Surveillant Subjectivities

**Sara Matthews in conversation with
Education Not Incarceration
(Alison Fisher and Melanie Carrington)**

This chapbook is one of several in a series produced as part of the project *Surveillant Subjectivities: Youth Cultures, Art, and Affect*. A collaboration between university-based researchers Dina Georgis (University of Toronto) and Sara Matthews (Wilfrid Laurier University), Kim Simon (Curator at Gallery TPW), the artist duo Bambitchell, and youth leaders, the project explores surveillance as both an embodied experience of being in the world and a set of social practices that orient our ways of knowing and encountering ourselves and others. Comprised of Bambitchell's aesthetic gesture "Special Works School" (Gallery TPW, January 13–February 24, 2018), a set of collaborative research conversations with the artists and youth leaders, and workshops held at the gallery with youth aged fourteen to eighteen, the project employs methods of research-creation to explore surveillance as an orientation to knowledge as well as a lived experience.

Sara Matthews: Surveillance is part of day-to-day life. It is endemic to modern society and affects everyone. For the most part, surveillance is deliberate—aimed to manage and control. It has protocols and routines based in the securitization of perceived "risk." There are many sites of

surveillance: military, government administration, community policing, workplace monitoring, airport security, and even the surveillance of visitors entering a gallery space.

Though surveillance is ordinary and banal, its experience is totalizing and for many it is violent and damaging. It aims to assert who belongs and who does not, and thus creates boundaries and borders. Sometimes its technologies control space and domesticate it; other times it is used to keep bodies out of space. Its biopolitical nature manages and scrutinizes bodies. For some, practices of surveillance promise safety from risk, but in doing so these same practices produce those who are deemed to be "risky" subjects. It is, arguably, a tool that enables further discipline and punishment on targeted bodies. Surveillance technologies, no matter how neutral their articulated methods, are never practiced in an objective manner. They are gendered, raced, and classed and organize bodies in a multitude of ways: from the regulation of movement in public spaces to the disciplining of bodies under capitalism. In the Canadian settler colonial state, surveillance is intimately tied to nation building.

Surveillance is an ongoing experience of trauma on the body and the psyche that is lived and felt emotionally. A significant theme in trauma studies is that events that are difficult to symbolize in language and thought can be mediated through bodily and expressive representations. This non-literal relationship between embodied affect and representation inspires our efforts, in *Surveillant Subjectivities*, to interpret young people's experiences of surveillance through methods

of research-creation. An approach to research that places aesthetic creativity as the locus of knowledge production, interpretation, and exchange, research-creation positions the aesthetic gesture as both a methodological and object-based provocation. In this case, it is Bambitchell's "Special Works School" that provokes a series of creative investigations that explore how youth experience and negotiate surveillance in their lives. Bambitchell's work is a focal point for conversation between researchers and youth participants who are invited to symbolize their experience of surveillance by way of their encounter with the artwork. But "Special Works School" also suggests new ways of thinking about, and theorizing, how surveillance is a mode of knowing inherent to visual and auditory cultures. The chapbooks that accompany this project invite interested readers to glimpse part of these conversations, which also have resonance for the broader communities in which we live and work. Indeed, this project was undertaken under the conditions of anti-black racism, transphobia, Islamophobia and settler colonial violence that permeate our social institutions, including those of the academy and the art gallery. This chapbook extends the conversation from the gallery to the greater Toronto community. It explores the resonances of surveillance cultures in public schools, as well as organized resistances to those incursions.

When my colleague Dina Georgis and I were conceptualizing *Surveillant Subjectivities* in the fall of 2015, we encountered a prominent news story about a police officer in a South Carolina classroom who was called in to address a disruptive

female student: he was subsequently recorded on video slamming the young woman to the floor and dragging her.[1] The video, which went viral on the Internet, recalls another incident, which occurred earlier that summer in Texas. That time a police officer drew a gun on black teens at a pool party and tackled one girl to the ground.[2] But such incidents of police surveillance and arbitrary violence on young black lives are not singular—indeed, they are endemic to life in the Greater Toronto Area.

