

THE EYES ON ALL PEOPLE: POLICING THE CITY UPON A HILL

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In memoriam Giulio Regeni 1988-2016

In the spring of 2020, as the world struggled to grapple with the spread of COVID-19 and the “new normal” that ensued, the collective discourse on mass surveillance took the center stage. State practices meant to monitor the pandemic made some private citizens feel stripped of their privacy and civil liberties. If distance learning and remote work preserved the world’s capacity to, at least seemingly, move forward, they also fostered the conditions of possibility for often unwanted and intrusive eyes to enter the private sphere of students, workers, and subordinate subjects in general, in the name of rigor, fairness, and productivity. The growing appeals to states of exception further called attention to the role of systematic policing in stabilizing authority. As surveillance capitalism entered a new phase, in which its panoptic gaze became more fluid, pervasive, and naturalized, we found ourselves in need to think deeper about the relationship between the figurative watchmen and those under their scrutiny.

On May 25th, the stream of news paced by data on the death toll of the virus and scrambled state officials press conferences, was disrupted by footage documenting Derek Chauvin’s murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. As Floyd repeated “I can’t breathe” twenty-seven times over the course of 9 minutes and 29 seconds, our bodies felt the spectral reverberation of Eric Garner’s words from six years earlier. Videos recorded by private citizens—yet another form of surveillance, enabled by technological development—of the deliberate and gratuitous killing of a black man, made an all too

common event in America the defining image of the nation in the summer of 2020. As Alessandro Portelli has suggested, the figure of Chauvin standing on Floyd's body produced a quasi-mythological resonance—the triumph of St. George slaying the dragon, the refiguration of a colonial white hunter kneeling beside his beastly prey for the photographer to capture the victory of civilization over savagery. Yet, Portelli continues, as suggestive as the interpretation of the symbolic might be, Floyd's public lynching is first and foremost a vividly violent representation of the United States' police apparatus and its brazen activity. What happened in Minneapolis is not to be dematerialized as a symbolic portrayal of power dynamics in the US, but rather to be taken as an all too concrete manifestation of “the current shape of relations of domination, naked violence, with neither fictions nor filters” (2020, 8).¹

During the protests that followed Floyd's murder, Juvenal's question from *Satire VI*—“*quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*” or “who watches the watchmen?”—appeared on a wall in Washington DC. The Roman poet's words lived well beyond his intended meaning and became something of a universal rant against dictators and oppressive governments, and, as such, came to voice popular dissatisfaction with the state of policing (or the police state, according to some) in the US. The demonstrations across the nation, and the ensuing backlash from law enforcement and media outlets alike, reveal a deep-seated indignation towards the ways in which institutional policing consistently targets the subaltern in the name of a perfectly-engineered City Upon a Hill and the capitalistic permutation of its transcendental concept of social order. When John Winthrop declaimed his famous sermon on board of the *Arbella* on April 8, 1630, it's hard to imagine that he would anticipate the grandeur of his (somewhat paranoid, already) allegory of a “City Upon a Hill” slouching towards a fairly dystopian reality. Winthrop's vision, “the eyes of all people” turned upon the rising New World, can be retrospectively read as an early, if only metaphysical, figuration of panoptic undercurrents in the United States, which in time would develop into a far more

¹ Translated from Italian by the authors.

concrete surveillance and control apparatus enforced to safeguard social and ethical order.

As symbol and allegory, the “City Upon a Hill” continues to be part of the US public and political rhetoric—and so do its implicit accoutrements, whose diverse incarnations entered the literary discourse to be revealed and investigated, reproduced or challenged, by American literature throughout its historical evolution. From Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, literature has often reminded us that order, even when not deferred to the State, has been violently enforced through coercion, stigma, or segregation. Narratives produced by works such as W. E. B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction in America*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and, more recently, Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, offer figurations of the United States’ leviathan policing apparatus, and proof of its sweeping power. Through such literary works, we are introduced to the ways in which the bodies of citizens are marshaled, revealing the momentous role of bio- and necropolitical powers in the social, political, and cultural definition of the subject. This is evident, for instance, in the US prison system, with its world-record constellation of institutions that actively re-design the institutional contours of national social inequality while also standing as a demonstration of how unfettered capitalism (even in its neoliberalist guise) predates on minoritarian and oppressed subjects for its reproduction.

