

Panopticism

In the “Panopticism” section of *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault develops the concept of panopticism through Jeremy Bentham’s architectural model of the Panopticon, a structure designed to make individuals constantly visible to an unseen observer. Foucault explains that “visibility is a trap,” as the system induces “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault). Rather than relying on direct force, panopticism causes individuals to internalize surveillance and regulate their own behavior because they never know when they are being watched. Foucault extends this beyond prisons, arguing that the Panopticon is “a generalizable model of functioning” used in institutions such as schools, hospitals, and workplaces to classify and normalize individuals (Foucault).

In chapter one, “Notes on Surveillance Studies: Through the Door of No Return” of *Dark Matters*, Simone Browne both expands and critiques Foucault’s framework by tracing surveillance back to transatlantic slavery and the regulation of Black bodies. Browne argues that systems of surveillance already operated through slave ships, branding, plantation records, and the violent monitoring of enslaved people. By shifting attention to “the view from ‘under the hatches’,” she reveals that racialized surveillance was foundational to modern systems of power long before the modern prison emerged (Browne 32). At the same time, Browne highlights how panopticism is insufficient for understanding contemporary surveillance, noting that it “cannot offer a complete account of...surveillance and exercises of power within social media...digital information databases and data aggregators” (Browne 39). This critique shows that modern surveillance operates beyond visibility and self-regulation, requiring attention to new technological forms as well as the racial histories that precede and shape them.

Africanist

In the introduction of *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild defines the term “Africanist” as signifying “African and African American resonances and presences, trends, and phenomena,” encompassing both historical influence and contemporary cultural expression (Gottschild 12-13). The term refers to artistic traditions such as blues, jazz, and hip hop, while also shaping everyday practices, from movement and speech to aesthetics and social behavior. In this way, the Africanist is a pervasive force embedded within American culture. Gottschild positions the Africanist in contrast to the “Europeanist,” noting that while these cultural systems are “fused and interwoven,” they also retain “distinct, discrete, and somewhat opposing characteristics” (Gottschild 12-13). However, Gottschild emphasizes that the Africanist presence has often been obscured through appropriation, particularly within minstrelsy. She argues that European American performers “set out to master and mock African American expressive styles,” producing distorted representations that both exploit and conceal their origins (Gottschild 81-82). This process renders Africanist contributions simultaneously central and invisible. Despite this, African American performers have continually reinterpreted and resisted these impositions, finding ways to “change the joke and slip the yoke,” as Ralph Ellison describes (Ellison 1964, 45). Thus, the Africanist emerges as

both a cultural foundation and a site of contestation, revealing how power operates through appropriation, performance, and compromised visibility.

War On

In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander challenges the common assumption that the War on Drugs emerged as a response to rising drug crime, arguing instead that it was a politically constructed initiative shaped by racialized agendas. She notes that President Ronald Reagan officially declared the War on Drugs in 1982, “before crack became an issue in the media or a crisis in poor black neighborhoods,” undermining the belief that it was a reaction to an existing emergency (Alexander 2). Rather, the war was amplified through strategic media campaigns that flooded public discourse with images of Black criminality, helping to “catapult the War on Drugs from an ambitious federal policy to an actual war” (Alexander 3).

Alexander further argues that the War on Drugs functioned as a mechanism of social control, disproportionately targeting Black communities while maintaining a façade of race neutrality. She explains that the policy “had little to do with public concern about drugs and much to do with public concern about race,” as it enabled the policing of “racially defined ‘others’” without explicitly invoking racist language (Alexander 14). This framing allowed punitive policies to gain support, particularly among white voters whose attitudes toward crime were shaped more by racial perceptions than actual victimization (Alexander 16). Through this framework, the “war on” becomes not merely a policy initiative but a broader ideological construct, one that mobilizes fear and racialized narratives to justify surveillance, punishment, and systemic inequality (Alexander).

Minstrel/Minstrelsy

Minstrelsy originates as a layered cultural practice shaped by competing histories of performance, power, and racial representation. As the introduction of Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* explains, it is both “a white conceit” and a form that nevertheless “expropriated and imitated bona fide Africanist expressive forms” (Gotschild 82). At the same time, African American performers working within minstrelsy were forced into what the text calls a “white-constructed mirror,” where they had to “imitate the imitation” while attempting to reshape and reclaim space within it (Gotschild 83).

This contradiction reflects what Marlon Riggs’s *Ethnic Notions* describes as a structural catch-22: Black performers gained visibility and employment through minstrelsy, yet that visibility often depended on reinforcing degrading stereotypes (Riggs). Over time, performers like Bert Williams infused minstrel roles with individuality and emotional depth, even as audiences failed to recognize the constructed nature of the mask.

In *Scenes of Subjection* Saidiya Hartman deepens this analysis by showing how minstrelsy and related forms made Blackness legible through suffering, gesture, and spectacle, where “affect, gesture, and vulnerability to violence constituted blackness” (Hartman 26).

Surveillance

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault conceptualizes surveillance as a defining feature of modern power, operating through constant observation, documentation, and control. He describes “a system of permanent registration” in which “everything that may be observed...is noted down and transmitted,” transforming individuals into objects of knowledge and regulation (Foucault). This form of surveillance extends beyond mere viewing, particularly as technology enables more pervasive forms of observation.