It was May 23, 2007, when fifteen-year-old Jordan Manners was shot and killed in the hallway of the North York high school that he attended. Ensuing discourses of public safety and risk around so-called "safe schools" were amplified in the media and reflected in school board policies. These are the historical conditions within which then Toronto police chief Bill Blair implemented the School Resource Officer (SRO) program in public and Catholic schools in Ontario. Aided by a provincial grant, the SRO program saw the placement of thirty-eight police officers in Toronto high schools in 2015–16, stationed primarily, as reported by Philip Dwight Morgan, in "'priority areas': neighbourhoods that the City of Toronto categorized as having high 'social risk' in part because of their large numbers of immigrant, racialized, and lone-parent populations."[3] Morgan faults community policing in general, and the SRO program in particular, with broadening "the scope of the surveillance of marginalized youth" as part of what he calls the "school securitization process" in Ontario. To learn more about SROs in Toronto schools and their impact on youth, I recently met up with Melanie Carrington

and Alison Fisher, two members Education Not Incarceration (ENI), a community organization that brings together youth, students, parents/caregivers, educators, researchers, journalists, and community organizers to advocate for public awareness about the school-to-prison pipeline and the effects of the SRO program on youth who are marginalized.

SM: Can you comment on the beginnings of Education Not Incarceration and the type of work that you have been doing?

Alison Fisher: A lot of the groundwork had been laid by other community groups such as NOCOPS, Jane and Finch Action Against Poverty, various parent groups, and of course, students. So many people have been fighting the SRO program for so long. And then journalist Desmond Cole reported about his interactions with police as a black man in *Toronto Life Magazine*,[4] followed by a *Toronto Star* article[5] outlining the disproportionate carding of racialized—and specifically black—male youth in the GTA, and the work done by Black Lives Matter in Toronto. All of these moments created a particular kind of context that made the issue of the SRO program even more salient.

In November 2016, a number of individuals who had already been working on issues of racism in schooling and policing decided to come together to work as a collective. After months of organizational and internal capacity-building and developing a strong shared political analysis—as well as a name: "Education Not Incarceration"—we began planning

a highly strategic campaign for the elimination of the SRO program. This involved, among other things, attending various Toronto Police Services Board meetings, where we received a lot of attention for our initial deputations in May 2017. We also engaged in intensive coalition-building with other racial justice organizations across the city and began mounting a media campaign. By June, we began to shift our energies to the TDSB, lobbying trustees with the intention of getting rid of the SRO program.

SM: I was very interested to learn about the links you make between the Safe Schools Act of Ontario (2000)[6], "zero-tolerance" behavioural policies, and the disproportionate impact of those school board policies on marginalized students, including black students and students with disabilities[7]. Can you comment on the ways in which such policies construct a particular environment of "risk" and its effects on marginalized students? Do you perceive an increased culture of securitization in school environments? I suppose the SRO program might be an example of that.

Melanie Carrington: I think the focus of the program has been wrong all along because at its root is the idea that violent risk is brought on by having children of colour around. The shooting of Jordan Manners provided a perfect opportunity for people to declare that they didn't feel safe without having to give any context to that fear. And it was a perfect opportunity for the police to further engage with "at-risk communities" under the guise of making everyone safe, but in reality, they were increasing the risk for certain

people. Research has continually shown that it's children of colour that are unsafe in the school system. And, time and time again, that is not recognized. Instead the idea is reinforced that these children are little beings to be afraid of.

