

WATCHING ME:

On Being A Black Woman In A Surveillance State



*“If I’m gonna stay here,
I’m gonna build me a lead house.
Keep them satellites out.
Direct TV
Am I watchin’ it or is it watchin’ me?
Man, I don’t really know*

*But I feel like
I feel like I’m being scoped, y’all.
Watch y’all,
Somethin’ ain’t right
Somethin’ ain’t right
Watching me.”¹*



Who Is Jill Scott? Words and Sounds Vol 1. Jill Scott, 2000. <https://www.discogs.com>

In the year 2000, Jill Scott (also known as Jilly from Philly), a Black-American mother, actress, model, poet, and singer-songwriter — released her debut studio album. Nineteen songs that helped to shape the landscape of neo-soul and contemporary rhythm and blues. On the album’s cover, Scott is pictured with her bronzed lips glossed and her head tilted down, her gaze concealed by a chocolate brown shearling bucket hat. Below this demure image a line white of text reads, **Who Is Jill Scott?** atop a solid black background.

Less than a year after its release, the project was nominated for Best R&B Album at the 2001 Grammy Awards. Scott’s hit singles “Gettin’ in the Way,” “A Long Walk,” and “He Loves Me (Lyzel in E Flat)” were nominated for Best Female R&B Vocal Performance in 2001, 2002, and 2003, respectively. There she was, on the frontlines of a sound that would define the new decade, a new era, and many of us didn’t even see her coming. That is, until she bust through our speakers voice first — taking over every local radio station worth tuning into at the time.

Though the album was tremendously critically successful, many still argue that the album did not receive the response it deserved. On Twitter, you can find outcries from countless Jill Scott fans who firmly believe that while multiple singles charted, many lesser known yet equally brilliant songs are under-recognized.

¹ Scott, Jill. “Watching Me”, *Who Is Jill Scott? Words and Sounds Vol 1*. Hidden Beach, 2000. Track 15. LyricFind.

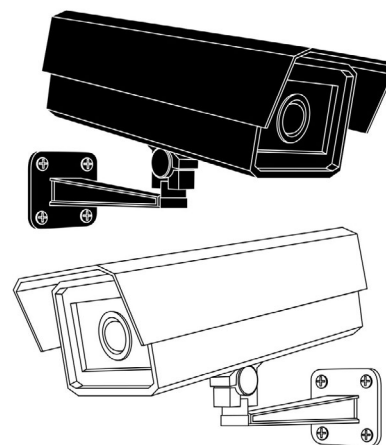
This July marks the 20th anniversary of *Who Is Jill Scott?*, and given that so much has unfolded over the years in regard to pervasive tech industry innovation, intersectional feminism politics, and the continued struggle toward Black American liberation, I believe the song “Watching Me” now offers us opportunities for re-evaluation. If we took Miss Scott’s hand and stepped back into the year 2000 with the benefit of 2020 hindsight, perhaps we would be able to better appreciate the red flags that signaled the overabundance of technological dangers awaiting us further into the 21st century — and then interrogate the ways in which the surveillance state, along with its uneven implications, has exponentially evolved.

Today I find that some of those same red flags continue to appear, clear as day. Even clearer than the resolution of the analog CCTV² security camera installed outside of your nearest gas station, the one that always seems to be aimed directly at you, above a blue sign that says: **“SMILE :) YOU’RE ON CAMERA!”**

*“First thing when I wake up
And right before I close my eyes at night
I think
Sense
Feel, man, like
I’m under some kind of microscope*

*Satellites over my head
Transmitters in my dollars
Hawking, watching, scoping, jocking
Scrutinizing me*

*Checking to see what I’m doing
Where I be
Who I see
How and where and with whom I make my money ^{3*}*



What. Is. This?”

² Closed-circuit television (CCTV), also known as video surveillance, is the use of video cameras to transmit a signal to a specific place, on a limited set of monitors. “In their first decades of existence, CCTV cameras were low-resolution analog devices that recorded onto tapes. Businesses or city authorities deployed them to film a small area of interest. Few cameras were placed in public, and the power to track people was limited: If police wanted to pursue a person of interest, they had to spend hours collecting footage by foot from nearby locations. In the late 1990s, video surveillance became more advanced. A company called Axis Communications invented the first internet-enabled surveillance camera, which converted moving images to digital data. New businesses like Milestone Systems built Video Management Systems, or VMS, to organize video information into databases. As time marched on, video surveillance spread. (Michael Kwet, “The Rise Of Smart Camera Networks, And Why We Should Ban Them,” [The Intercept](#), January 27, 2020)

³ Hold that thought, we will revisit this line later.

