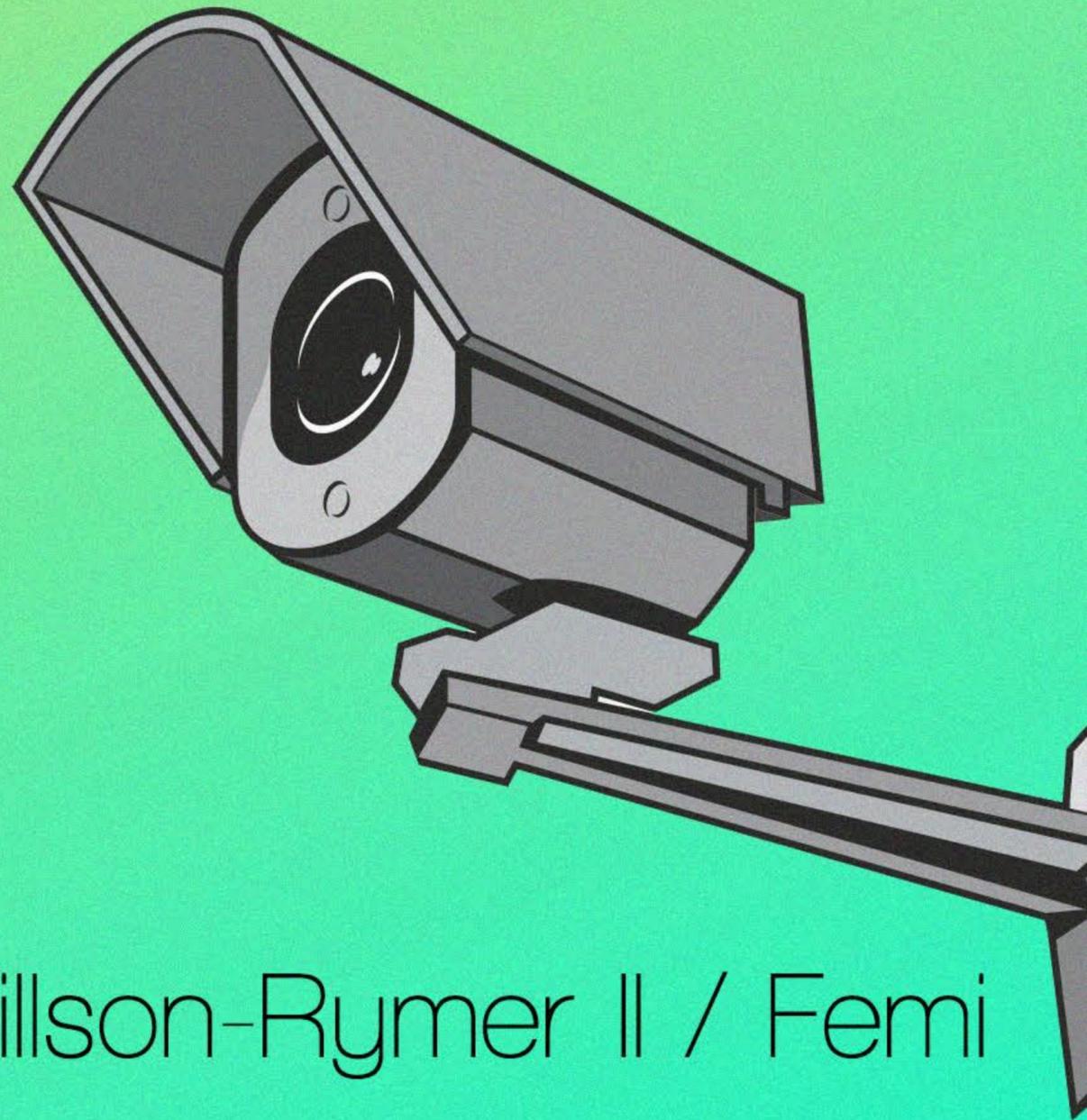


RUUBIN'S  
WASSE

Selectivity in surveillance



By Denver J. Willson-Rymer II / Femi

# Rubin's Vase: Selectivity in Surveillance

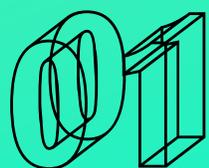
BY: DENVER J. WILLSON-RYMER  
II / FEMI

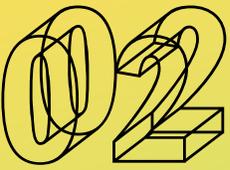
Rubin's Vase is an ambiguous illusion that can be perceived in one of two ways. It can be a vase or two faces. We can recognize both possibilities once they are pointed out to us but we always gravitate towards our instinctive judgement.