If racialized violence that has been perpetrated since the Federalist Era through both institutional and private forms of racial policing reverberates in the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery, the protesting, marching, and rioting that ensued in the summer of 2020—culminating in the Defund the Police movement and in the deployment of federal troops to contain protests and protestors—point to the desire of new forms of governance (and self-governance) from the opposite poles of the political spectrum: a counter-apparatus from below, aiming to citizens empowerment and liberation, on the one hand, and what we may call a “neo-conservative revolution,” aimed at preserving old white patriarchal structures. Filmmaker Stanley Nelson has described the early activities of the Black Panthers Party

in Oakland as “policing the police,” at a time when police brutality towards the black community was believed to be at its height. In addition to providing food, clothing, and transportation, the Panther’s community service programs, adequately called “survival programs,” aimed at challenging, exposing, and preventing (often by all means necessary) police malpractice. Despite and because of the affordances of technology, such tactics of policing “from below” have grown exponentially in recent decades, as exemplified by the aforementioned recordings of Floyd’s murder, a synecdoche for the countless witnesses and victims documenting abuses that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. Meanwhile, structured initiatives, such as the Immigrant Defense Project, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and Assata’s Daughters, as well as other loose-knit groups of independent collectives, continue to provide support and essential care to minoritarian citizens, including the scrutiny of state policies (and policing practices) working to their detriment.

Yet, as the Defund the Police movement gained steam, the *other* America pushed back, relentlessly attempting to preserve an ever-failing status quo through means that increasingly exceed what Louis Althusser has called the State Repressive Apparatus and include an array of modalities perpetuated by private citizens. The social dystopia depicted in a number of artifacts from popular culture such as *The Walking Dead* (2010), *Revolution* (2012), and *Watchmen* (2019), predicted the schizophrenic wavering of self-styled right wing militia that we witnessed over the past two years. If in the spring of 2020 private police militia marched the streets to show their support to law enforcement (leading to, among other acts of violence, the shooting of two unarmed protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin at the hand of a 17 year old white man), six months later, on January 6th, 2021, a mob of supporters of President Donald Trump led an unprecedented attack on the United States Capitol.

The essays in this special issue not only aim to discuss representations and histories of police and *policing* in the United States but also analyze (and produce) counter-imaginaries, modes of care that aim at seeing, rather than watching, citizens and bodies. An investigation of the current state of policing in the US through its cultural production is not only useful to unveil the strategies of power currently

undergirding the layout of the American chessboard. Understanding the grammar of control that underlines quotidian social dynamics, a syntax that is embedded, reproduced, or denounced by literature and other cultural representations of our social reality, allows us to piece together the tiles that reveal the extraordinary extension of contemporary modes of state and corporate-sanctioned discipline and punishment. Acting, moving, exerting its power across race, gender, and class lines, the thousand-eyed leviathan of virtually unrestrained neoliberalist vigilance not only dispose of bodies, psyches, and identities, but in so doing it channels our understanding of such vital spheres, at the same time exerting its influence on society and leaving a mark in its cultural production.

In “Security and Surveillance: Los Angeles Police and Land Abuses in Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice*,” Antonio Di Vilio’s reading of Thomas Pynchon’s 2009 novel brings the politics and policing of public spaces in 1960s Los Angeles to the fore, shedding light on the processes that make a hyper-surveilled postmodern city the site for ideological clashes over the very meaning of freedom and civil rights. Dwelling on the ground of civil rights, yet at a different historical conjuncture, Andrea Carosso’s “The Post-9/11 Security State: Surveilling America Arabs and Muslims in the 21st Century” provides an account of the September 11 attacks as a gateway to build what he calls “a massive surveillance apparatus.” According to Carosso, the Bush administration’s response to the attack resulted in the erosion of civil liberties and rights for ethnic and religious groups until then perceived as a “silent minority,” despite their complex diasporic histories.