AF: We saw that there were a certain set of belief systems and white supremacist values implicitly operating in the Safe Schools Act, which was demonstrated through the Human Rights Commission complaint against the Ministry of Education and the Toronto District School Board in 2005.[8] These same values shaped the moral panic that erupted when Jordan Manners was shot. You have to look at how that panic was framed around black bodies in particular. The context for this was really the shooting of Jane Creba[9] and the panic surrounding the killing of a young white woman. Critical geographer Amy Marie Siciliano wrote about how there was a young black woman, Chantal Nunn, killed outside a nightclub around the same time, an incident that wasn't discussed in the mainstream media in the same way as the Creba shooting. And that's when the police created the Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS) and then the carding issues were exacerbated. Shortly after TAVIS was introduced in 2006, Jordan Manners suffered a gunshot wound inside a school. That was the moment for the police to invite themselves into schools, and unfortunately the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic Board uncritically accepted that invitation without really investigating why it might be offered. The SRO program implementation was simply offensive because it was particular schools, in particular communities.

MC: It's really a perfect breeding ground because the way that these marginal groups are portrayed, in general, would make it seem perfectly reasonable for police officers to only be in these areas. And it makes it perfectly reasonable as well for everyone to be afraid. All of the institutions—schooling, higher education, and health care—are borne from a place of white supremacy and their intent is assimilation or extraction. With regard to the criminal justice system, that's why we focus on the school-to-prison pipeline. Because, unfortunately, that's the reality of how these systems are constructed and who holds power in them. I think that one of the strengths of Education Not Incarceration is that we bring forward information and use data to make these links clear—indisputable—which then addresses some of the politics that people don't actually want to hear or have a difficult time embracing.

AF: The educational system has these colonial roots built in industrialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. The disciplinary regime of the education system is so deeply intertwined with these systems that it has become institutionalized. This impacts particular communities differently. And it's not just education. Children's Aid, the YMCA, the RCMP, all of these institutions have had these terrible impacts historically—nation-building, moral/social reform, and policing are intimately tied together. Canada is built on Indigenous land.

One thing that has struck me during the process of my own dissertation research is just how surprised some educational

administrators are by the level at which they have to take on a policing role in their institutions. When there is a disciplinary issue they have to do investigations and be in contact with police. When gender violence or sexual assault erupts in the school system, if any incidents are divulged to the teaching staff, the staff are legally obligated to contact the principal and Children's Aid. The police have to be called, but, as the Falconer School Safety Report[10] noted, the decision to involve police should rest with the survivor of sexual assault. Because of the issue of underage youth status, the report suggested that there should be a consideration of not involving police. When a sexual assault or some sort of gender violence has occurred, the survivors should be empowered to decide for themselves. There is also the differential impact that involving police will have on racialized survivors and racialized perpetrators and how that might create more silence. It puts teachers and administrators in this terrible conundrum.

SM: You mentioned working with an equity lens and that being something you have emphasized as a group. Can you say more about that approach?

AF: When you begin research from an equity lens, you start with those voices that have been traditionally most excluded from the research process and the institutions in which you are operating. Those are the voices you want to amplify and hear from; they would be given more weight in thinking through the issues that the research is exploring. With the SRO program, there was never a student

or community consultation process—it was just brought into the school system, which from our perspective was a huge mistake. We suggested this to the Toronto District School Board when they were doing a review of the SRO program. If they chose a survey method there might even be a greater percentage of students who would potentially be ambivalent or even support the program. But with an equity lens, it is the number of students who have had a negative experience whose voices should be listened to the most because they have historically been marginalized, have not been heard, have not been listened to. Given that there wasn't a consultation process initially, those spaces needed to be provided.

MC: I just want to add the idea that, within the equity lens, one is trying to mitigate the opportunity for revisionist ways of looking at the data. Because this is an uncomfortable—and for some, very black-and-white— issue, it has been very easy for people to want to interpret the data in certain ways. It leads to comments like, "Oh, it can't be that bad," or, "Whoever is telling me their stories of trauma must come from a background of violence that has precipitated this police violence," that sort of thinking.

SM: With ENI, how have you pushed for a different kind of framework that shifts some of this thinking?

MC: I feel like we flipped the notion of "safety" on its head. It's not about the teacher. It's about the racialized student who is consistently impacted by the violence of

the education system, with or without police presence. That is where our concern with safety comes from.

SM: Along those lines, how do you combat the depoliticized view of the SRO program as one of community-building and creating liaisons between policing and the community?