I'll be addressing a number of concepts that may seem disparate and tangential upon first reading but bare with me.

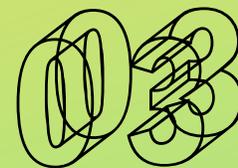


Confirmation bias refers to the proneness to collect and discern information to support one's existing beliefs. Tribalism refers to behaviours and attitudes based on one's loyalty to a social group. When combined in an unchecked manner, these two concepts create a dangerous logical fallacy.





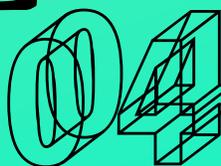
The loyalty to the group creates an “us and them” complex. Through othering the them, unjust treatment is validated by the us. Official actions such as President Trump’s travel ban from several Muslim majority countries creates a clear dichotomy us and them, between good and bad. They are the ones who produce terrorists so we must surveil and abuse their civil and human rights. The disproportionate diversion of policing resources leads to a reduction in the rates of infringement from the us not because they are any less criminal but because most resources are deployed to watch them. These numbers are then used to justify even more surveillance of the them.



The interplay between confirmation bias and tribalism act as a backdrop for each of the following examples.

The war on terror, much like the war on drugs and the red menace is a catch-all term that has been used to validate legally dubious increases in the policing of people who fit into the stereotype of the "enemy." The creation of an us and them is a vital part of the dehumanization process that allows governments to overstep legal and ethical boundaries without serious backlash. Nazi Germany's them were the Jewish people and Hitler's policy had and continues to have precedent in the West (Roman, 2016). Scapegoats are created by both citizens and the government. Marginalized groups find themselves in a much more dangerous situation when the government leads the discrimination. Kristallnacht, was a wave of extremely violent anti semitic protests instigated largely by Nazi Party officials (USHMM, 2018). The red menace was used to justify a futile war in Vietnam as well as to silence left-leaning political dissenters on the homefront. The "n-word" and other racial slurs are also used to silence and invalidate the concerns of racial minorities (Roman, 2016).

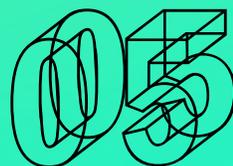
Take note of the examples I used in the previous paragraph: Nazis and fake communists. Remember this when reading other works on similar topics because many authors will stop there. I know this because I did just that three years ago when I first described this phenomena. Now, allow me to modernize these examples. Replace Kristallnacht with the resurgence of lynching in the US, the unaddressed plague of police brutality against Black and Brown people in the West as a whole, gerrymandering, the militarization of the police and endless surveillance of non-white people. The effects are the same but because it is not condensed into a small period, it is very difficult to name.

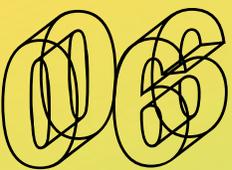


This is America. Canada.  
Germany. Britain. France.  
Belgium.

Fabricating and enforcing  
tribalist sentiments is as  
simple as Donald referring to  
white people marching on  
state capitals with military  
arms as mostly good  
people; then, within a matter  
of weeks, stating “when the  
looting starts, the shooting  
starts” in reference to Black  
Lives Matter protests across  
the country.

Trudeaus’s government has adopted a  
significantly more insidious approach than our  
neighbours to the South. Rather than explicit  
dialogue stoking division, The Prime Minister  
and his colleagues acknowledge the issues  
but the policies they enact continue the  
discrimination they claim to abhor.





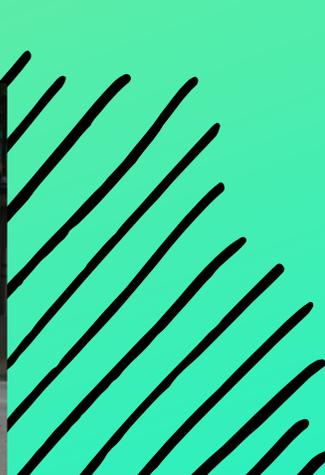
Nonetheless, I believe it is important to draw on examples fresh in the memory yet further back in history to draw a continuity of principle. Hitler is alive and well when you know what to look for.



