have begun to think more closely about social infrastructures in recent years. In a comprehensive review essay, Brian Larkin argues, "What distinguishes infrastructures from technologies is that they are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems."[20] Larkin's essay is motivated by a dissatisfaction with tendencies to ignore or efface the infrastructural in favor of the social or the semiotic. He argues that recognition of the relative autonomy of infrastructure as a self-sustaining logic must be accompanied by attention to infrastructure as the object of scholarly analysis.[21]

Though provocative, anthropologies of infrastructure and archaeological excavations of media's materiality tend either to flatten figure and ground or to raise the latter to the same level as the former. They do not adequately consider the possibility that figure and ground are not temporally simultaneous. Instead, ground is prior to figuration. An inability to address this temporal distinction plagues infrastructural analysis, which usually

resorts to meticulous description or takes recourse to a language of visibilization. For example, Nicole Starosielski's formidable essay on underwater Internet fiber-optic cables is organized around the problematic of visibility and seeks to "make visible the material systems that support an "immaterial" internet."[22] The project of making something visible begins with the assumption that the apparatus of information society is hidden and must be brought into public consciousness. It ignores the fact that visibility per se is not political.[23] The desire to unveil blackness continues to hold in place the representational conventions upon which the social is rendered intelligible.

Blackness is infrastructural in the sense that it is the medium even when it is not the message. Fred Moten's work usefully reverses the temporality of social order by arguing that it is blackness, not governance that comes prior. Rather than rehearse the familiar narrative of state power imposing itself on the social, Moten suggests that blackness possesses an originary (or in his words, "anoriginary") freedom that is prior to government. This essential freedom of blackness calls the apparatus of capture into being; the state emerges as a force that will ensnare and trap black freedom.[24] To accept the priority of blackness-as-ground is also to acknowledge the violence that accompanies priority. Regulative power—whether in the form of the police or interpretive frames dedicated to illumination—seeks to mark anoriginary blackness precisely because it structures the world without seeking a relation to it. Unlike, say, the workers' movement, blackness is not a response to regulative power. Power is a response to the uncontainable priority of blackness.

Colored Black

To better understand why priority poses a problem that requires regulation, it is helpful to consider color. Esther Leslie writes of the modern alchemical process whereby German chemists in the nineteenth century began developing synthetic substances—including colors—from coal. She argues, "Through coal's carbon chemistry, and its waste product of coal-tar, a realm of synthetic colours and substances is unlocked from a dense and primitive blackness."[25] In the 1830s, coal "reintroduced wonderment into chemistry" by letting color "glitte[r] forth from blackness" in a kind of magical process.[26] On a philosophical register, blackness, as "anterior to both light and dark," "is less a color and more the withdrawal of every relation between self and the

world."[27] As Eugene Thacker notes, color theory has always been indecisive about whether black is a color at all.[28] Does blackness designate the absence of light or an inability to reflect it? Is it a non-color or the color that subsumes all others?

These tensions are visible in modernism's fascination with blackness as artistic surface. Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) and Ad Reinhardt's black *Abstract Painting* (1963) are just two examples. While Malevich's work can be read as part of the wider modernist rejection of representational conventions, Reinhardt's monochrome is not actually a monochrome. The more time a viewer spends looking at the artwork, the more clearly she sees that it actually contains a grid structure composed of different shades. Critics and art historians suggest that there are several ways to interpret black canvases like these—or indeed, blank canvases in general. We can understand blackness either as a meta-commentary on the limits of the pictorial or as a metaphor for larger social processes like historical trauma that exceed representation. The paintings in question collapse figure and ground and, in the process, deconstruct the former but leave the latter intact. But such reduction of figure to ground often goes hand-in-hand with a highly materialist process of production that occurs at the interface of the human and the infrastructural. Thacker writes that artists produce "their black artworks through very material, physical processes that are also processes of negation: rubbing, smearing, smudging, and erasing material like graphite or charcoal into shards of powder and dust."[29] Negation therefore occurs not merely at the level of the canvas but even before the canvas is marked.

Leslie and Thacker implicitly gesture to black anteriority in a vein similar to Moten. Drawing on their work, I want to emphasize the fundamental instability of blackness, which simultaneously stands at the origin of the world and affects its negation. Within this scheme of things, the oversaturation of blackness as signifier is a regulative response that attempts —through violence, interpretation, and the opening up of blackness—to capture something that exceeds relation within the grid of intelligible politics. Even as abstraction visually reduces figure to ground, it cannot come to terms with the ground without wreaking material violence on the canvas. The monochromatic non-figuration of modernism is, then, always already marked by (white) violence as the dominant mode of relating to blackness.

Black Universe, Gray Media

Returning to the three snapshots I invoked earlier, it is now possible to claim that each of these exemplifies what I am calling a "regulative response to black priority."Anoriginary blackness—blackness foreclosed to being, nonrelational yet prior to the world—marks the limit of the thinkable in such a manner that even a work as sophisticated as Thacker's completely elides the racial grounding on which "the horror of philosophy" is figured.[30] Descriptive accounts of blackness—either in the critique of the security state or through the valorization of encrypted resistance—attempt to mark, negate, or capture this ground. By resorting to the language of shadows, light, and revelation, such efforts repeatedly produce blackness as an anomaly to be dispelled or leveraged through the strategic play of visuality. Photograph black sites to make them "public." Expose secret geographies. Go dark to escape surveillance. These imaginations of a world without blackness, which emanate differently from various points of the political spectrum, are fantasies constitutive of regulative power.