The song, written by Jill Scott, composed by Ted Thomas Jr. and Rich Medina, and engineered by Vidal Davis, grapples with the 21st century ordeal of being monitored constantly⁴. This is described from the perspective of a Black American woman living in a predominantly Black neighborhood. As the track begins, Scott's voice is ushered in by an interpolation of Roy Ayers track "Want You", the bright tones of a Rhodes piano and vibraphone fuel the flipped sample. Her casual flow is syncopated, with a repeated break beat. The drum arrangement persists throughout the track, only pausing when punching into a chorus. A marching yet minimal bassline establishes the momentum of the composition. Recurrent background vocals scatting "*watching me watching me watching, watching watching watching me*" are overlaid by Scott's voice and cloud-like harmonies. Lush strings and rain drops sampled from Marc Moulin's "Tohubohu" fill the blanks. The drop-lets sound like leaky pipes, or rain gutters in alleyways.

Scott's timbre progressively shifts in and out from a laid back, conversational tone, to one of heightened frustration. There is a midpoint where her voice begins to hopscotch expressively and freely along the beat, hot with fervor. She tapers off this soapbox moment by pulling back into her casual, yet confident delivery. What is most apparent throughout the track, and particularly on the hook, is Scott's even repetition of:

"watching me, watching me, watching me, watching me, ah"⁵
 watching me, *watching me,* *watching me,*

With every waking moment, "*in every dressing room, on every floor, in every store,*" she is being stalked by ever present proxies of the state, insidious early 21st century weapons of surveillance like police patrols, street cameras, wiretaps, and GPS satellites that infiltrate both public and private space. This is what Black studies scholar, essayist, and poet Jackie Wang refers to as the *intrusive-unseen*. Scott is plagued by a sense of deep paranoia which she knows to be justifiable, but still she cannot name this all-knowing presence — because as Wang articulates, "the cybernetic cop has no face."⁶

4 https://www.google.com/search?q=fbi+agent+memes&client=safari&rls=en&source=l-nms&tbnm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiZj7qz3c3qAhXSgnlEHUnnCd0Q_AUoAXoECAwQAw&biw=775&bih=652&dpr=2

5 Her voice is low and seductive in its softness.

6 "What is the future of law enforcement? Robocop is it. It is the place where the violence and coercion of prisons and police meet soft counterinsurgency. On the one hand, the militarization of the police. On the other, cybernetic forms of control... Nowadays, data mining and predictive analytics work alongside instruments of brute force. Today we might call the cybernetic cop CompStat — it lives in linked databases. It spreads out over the map as electromagnetic radiation, atmosphere, signals. It is inhaled. It moves through me." — Jackie Wang, "The Cybernetic Cop: RoboCop and the Future of Policing," *Carceral Capitalism*, The MIT Press. p. 253-259.

*"Look here at this watch of mine,
Gotta open it up*

*Don't know who's been in it
Tracking where I go
Finding out all my bi'ness*

*SE-CUR-I-TY
Video cameras locked on me
In every dressing room
On every floor
In every store*

*Damn can I get that democracy
And equality
And privacy*

You busy watching me, watching me

*That you're blind, baby
You neglect to see
The drugs coming into my community
Weapons coming into my community*

Dirty cops in my com-mu-nity..."

Surveillance is nothing new to Black folks (see: COINTELPRO⁷). Rather, as Simone Brown notes in the introduction chapter of her book *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, "it is the fact of anti-blackness." However, what was once limited to in person, street-level surveillance or wiretaps has expanded into the virtual realm, to infiltrate the spaces we once attempted to seek solace in, searching for some level of privacy, some sensation of peace. Today, predominantly Black American communities witness the highest concentrations of covert surveillance technology systems such as (but not limited to), CCTV cameras, stingrays⁸, automatic license plate readers⁹, biometric surveillance technology¹⁰, gunshot detection and location hardware¹¹, surveillance enabled light bulbs¹², hacking software and hardware¹³, social media monitoring software, and police body cameras.

⁷ COINTELPRO (COunter INTELligence PROgram) is a series of covert and illegal projects conducted by the FBI aimed at the surveillance, infiltration, discrediting, and disruption of American political organizations. The program was launched in 1956 to compromise the activities of the Communist Party of the United States. In the late 60's, its focus shifted onto the Black Panther Party. According to the FBI website, all operations ceased in 1971. However, there are many people today who believe this to be untrue, insisting that [COINTELPRO never ended](#).

⁸ a device that mimics cell phone communications towers and causes cell phones to communicate with it, tracking locations, and intercepting data including voice and typed communications.