Lindsey Albracht and Amy J. Wan bring the conversation to a terrain most familiar to *JAm It!*’s readers. “Beyond ‘Bad’ Cops: Historicizing and Resisting Surveillance Culture in Universities” provides a much needed perspective on the role of surveillance technology in higher education, especially in the context of distance learning. Albracht and Wan make use of their personal experience as instructors at CUNY, the largest public university in New York City, to offer suggestions and alternatives to submitting pedagogy to surveillance culture.

Eva Puyuelo Ureña joins the rich debate around Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015) and provides a poignant commentary on the dynamics of empathy it fosters. Through the lens of black phenomenology, "Vessels of Flesh and Blood: Policing and Racial (Dis)Identifications in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*," reads the relationships between the paradigmatic abstraction of the Black body and its physical reality in their ability to forge a shared historical narrative innervated by trauma and discrimination. Likewise, in "Dialogically Destabilizing Discourses of Power/Knowledge in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," Zebulah Baldwin also investigates the power relations that determine the visibility or lack thereof of the black body. Baldwin proposes a sophisticated rhetorical and dialogical analysis of Ellison's celebrated novel. The essay tackles Ellison's representations of hierarchized subjects in mid-twentieth-century America, offering a new understanding of the unnamed protagonist's quest for visibility through the symbolic ambiguity that underlines his parable. From one of the most celebrated black US authors of the 20th century, Elisa Pesce takes us to one of the most engagé contemporary African American authors: Jesmyn Ward. Pesce highlights how the National Book Award-winning *Sing, Unburied, Sing* provides a commentary on the way the African American community has been pushed to the margins of citizenship through incessant necropolitical power. Through the analysis of the role of children in the novel, Pesce offers a fascinating scrutiny of the youngest generation's potentiality to redeem an otherwise marred socio-historical narrative.

This special issue of *JAm It!* on the role of acts and counteracts of surveillance in the definition of an unstable dialectics between the state and its citizens seems particularly relevant in light of 2021 marking the 20th anniversary of the Italian Republic's most ignominious act of police violence against its citizens: the 2001 raid on the "Armando Diaz" school in Genoa, an event that has been defined by Amnesty International as an example of "human rights violation never before seen in recent European history" (2018). On July 21st, just before midnight, almost 500 officers unleashed their bloodlust on the occupants of the building—unarmed protestors (many of them students and some of them underage) who had gathered in Genoa to march

against the world politics of the G8 leaders—resulting in 61 serious injuries. 222 protestors were later brought to a nearby temporary detention facility and savagely tortured. At a time when protests sparkled everywhere in the US, we couldn't help but remember that defining moment in our lives, one that shattered our trust in institutions before our political consciousness was even fully formed. The sense of helplessness our former selves felt, for a gratuitous act of violence towards citizens invested in their political commitment to create a more just world, pushed us to co-edit this special issue. The authors of the essays that follow, to whom goes our gratitude for their rigor and patience during the editorial process, each provide a small contribution to the understanding of what is needed, from a humanities perspective, to engage in that struggle.

Yet, as Jacques Derrida writes, no justice is possible without a principle of responsibility, of respect for those who are no longer, “be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism” (2006, xviii). As such, we would like to conclude by dedicating this issue to the memory of Giulio Regeni, a fellow Italian scholar and a devoted researcher at Girton College, whose hunger for knowledge made him the target of military brutality, torture, and ultimately, death in Egypt in the winter of 2016. To him, and to all those who struggle incessantly to foster our understanding of the processes that hinder, or promote, our vital quest for justice, also goes our unfailing gratitude.

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