In this context, Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey's concept of "gray media" offers one route for rethinking blackness beyond the optical.[31] Gray media not only play with the field of visibility, but, more importantly, acknowledge opacity and ambiguity as grounds of mediation. By extension, a gray medial position pushes against the tendency to identify spaces of resistance within apparatuses of capture. This tendency was—and perhaps continues to be—popular within the disciplinary framework of cultural studies, where any formation of power is often seen as open to its own potential subversion. In this article, I have tried to articulate a tentative skepticism towards the imperative to read power in this double-edged manner that remains inevitably incomplete. In doing so, I do not suggest a "total system" that is self-enclosed and cannot be countered except by revolutionary means. Rather, my attempt at grappling with the priority of blackness is part of an effort to rethink power as (forever?) reactive and regulative. The insistence on priority is perhaps resolutely ahistorical because it imagines a moment that preceded apparatuses of capture.

Of course, that does not mean that Dyer's or Browne's historically specific narratives of escape, subversion, and resistance are erroneous. Nor does it mean that systems of domination are utterly sealed off from the possibility of

rupture. However, rather than privilege power as the site where totality is fractured, I want—however foolishly—to hold out for the possibility that the "something" prior to power that blackness designates always already determines the nature of power itself. Thus, blackness is constitutive; it is neither an aberration nor an effect of power. And as a constitutive force, blackness is an originary condition that leads François Laruelle to claim that "Black prior to light is the substance of the Universe, what escaped from the World before the World was born into the World."[32]

Notes

1 This is an allusion to Michel Foucault's famous statement, "Visibility is a trap" in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 206. Although I borrow Foucault's tendency to express skepticism of the visible, the crux of the formulations that follow might not always be easy to reconcile with a Foucauldian diagnosis.

2 "Do Black Lives Matter? Robin D.G. Kelley and Fred Moten in Conversation," Vimeo video, from a Critical Resistance event on Dec.13, 2014 in Oakland, CA, posted by "Critical Resistance," Jan. 2015, vimeo.com/116111740. Emphasis added.

3 Moten is often careful to distinguish between *blackness* and *black people*, a distinction I too would like to attempt. However, here, as in Moten's work (which I cite below), I am unsure that the distinction is sustainable beyond a point.

4 Simone Browne, "Everybody's Got a Little Light Under the Sun: Black Luminosity and the Visual Culture of Surveillance," *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 4 (2012): 542-564, 546.

5 Ibid., 551. Here, Browne is quoting David Lyon, *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life* (Buckingham, UK and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001), 53.

6 Ibid., 547.

7 While Browne's argument on this score is compelling and convincing, it might be worth remembering that the plethora of surveillance technologies she points to were not entirely specific to the experience of slavery. For example, Radhika Singha's work on colonial forms of identification fleshes out a similar genealogy that complements Browne's account and makes the implicit case for globalizing our conception of blackness beyond the immediate experience of North America (cf. note 16). See Radhika Singha, "Settle, Mobilize, Verify: Identification Practices in Colonial India," *Studies in History* 16, no. 2 (2000): 151–198.

8 Ibid., 546.

9 Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

10 For a detailed exposition of such edges, see Eugene Thacker's three-volume work *The Horror of Philosophy*, especially the second volume, *Starry Speculative Corpse* (London: Zero Books, 2015).

11 Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

12 Alexander Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 145.

13 Ibid., 145–150.

14 For further exploration of "ghost detainees," see Andrea Miller's article, "Ghost Photography in the War on Terror: Manadel al-Jamadi, Abu Ghraib, and the Shadow of Surveillance" in this issue.

15 Manuel DeLanda, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 206–207.

16 Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

17 I am consciously conflating "blackness" and "darkness" not only because they are conflated in everyday speech, but more importantly because an infusion of "darkness" into the rhetoric of blackness serves to usefully decenter the North American experience of race by throwing it into a more global framework.

18 Felix Stalder, "Ground to Actor–Networks: McLuhan and Latour," conference paper, Many Dimensions: The Extensions of Marshall McLuhan Conference, Toronto, October 1998, felix.openflows.com/html/mcluhan_latour.html.

19 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2001).

20 Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 327-343, 329.

21 Ibid., 336–38.

22 Nicole Starosielski, ""Warning: Do Not Dig": Negotiating the Visibility of Critical Infrastructures," *Journal of Visual Culture* 11, no. 1 (2012): 38–57, 38.

23 See Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

24 The question of priority is predominant in many of Moten's works, but for a succinct summary, see the chapter "Blackness and Governance" in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013). Also instructive is Moten's essay "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737–780. However, I should note that, while Moten's work is crucial for me, the present essay is also unfaithful to his fundamental and emphatic allegiance to sociality.

25 Esther Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 8.

26 Ibid., 46.

27 Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse*, 52, 51.

28 Ibid., 52.

29 Ibid., 60.

30 This phrase provides the title for Thacker's aforementioned three-volume work on philosophy.

31 Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey, *Evil Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 1.

32 François Laruelle, "On the Black Universe," in Eugene Thacker, Daniel Colucciello Barber, Nicola Masciandaro, Alexander Galloway, François Laruelle, and Aaron Metté, *Dark Nights of the Universe*, (Miami: [NAME] Publications, 2013), 102-109, 105.

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