⁹ mobile or fixed-location cameras used to take photographs of license plates, digitize them, and then store, process and search captured data in real time or over the course of months or even years.

¹⁰ mobile or fixed-location cameras used to take photographs of license plates, digitize them, and then store, process and search captured data in real time or over the course of months or even years.

¹¹ microphones that can be used to listen in on a community remotely.

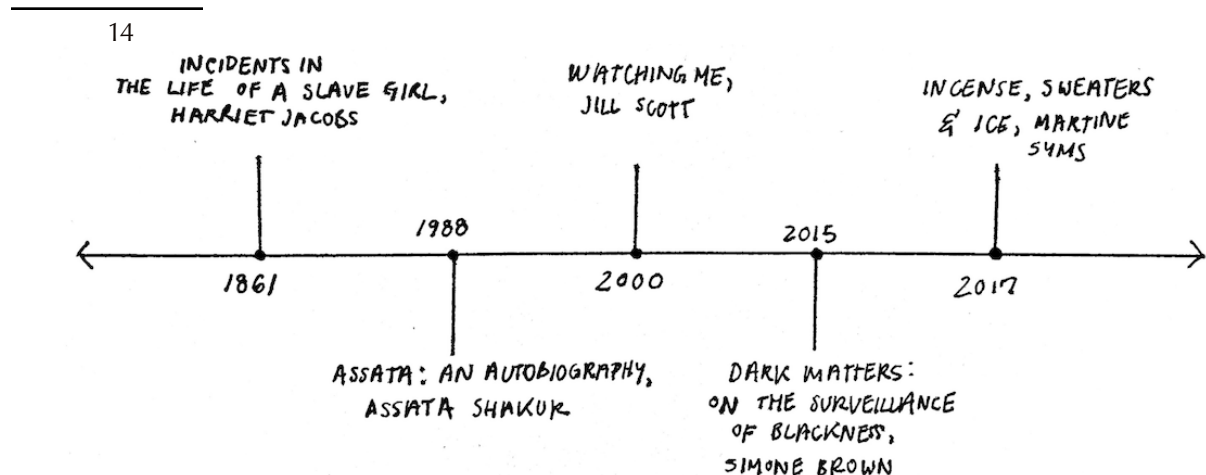
¹² LED surveillance light bulbs presented as energy efficient upgrades to existing incandescent light bulbs, that can conceal tiny cameras and microphones that monitor their surroundings and transmit their feeds back to a central monitoring station.

¹³ allows law enforcement officials or other government actors to gain access to a person's personal computing equipment (including laptops and cell phones) and password-protected websites or accounts (like cloud storage or social media accounts).



Still from *A Long Walk*, 2000. Directed by Jessy Terrero.

Though it was at first unbeknownst to her, Jill Scott effectively illustrated the then emergent, now ubiquitous era of mass surveillance. Her foreshadowing was rather timely, given that the song was released just before 2001 — preceding the 9/11 induced hysteria and subsequent profit surge in surveillance tech industries. These occurrences coincided with the establishment of new national security regulations, agencies, and departments, most notably the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Transportation Security Agency (TSA). Be that as it may, I do not aim to suggest that Scott was the first Black woman to address such matters¹⁴. She surely wasn't the last.



When I am walking home alone late at night and a Black man walks too close behind me, I clutch my keys between my thumb and fist. At the workplace, I am pressured by management and our clientele to compensate for my Blackness by looking my absolute best at all times — because this will partly determine how well or poorly I am treated. When I look too good, I become a spectacle for my white coworkers to gawk at. I open my phone camera at least 10 times a day to make sure that I don't "look crazy," and whenever I walk past glass storefronts, I clock my own reflection to confirm that everything is sitting in its right place. In the morning when I am getting ready in my bathroom mirror, I suddenly become anxious at the thought that someone or something is always watching, yet I have no true conception of what I actually look like.

My name is Anisa Olufemi. I am a Virginia born, Prince George's County, Maryland raised queer Black-American of Afro-Trinidadian descent. My pronouns are they/them and she/her. I am a writer, curator, and art worker. Each of my creative practices are rooted in the study of post-colonial critical theory, trans-national oral histories, land and labor politics, and Black Feminist Thought. My research has been presented in Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, and Chicago. I am a caretaker, a storyteller, a student, and a sister to many, but I am also **a Black woman watched.**

This is a multi-part essay experiment set to be released sporadically / as it develops. I hope that it will encourage a much larger dialogue beyond the contents of these pages. I welcome folks in community with me to reach out and offer feedback, perspective, or any lingering thoughts as the series unfolds.