This framework is extended and challenged in *United States v. Jones*, where the Supreme Court considers whether technological surveillance violates constitutional protections. Justice Sotomayor argues that GPS monitoring allows the government to “ascertain...political and religious beliefs, sexual habits, and so on,” revealing the expansive reach of modern surveillance (U.S. v. Jones 4). Unlike Foucault’s model, which emphasizes internalized discipline, this case highlights the legal tensions between surveillance and privacy, particularly as technology enables more pervasive forms of observation.

Simone Browne further complicates these perspectives in chapter one, “Notes on Surveillance Studies: Through the Door of No Return” of *Dark Matters* by arguing that “the regulation of blackness as spectacle and as disciplinary combined” shaped the development of surveillance itself (Browne 42). For Browne, surveillance is not neutral; it is rooted in racial control, showing how observation, documentation, and mobility restrictions have long been used to discipline Black bodies.

Punishment

Punishment is a shifting practice shaped by competing definitions of justice, authority, and human value. In *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke defines punishment as “proportionate to [one’s] transgression,” serving both reparation for the victim and deterrence for others (Locke 2). While Locke frames punishment as a rational mechanism grounded in natural rights, he also acknowledges its instability in the state of nature, where individuals possess the power to punish but risk abusing it. This tension leads him to argue for formal government authority, suggesting that punishment becomes legitimate only when regulated by a centralized power. However, later theorists complicate this assumption that punishment can ever be fully neutral or fair. William J. Brennan Jr. in *The Constitution of the United States: Contemporary Ratification*, for example, argues that punishment must not be “so severe as to be utterly and irreversibly degrading to the very essence of human dignity,” directly challenging forms such as capital punishment that reduce individuals to objects rather than persons (Brennan 15).

That boundary becomes even more unstable when punishment is examined in historical and racial contexts. In *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe*, Nwando Achebe’s account of pre-colonial and colonial Nigerian punishment systems shows how different regimes of power define severity and legitimacy differently: livestock theft could be “punished by death” in pre-colonial systems, while British colonial rule imposed prolonged imprisonment and forced

labor (Achebe 121). These theories take on deeper meaning when placed alongside *The New Jim Crow*, where Michelle Alexander argues that “governments use punishment primarily as a tool of social control,” demonstrating that mass incarceration cannot be explained solely through crime rates but through political decisions about whom to punish and control (Alexander 3).

This logic of control is historically continuous. Simone Browne argues in chapter one, “Notes on Surveillance Studies: Through the Door of No Return” of *Dark Matters* that slavery relied on “acts of making the black body legible as property” through passes, branding, and documentation systems that regulated Black mobility (Browne 42). In this way, punishment becomes inseparable from surveillance and classification, operating as a mechanism that organizes who can move freely and who must be controlled.

Authenticity

The idea of “authenticity” in American performance culture has often been constructed through distortion rather than truth, particularly in representations of Black identity. In the introduction of *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, the author shows how minstrelsy depended on a contradiction: white performers claimed to present “authentic black material” while simultaneously producing exaggerated caricatures (Gottschild 95). This tension reveals that authenticity was never about accurately representing Black life, but about creating something that felt real to white audiences. For example, minstrel performances blended “authentic-but-transformed Africanist elements,” meaning that real cultural practices were appropriated, altered, and repackaged into stereotypes (Gottschild 100). As a result, audiences began to accept these distorted portrayals as reality. The text explains that white spectators “conflated the stage mask with the real-life black man,” treating blackface performances as truthful representations rather than performances (Gottschild 103). This confusion demonstrates how authenticity can be manufactured through repetition and belief, rather than grounded in lived experience. Even productions like *Black America* marketed themselves as showcasing “real” plantation life, presenting Black performers as “anthropological artifacts” rather than individuals, further blurring the line between performance and reality (Gottschild 122). Ultimately, authenticity in this context is revealed to be a tool of power. It legitimizes stereotypes, reinforces racial hierarchies, and allows dominant groups to define what is considered “real” about marginalized communities.

Discipline

Discipline, as Michel Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish*, is not simply a system of punishment or restriction but a “political anatomy of detail” that produces individuals who are both useful and controllable (Foucault). Rather than relying on overt force, disciplinary power works by organizing space, time, and behavior so that individuals regulate themselves. This is most clearly expressed in the panopticon, where individuals internalize the possibility of being watched and therefore discipline their own behavior. As Foucault argues in the “Docile Bodies” section, discipline “produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies,” increasing their

usefulness while simultaneously reducing their autonomy (Foucault 138). Power, then, does not simply repress the body but “explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it,” turning human beings into components of a larger system of control (Foucault 138).

This process also depends on normalization and categorization. Foucault explains that discipline compares, differentiates, homogenizes, and excludes revealing how institutions classify individuals according to standards of acceptable behavior (Foucault). This logic extends beyond prisons into schools, factories, and hospitals, where ranking systems, observation, and spatial organization reinforce broader systems of social control.