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"There is Power in Looking": The Oppositional Gaze in Black Women's Sousveillance Practices When Encountering Police

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Abstract: This article examines how Black women use multiple consciousness as a tool to perform sousveillance practices against bureaucratic systems, specifically law enforcement or police. More specifically, the article examines how Black women use multiple consciousness to develop an oppositional gaze and become critical Black female spectators to police actions through sousveillance. The article used a mixed-methods approach to analyze six traffic stops and the sousveillance practices that Black women use to critique police. The author argues that Black women's sousveillance practices form from their oppositional gaze, and critical Black female spectatorship gives Black women autonomy over their experiences, allows them to show the truth of Black life, resists bureaucratic systems, and creates counternarratives to racist narratives of Black experiences with the police.

Keywords: Black women, African American, sousveillance, multiple consciousness, oppositional gaze

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Introduction

In 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world witnessed the modern-day lynching of a Black man, George Floyd. The witnessing of Black folks' reality—the brutality of police—was made possible through Darnella Fraizer's recording of Floyd's murder. While this young Black girl was harassed and ridiculed by some, one can't deny how her "watching from below" impacted not only police departments but individuals and caused them to consider the question, "Do you like what you see?"

The reality is Black women have realized the "power in looking" and the need for what Steve Mann calls sousveillance, an "observation or recording by an entity not in a position of power or authority over the subject of the veillance" (6). Black women have been able to recognize and use sousveillance through their multiple consciousness, which is Black women's awareness of their multiple identities and how they truly exist versus how the world perceives them. Essential to sousveillance is its reflectionism which uses "technology to mirror and confront bureaucratic organizations" (Mann et al. 333). Mann et al. note that sousveillance can give those with little to no power a sense of self-empowerment and aid them in mastering the gaze (448). Additionally, Simone Browne extends the original definition of sousveillance, coining the term dark sousveillance to describe "the ways that tools of social control in plantation surveillance and beyond were appro-

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priated, repurposed, co-opted, and also challenged to facilitate escape" (*Dark Matters* 21; "Simone Browne" 4:47–4:58). The simple questioning of bureaucratic organizations through sousveillance's reflectionism and Browne's definition of sousveillance allows one to resist surveillance, abuses of power, and dominant structures within organizations.

Examining Black women's sousveillance through these definitions permits an understanding of how Black women interact with technology aside from the intended purposes to neutralize surveillance and establish practices within our surveilled society that forge paths, uncover and preserve truths, and resist and remove current barriers. When sousveillance is combined with mobile networked technologies that are linked to social media networks, sousveillance can be a dynamic force to disrupt and change antiblack narratives of policing Black bodies. Judith Butler notes that videos of police brutality that do not hold police accountable through convictions do so by shaping narratives around the videos that clearly depict police brutality against Black people and construing them within a "racist interpretive framework" to alter how one sees the actions taking place (16). Butler offers up the claim that readings within the racist interpretive framework need counterreadings to expose the truth of brutality. Throughout this article, I refer to Black women watching from below through *Facebook* videos (live or uploads) as a form of sousveillance.

In this article, I argue that Black women's sousveillance of their encounters with law enforcement is an attempt at offering these counter readings of police brutality. I use a Black feminist perspective to continue Simone Browne's focus on tools as a form of resistance, centering Black women's specific lived experiences with racialized and gendered surveillance and how Black women's multiple consciousness is used to look (or gaze) back at those in positions of power through digital technology. I analyze how Black women use social media features (live videos and video uploads) as a tool to "talk back" to and resist harmful law enforcement surveillance practices. I argue that it is through what bell hooks calls the oppositional gaze—the "rebellious desire" of Black people to look despite the repression of Black peoples' right to look—that Black women become critical spectators of police surveillance practices (116). Being able to "surveil the surveillers," Black women can sousveil those in power, use current digital technologies to neutralize surveillance, and resist surveillance practices that harm Black women and others within Black communities (Mann et al. 332).

Theoretical Framework

To examine the autonomy and power Black women forge by enacting sousveillance in encounters with police, I take up the following question: how is Black women's multiple consciousness displayed in their use of social media as a veillance technology? Within this question, I seek to answer three supporting questions:

1. How are Black women expected to engage in or mediate in activities through digital technology when interacting with bureaucratic systems, specifically law enforcement?