Unjust Western institutions are not a recent development. The Black Panther Party (BPP) was a human rights organization founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966 to counter such institutions. The right for people of colour to defend themselves against any threat, and especially the American Government, was vital to the achievement of parity with White America (Roman, 2016). That sentiment is one of many that lead to the formation of the BPP that are still relevant today. The need to protect oneself from the government is arguably more applicable now, because of how surveillance and policing technology has evolved. The BPP framed their struggle in colonial terms; the ghettos primarily inhabited by people of colour were seen as an internal colony and the police forces were seen as an occupational army (Roman, 2016). The BPP's discourse is legitimized by the police continuing the "civilizing" mission inherited through its colonial roots. The police see themselves as the "thin blue line" between chaos and order. This language conveniently ignores that when enforcing the current "order," they make the lives of Black and Indigenous peoples chaotic. We expect to be harassed.

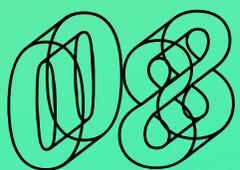


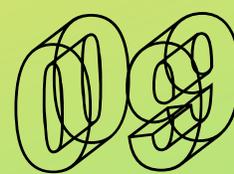
The issue of race relations in North America is often framed in terms of “how far we’ve come” (Bell, 2016). I believe this invites complacency into the discourse. The omnipresence of brutal violence perpetrated in Black communities by the police, suggest that the state’s domination of historically disenfranchised peoples has not changed in the decades since the Civil Rights Era (Bell, 2016). Technology has made it more visible but Black neighbourhoods are still being policed by departments disconnected to their communities (Bell, 2016; Cinnamon, 2017). The officers being foreign to the communities is important because policing of this form is effectively the state asserting that Black people are a them who must be closely monitored or they will threaten the us. The departments are also subject to confirmation bias so when they send more officers to these communities they are bound to find “more” crime. Upon seeing the spike in rates, the department heads--and politicians backing them--divert even more resources to policing which leads to more crime. This spiral is very difficult to overcome because the short term incentives for the police are to arrest even more people to meet “crime stopping” quotas. Another side effect of policing in this manner is that the spiral enforces the common preconceptions of Black people as needing (white-enforced) order because they live criminal lives. The specifics of this framework deserve a followup in another essay.





How far we've come when Chantel Moore, a 26 year-old Indigenous mother, is murdered by RCMP officers performing a "wellness check." Every protection is offered to the police because they have difficult jobs or whatever the latest excuse for their legalized reign of terror is. I am so desensitized to police brutality that the only shocking aspect is seeing one of them get convicted. Agencies that enforce laws that they are not subject to are despotic.

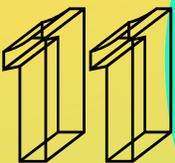




Yet another tie between the era of the original BPP and today is the systematic effort to stop people from surveilling the police. The Black Panther newspaper was a vital part of achieving the goals of the BPP (Roman, 2016). The newspaper was meant to inform people of the key issues and opportunities to participate in events around the country. The FBI worked tirelessly to stop the production and distribution of paper, even resorting to arresting people selling them, convincing airlines to destroy shipments and confiscating the ones that did get through (Roman, 2016).



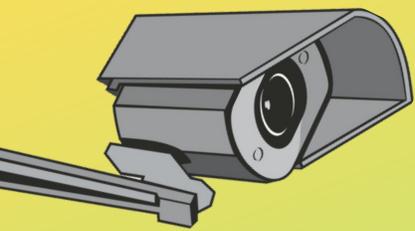
As mobile phones with cameras have become ubiquitous in the modern age, much of the injustice carried over from the past is more easily documented. Police brutality is now extremely visible but the video evidence almost never leads to a conviction. Of 15 high-profile deaths of black males at the hands of the police in 2017, 11 of the families received financial settlements in excess of \$850,000 USD. This implies wrongdoing on behalf of the officers in question but they are spared criminal convictions and, in 10/15 cases, their jobs (Lee & Park, 2017). Only one officer was convicted (Lee & Park, 2017). The settlements are a step in the right direction but without the criminal charges, it is the reduction of black lives to a sum of money, again. The introduction of body-cams initially made me hopeful for more accountability of the police. However, it is evident that the legal system has no qualms ignoring the endless stream of footage depicting police brutality in North America. My mind wanders to indigenous Chief Allan Adam who was tackled to the ground and beaten until bloody by the RCMP. As things go when criticizing the state abusing its powers over marginalized groups, I'm certain this reference will be out of date by the end of the week.



I understand that it is not all police officers who commit such atrocities but the “few bad apples” argument cannot be allowed to be applied to something as vital to democratic freedoms as law enforcement. The complete metaphor is “a few bad apples spoil the whole barrel” after all. One key tenant of almost every Western constitution is the right to fair and equal treatment under the law regardless of race, creed, gender, sexual orientation or any other constructs that divide us. Police departments may have reasonable concerns about being recorded by bystanders while performing their duties. However, even if it isn't a right, if it isn't illegal, there is no justification for stopping citizens who feel the need to do so. If any public official is carrying out a public function, they should be held accountable by the people. As increasingly invasive technology enables the proliferation of preventative policing, accountability will be even more important that it already is.