AF: This is where white folk have to step up and start having serious conversations with other white folk about some of these issues. I'm just thinking about myself as a white teacher in a school system of largely white staff. Many staff members believe that the program is about building relationships. There need to be some very difficult conversations and people often don't have the skills to enter those conversations. It can't be personal, about white guilt or white fragility. It needs to be political. This means reflecting and taking responsibility for, and connecting oneself to, the institutions in which one is working. This also means understanding those institutions as part of a history of white supremacy, colonialist assimilation, and processes of othering. Residential schooling and the colonialist genocidal project are the history of the school system that many of us are working for. Have an awareness of this history. ∎

[1] Andrew Russell, "FBI Investigating after video shows South Carolina officer flipping, dragging student." Global News Network, October 27, 2015, 9:15am. Accessed January 30, 2016. http://globalnews.ca/news/2301552/outrage-after-video-shows-south-carolina-officer-flipping-dragging-student-in-classroom/

[2] Martin Pengelly, "Texas officer suspended after pool party video shows him pulling gun on teens." The Guardian, June 8, 2015, 2:06pm. Accessed January 30, 2016. http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/07/youtube-texas-police-officer-pool-party-arrests

[3] Philip Dwight Morgan, "School Dispatch," Briarpatch Magazine, Jan 1 2017. Accessed January 30, 2018. https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/school-dispatch

[4] Desmond Cole, "The Skin I'm In; I've been interrogated by police more than 50 times—all because I'm black," Toronto Life, April 21, 2015. https://torontolife.com/city/life/skin-im-ive-interrogated-police-50-times-im-black/

[5] San Grewal, "Blacks three times more likely to be carded by Peel police than whites," Toronto Star, September 24, 2015. https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2015/09/24/blacks-three-times-more-likely-to-be-carded-by-peel-police-than-whites.html

[6] Ontario Ministry of Education, "A Safe and Welcoming School Environment." http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/safeschools.html

[7] Ontario Human Rights Commission, "The Ontario Safe Schools Act: School discipline and discrimination." http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/ontario-safe-schools-act-school-discipline-and-discrimination

[8] Ontario Human Rights Commission, "Human Rights Settlement Reached with Toronto District School Board." http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/human-rights-settlement-reached-toronto-district-school-board

[9] A bystander to gun violence on Yonge Street in Toronto, 15-year-old Jane Creba was killed on December 25, 2005.

[10] School Community Safety Advisory Panel, "The Road to Health: Final Report on School Safety," January 2008. http://www.falconerschoolsafetyreport.com/finalReport.html

Contributors

Melanie Carrington is a mother whose son is in elementary school. She has been a social worker for more than fifteen years, having previously worked at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Seeing the necessity of highlighting the injustice inherent in the Canadian criminal justice system led Melanie to PhD. studies at York University's School of Social Work. Melanie is also a member of Education Not Incarceration, a Toronto-based collective that came together in order to address the school-to-prison pipeline.

Alison Fisher is a doctoral candidate in her sixth year of study in the Faculty of Education at York University. She has also worked as a secondary school teacher in the Greater Toronto Area for twelve years. Alison's doctoral research uncovers how the "equity work" of activist educators reconstructs and reimagines schools differently. In her spare time, Alison is a member of Education not Incarceration, a Toronto-based collective that works with other anti-racist community organizations to challenge the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of youth in schools.

Sara Matthews is Associate Professor in the Department of Global Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her interdisciplinary work brings aesthetics and cultural theory to the study of violence and the dynamics of social conflict. Along with Dr. Dina Georgis at the University of Toronto, she directs the SSHRC-funded Research Creation Project *Surveillant Subjectivities: Youth Cultures, Art and Affect*. In addition to her academic work, Sara writes about aesthetic projects that archive visual encounters with legacies of war and social trauma. Her critical writing has appeared in *PUBLIC*, *FUSE Magazine* and in exhibition essays for the Art Gallery of Bishops University, YYZ, Circuit Gallery, and the Art Gallery of Ottawa.

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