2. To what extent do Black women participate in the expected activities of bureaucratic systems when sousveiling them?

3. How do Black women evaluate bureaucratic systems, evoking reflectionism, when sousveiling law enforcement?

To address these questions, I use the theoretical frames of Black women's multiple consciousness, oppositional gaze, and sousveillance to form the understandings of Black women's sousveillance practices as distributed on *Facebook* and similar social media platforms. Black women's multiple consciousness is an extension of W. E. B. DuBois' theory of double consciousness and acknowledges how Black women's overlapping identities of gender and race are essential to understanding the lived experiences of those who are multiply marginalized (Spillers). Black women's multiple consciousness opposes dominant conceptions of discrimination that "condition us to think about subordination as a disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" (Crenshaw 140). Additionally, Black women's multiple consciousness allows us to create new paths for navigating a White patriarchal society and resist the negative stereotypes and discrimination of Black women in particular. For this study, Black women's multiple consciousness provides a distinct perspective into Black women's experiences with law enforcement and how we use digital technology to showcase our experiences and resist surveillance practices.

Black women's multiple consciousness also aids in the formation of what bell hooks calls the oppositional gaze. hooks defines the oppositional gaze as the "rebellious desire" of Black people to look despite the repression of Black peoples' right to look (116). Developing this oppositional gaze permits Black women to participate in critical Black female spectatorship (hooks 122–123). hooks further notes that Black female spectators are aware of how race and racism influence "the visual construction of gender" (122). Thus, Black women's oppositional gaze stems from an awareness of multiple consciousness and depicts Black women's multiple consciousness. hooks emphasizes that being multiply conscious of discrimination and devaluation as Black women contribute to the development of the oppositional gaze and explains that this form of looking provides a sense of satisfaction in its resistance (123–127). In this study, Black women's oppositional gaze permits both visual and verbal representations of Black women's multiple consciousness and shows how critical Black female spectatorship critiques surveillance practices through sousveillance.

Sousveillance is often briefly defined as watching from below or inverse surveillance (Mann 6). Black Americans have used sousveillance to navigate a white hegemonic society and resist the surveillance of Black bodies (*Dark Matters*; Mann). As a form of reflectionism, sousveillance allows those not in power positions to use "technology to mirror and confront bureaucratic organizations," which includes using the tools of social controllers against organizations (Mann et al. 333). In examining Black women's multiple consciousness through their digital technology use and literacies, sousveillance offers insight into how Black women use their knowledge intentionally to critique and resist structures of asymmetrical power and show the truth of their experiences. In this study, sousveillance through the oppositional gaze permits Black female specta-

tors to interrogate by showing the actions of those in positions of power. In sharing these actions on social media platforms, like *Facebook*, Black women maintain autonomy over the narratives of their experiences, resist by looking (or gazing) back at those in power, and use digital technology to ultimately ask those in power "Do you like what you see?" (Mann et al. 334).

Methods, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

I conducted this study using a mixed-methods approach of verbal data analysis, called coding streams of language, by Cheryl Geisler and Jason Swarts supplemented by Margarete Sandelowski et al. and W. Paul Vogt et al. Geisler and Swarts' mixed-methods approach permits the use of Black feminist theory to construct the coding categories and provides multiple means of comparing, contrasting, and examining the intersections of the coding categories described later in this section. To evaluate how Black women's multiple consciousness is invoked through the interactions of digital technology as exuded in sousveillance practices, I relied on their lived experiences as they captured their encounters with police using *Facebook* Live or videos uploaded and shared on *Facebook*. To find the videos that showed these encounters with law enforcement, criterion-based sampling was used to gather the videos. First, I searched *Google* and *Facebook* using phrases, such as "Black woman and police live," "Black woman arrested live," and "Black woman record police live." I also took up these same queries and replaced "Black" with "African American." For the protection of the identities of youth under the age of 18, all videos involving youth under the age of 18 were excluded from the sample size. The content was also filtered to only include videos from 2015 to 2022, which is suitable for this study because *Facebook* Live was not available until August 2015 and numerous Black users still use the platform. After performing *Google* and *Facebook* searches with these criteria, the samples presented in the study were selected based on convenience, particularly focusing on videos in which the full recording was available.

From this aforementioned search, six videos were selected and the audio of each traffic stop was fully transcribed for coding and analysis. To establish codes that would accurately define multiple consciousness, oppositional gaze, and critical Black female spectatorship, I first segmented the transcripts by topic chains to define the topics (or experiences) the officers and Black women are attempting to create in their dialogue. The data was then segmented by conversational turns to help determine power within the conversation. To do this, I segmented the data after each time the speakers took a turn speaking. For this study and as a nested code, the conversational turns determine who is constructing the building task (or experience), how the other is experiencing the building tasks, and whether or not their experiences align. In the nested coding, "the second dimension was applied selectively only to data that had been placed in a specific category as a result of the first coding scheme" (Geisler and Swarts 148). Lastly, the drivers' responses from the conversational turns were segmented to determine how Black women in this study evaluated the building tasks they were prompted to participate in.