Why don't we have a public registry of law enforcement officials? I do mean a much more in depth adaptation of registered sex offenders. I want it to be easy to see a history of every complaint, reprimand, violent interaction, and award every officer collects. I want every cop car to have a magnet on the back with the occupants' badge numbers, names, supervisor and an external agency to handle my complaints. I do not trust the police to do the right thing. I'm slowly working on more comprehensive explanations of what I want to see more of and I urge you, reader, to do the same. Think radically. Think with a long term goal in mind. I want to normalize the public-led surveillance of the state and I would like to start with their most violent arm, the police.



# 13



The fraudulent “war on terror” has been used to justify enormous increases in surveillance of everyday people. 9/11 was the basis of massively increased fears about national security. The pervasiveness of biometric security, CCTV cameras and facial recognition software have secured the eminence of the centralized modern state. Extreme surveillance was originally the realm of authoritarian states (Roman, 2016) but it has been adopted quickly and many of the policies lack democratic foundations or even a practical one. The growing academic literature on surveillance cameras suggests that they are not an effective counter terrorism tool (Jeffries, 2011, p. 177).

Current research suggests that not only is CCTV an ineffective anti-terrorism tool, a study of 336 universities concluded it has little to no impact on crime rates (Liedka, Meehan, Lauer, 2016, p.19). In spite of the evidence, anti surveillance discourse is stigmatized and discredited as being “soft on terror” in a similar manner to the Panther’s human rights discourse was framed as pro-communist--communist referring to the US’s cold war brother in oppressive regimes, the USSR. Unjust fear is the justification of securitization. The government does not want you to remember that they are much more likely to imprison, torture, or kill you than any terror cell. It is here that I ask you to note that the us is not necessarily any better than the them. It is a psychological cue to focus attention away from the us.

Governments have capitalized on the fear they forged through dominating the development of surveillance discourse. In major urban centres and ports of entry, governments have mobilized the population to observe and report on each other (Jeffries, 2011, p.176). New York City’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority established the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign which encourages people using public transit to remain alert for strange behaviour, baggage as well as reminding everyone that they are always under surveillance (Jeffries, 2011, p. 176). Such a campaign has dangerous implications, especially in the case of an actual terrorist attack.

Western media has created a profile that primes people to be more likely to express Islamophobic sentiments after viewing footage from 9/11 and presumably other terrorist attacks (Choma, Charlesford, Dalling & Smith, 2014, p.345). People were also more likely to having their civil liberties restricted because of future terrorism distress (Choma et al., 2014, p. 346). When everyone is a potential suspect and something does go wrong in a crowded underground chamber, it is not unlikely that hysteria will quickly set in. A situation like this can be extremely dangerous for Middle Eastern minorities in particular because Anti-Muslim hate crimes rose 1,600% after 9/11 (Southern Poverty Law Centre, 2011) and the resurgence of Islamophobic rhetoric across America may further reinforce existing tensions. This effect holds true for every them. Black and Indigenous peoples are endlessly depicted as criminals, incapable parents, drug abusers, and broadly threatening to white people. Is it any wonder why police see skin colour as probable cause when they live their whole lives with this subconscious priming backing their confirmation bias? This isn't cyclical. It is a downward spiral that inevitably leads to abuses of power.

# 15

Unarmed Black teenagers are still being shot and the murderers are not being held responsible. George Zimmerman was acquitted by a jury with no Black jurors for the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman was told by a police dispatcher not to approach Martin but decided to step out of his car with a gun to confront Martin but faced no punishment for disobeying the dispatcher and acting as a vigilante (CNN Library, 2018). This narrative, along with many others, lead to the formation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The very cases of unjust applications of force on Black people are identical to the ones that lead to the formation of the BPP (Bell, 2016).

When you think about these murders I urge you to do so introspectively. Take careful note of your first response. Did you wonder how many times they were shot? If there was a video? Did you expect the officer to face any circumstances? Did you wonder about the family of the victim? The collective trauma of the community experiencing the loss? Did you wonder about the victim's history? If the cop's life was really in danger?

Did you try—even momentarily—to justify the officer's—the murderer's—choices? Sometimes I do and it worries me deeply.



“We shall only be free of hate complexes once mankind has learned to repudiate the complex of the scapegoat”

- Baruk cited by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

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