After segmenting the data, I applied hooks' theory of critical Black female spectatorship along with

trends within the data to determine three coding categories, which aided in my investigation of the presence and intersection of multiple consciousness, oppositional gaze, and critical Black female spectatorship as depicted in Black women's thoughts and through their sousveillance acts. To evaluate the impact of Black women's multiple consciousness on technological interactions during moments of sousveillance, I considered that multiple consciousness, like double consciousness, is rooted in lived experiences, particularly those experiences in which one becomes aware of self through the actions and/or view of others as it pertains to race, gender, and class. I deduced that sousveillance enacted by Black women through social media is pertinent to illustrating the intersection of Black women's digital technology use, multiple consciousness, and literacies, which are reflected in oppositional gaze and critical Black female spectatorship. Since this study only assessed verbal discourse of the videos, coding definitions that would assess experiences, particularly the type of experience, were constructed. Geisler and Swarts' coding streams of language method was used to help assess how each coding category intersected and/or was interdependent. The coding definitions are organized into the three categories of building tasks, participation, and contribution, which I explain in the following paragraphs.

Using the idea of building tasks within language as proposed by James Paul Gee and as a basis for assessing experience and self, I first coded to appropriately categorize and identify experiences or realities. Gee proposed that "language-in-use is a tool, used alongside other tools, to design or build things" (11). According to Gee, this also includes using language alongside other tools to create seven areas of "reality" (11). I use Gee's concept of language as a tool to construct or build reality to analyze how Black women's multiple consciousness (or racial-gendered reality) is linguistically mediated through digital sousveillance literacy practices like oppositional gaze and critical Black female spectatorship. The three building tasks chosen for this study and inspired by Gee's building tasks and Black women's identities that prompt an oppositional gaze were Action, Knowledge, and Identity. These building tasks intend to establish the experiences that the police officer and the driver are attempting to create and show their realities with a specific focus on how the drivers, Black women, are creating and managing their realities through language. Viewing the discourse as a means of creating experiences or realities allows us to see the congruences and differences between the police officers' and Black women's experiences. I use N/A (not applicable) in all sets of coding definitions because some segments did not need to be coded due to the lack of information and/or inaudible phrases.

After deciding on and coding for building tasks (Action, Knowledge, and Identity), I used nested coding on the two remaining segmentations for each transcript to identify the sousveillance literacy practices (oppositional gaze and critical Black female spectatorship) that are prompted by Black women's multiple consciousness. These nested coding categories were based on magnitude, which "consists of and adds a supplemental alphanumeric or symbolic code or subcode to an existing coded datum or category to indicate its intensity, frequency, direction, presence, or evaluative content" (Saldaña 73). I specifically created nested coding categories to determine the intensity and evaluative content of the building tasks. Intensity of the building tasks was coded using the category of Participation (Full, Partial, None, N/A). Coding the building tasks for participation identifies how Black women engage in experiences or realities set by bureaucratic

systems like policing. This correlates with hooks' analysis of how Black women mediate their looking relations—"the extent to which black women feel devalued, objectified, dehumanized in this society determines the scope and texture of their looking relations" (127). Evaluative content of Black women's participation in the building task was coded using the category of Contributions (Critical, Neutral, Uncritical, and N/A). Coding Black women's evaluations of building tasks as contributions based on levels of critique (Critical, Neutral, Uncritical) permits an assessment of Black women's development of a critical Black female spectatorship. In relation to hooks, the coding definitions of contributions aid in the identification of a "broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels" that critical Black female spectators engage in (128). Full coding definitions for building tasks, participation, and contributions are displayed in table 1, table 2, and table 3.

Codes for Building Tasks, Participation, and Contributions

Table 1: A table providing definitions for the building tasks codes used within this study.

Building Tasks Codes	Definitions
Action	Code as action any topic chain in which the driver (D) and/or police officer (P) are completing or attempting to complete an activity. Actions can include obtaining physical property from the driver and/or removing the driver from the vehicle.
Identity	Code as identity any topic chain in which the driver (D) and/or police officer (P) provides a description of oneself related to job occupation, race, ethnicity, and/or relationship to others.
Knowledge	Code as knowledge any topic chain in which (a) information about the speaker's well-being is requested (i.e. "How are you?", "Are you okay?"), (b) a common understanding of information is being made or attempted through a series of clarification statements or questions, or (c) the driver (D) makes a claim of Knowledge of rights and/or the legal system and/or questions the legality of the police officer's actions.
N/A	Code as N/A any topic chain in which (a) salutations between the police officer(s) and the driver are expressed, (b) the police officer (P) is requesting or sharing information with a dispatcher or another officer, or (c) full topic chains that are inaudible.

Table 2: A table providing definitions for the participation codes used within this study.

Participation Codes	Definitions
Full	Code as full participation any conversational turn in which (a) the driver (D) or police officer (P) provides a direct reply in response to the previous question, request, and/or statement without opposing the question, request, and/or statement or (b) initiates a new task after the completion of the previous task. Direct replies are statements in agreement with and direct response to the action requested by the driver or police officer.
Partial	Code as partial participation any conversational turn in which the driver (D) or police officer (P) responds to the previously mentioned task in order to provide and/or receive clarification. Partial participation does not oppose requests and/or statements.
None	Code as none participation any conversational turn in which the driver (D) or police officer (P) refuses to participate in the activity as requested and directly opposes requests and/or comments (i.e. "No." or "I'm not."). A complete change of subject or no response may also be a form of Non-participation.
N/A	Code as N/A any conversational turn in which (a) salutations between the police officer(s) and the driver are expressed, (b) the police officer (P) is requesting or sharing information with a dispatcher or another officer, or (c) conversational turns that are inaudible.

Table 3: A table providing definitions for the contributions codes used within this study.

Contributions Codes	Definitions
Critical	Code as critical any phrase in which the driver (D) questions or makes commands in regard to the action or commands of the police officer (P). A Critical phrase can be identified as (a) questions or commands that respond to the police officer's actions as directed towards the driver, (b) questions or commands that respond to the police officer's actions as directed towards an object in the driver's possession, and/or (c) statements that oppose the actions or commands of the police officer.
Neutral	Code as neutral any phrase in which the driver (D) provides no response to the police officer's request.
Uncritical	Code as uncritical any phrase in which the driver positively responds using short phrases such as okay, yes, thank you, etc. Positive responses do not oppose actions or commands and are direct responses to the police officer.

N/A	Code as N/A any phrase in which (a) salutations between the police officer(s) and the driver are expressed, (b) the police officer (P) is requesting or sharing information with a dispatcher or another officer, or (c) phrases that are inaudible.

Results

Of the six traffic stops analyzed, the data revealed similarities among the building tasks, participation, and contributions among all traffic stops except for Traffic Stop 4. The data further revealed that Black women use sousveillance to critique building tasks (Action, Identity, and Knowledge) during encounters with law enforcement. From the data, the extent to which Black women participate in building tasks during traffic stops is mostly partial or not at all. When examining Black women's critical spectatorship through sousveillance and as drivers during traffic stops, the degree to which Black women participate and contribute in the building tasks that unfold throughout the encounter is similar when a singular driver is present. A strong indicator within the data of Black women's multiple consciousness and oppositional gaze reflected in their sousveillance practices is Black women's contribution (critical, neutral, or uncritical) to attempts at completing building tasks, or creating experiences, during the traffic stops. For all traffic stops, the majority of Black women's contributions are critical, in which they have questioned or made commands regarding the police's actions or commands. All of the six traffic stops analyzed in this study yielded large frequencies of critical contributions.

Analyzing the relationship among the dimensions of this study (building tasks, participation, and contribution) shows how Black women's multiple consciousness invokes Black women's digital literacy practices when social media is used to sousveil bureaucratic systems and organizations. Specifically, the study reveals how the oppositional gaze, sousveillance, and reflectionism become digital literacy practices when Black women's multiple consciousness is mediated through digital technology. Throughout this study, law enforcement acts as a representation of bureaucratic systems or organizations. Additionally, the results show how Black women call out questionable actions they are expected to participate in when encountering the police, the extent to which Black women participate in questionable activities, and how Black women evaluate the questionable activities through the oppositional gaze and sousveillance reflectionism to become critical Black female spectators.

Black women pinpoint questionable actions, knowledge, and claims of identity when encountering the police. Based on this study, the most prominent questionable tasks that Black women are expected to participate in involve performing certain actions. Black women calling out these actions contributes to sousveillance reflectionism. Recording and linguistically announcing the actions of police allow Black women to "mirror and confront" the powers of law enforcement. From the women's experiences in this study, the oppositional gaze is determined based on the intersection of codes for Black women's level of participation in (full, partial, or none) and contributions (critical, neutral, uncritical) to the building tasks.

Black women call out police actions in four ways: through sousveillance, direct audience interaction, articulating officer actions, and question officer actions. The first means of Black women calling out police actions is through sousveillance itself. Black women's choice to sousveil the police despite the potential dangers is the initial indicator of Black women's multiple consciousness and oppositional gaze. In this study, Black women begin to sousveil at various points in their police encounters. The various points at which they sousveil indicate when they believed the police's actions were worth critique. For some Black women, history dictates when they begin recording. For other Black women, the questionable behaviors of police cause them to begin recording. This is a point of contention for those who question the completeness or incompleteness of sousveillance.

A second form of calling out police actions is directly talking to social media viewers or potential viewers. Sousveillance when paired with social media features, like *Facebook* Live, creates a virtual space for and presence of viewers. In recording and inviting others to watch virtually, Black women are also requesting that others be present and participate in witnessing.

The third form of calling out police actions involves stating the officer's actions. Black women clearly state the questionable actions of the officer(s), leaving little to no ambiguity in Black women's perception of how they are being treated during traffic stops. Adverbs, like "very" and "even," and determiners, like "no," place emphasis on actions and help describe the action(s) as extreme. These clear statements of the officer's action(s) also create a verbal record of the officer's action(s) within Black women's sousveillance.

Clearly questioning the officers' actions is the fourth form Black women use to call out police actions. Black women also use questions to announce actions, by stating the action in questions of which they want clarification. Stating actions within questions along with sousveillance allows Black women to enact reflectionism, suggesting that officers reflect on their actions and realize the practices are unreasonable for the situation and towards certain demographics. When each form of calling out actions intersect, Black women become spectators of themselves and others.

In the traffic stops examined for this study, the level of participation determined how Black women engaged in the building tasks. Black women's engagement in the action requested by police was predominantly partial or none. Rarely were these interactions full participation. Black women's social participation reflects the oppositional gaze and their opposition to asymmetrical power and bureaucratic systems. The extent to which Black women participated in activities initiated by asymmetrical power could be seen in their means of providing or receiving clarification on actions and opposing requests or comments based on police actions.

Black women involved in the traffic stops of this study evaluated the actions of the police and critiqued the actions by questioning and making commands in response to the police's actions. A key aspect of sousveillance is reflectionism, which is also a key aspect in pinpointing multiple consciousness and op-

positional gaze in Black women. Reflectionism occurs through the type of tasks that Black women critique through questions or statements. Basically, Black women's sousveillance practices allow them to place police actions at the forefront and enact reflectionism, ultimately asking "Do you like what you see?" Beyond simply recording from below, Black women's questions and comments about police officers' actions as they sousveil this bureaucratic system, highlight their oppositional gaze and critical Black female spectatorship.

Black women's contributions as critical female spectators to attempted tasks during traffic stops allow them to critique actions in two ways. First, Black women are critical of officers' actions directed towards the driver, the driver's possessions, or an object. Second, Black women evaluate police actions by opposing the actions or commands of the police officer. Black women, in this study, used a combination of statements, commands, and questions to critically evaluate the officers' actions. Black women also critique officers' justifications for wanting or making observations about the driver's possession(s). This critique often stems from the officer's inability to effectively justify why the women are being detained or investigated. In these situations, critical Black female spectatorship permits Black women to talk back to officers' violation of their bodily autonomy or awareness of different treatment than other non-Black citizens. Black women who critique in these ways are professing their innocence and the officers' negligence.

Black women's multiple consciousness and oppositional gaze are mediated through digital technology, specifically sousveillance discourse. The results above aid in determining how Black women call out the activities Black women are expected to participate in, how they participate in the attempted activities, and how they evaluate the activities through an oppositional gaze. Lastly, these results reflect how Black women's multiple consciousness aids in the development of critical Black female spectatorship and gives Black women autonomy in encounters with bureaucratic systems that abuse power.

Conclusion

This study examines how Black women mediate multiple consciousness through social media, enacting oppositional gaze, sousveillance, and reflectionism as digital literacy practices during traffic stops. Collectively, invoking these digital literacy practices aids in the development of a critical Black female spectatorship, in which Black women "do more than resist" and instead "participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels" (hooks 128). In mediating multiple consciousness through social media, Black women use the aforementioned digital literacy practices to archive their experiences, resist White hegemonic systems, and survive and thrive despite repression of their gaze and lived experiences. Black women harness autonomy over their experiences and the experiences of their communities, creating counternarratives to racist interpretations of Black experiences. By sousveilling and becoming critical Black female spectators, Black women showcase the power in looking.

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