Essay 1: Space, Surveillance, Memory, and Otherness

I. Overview
As we discussed in class, specific sites have the power to call us into being as subjects – making us aware of the hierarchies and discourses around us which situate us as social beings.

This paper asks you to look at this process with an example of your own personal history, and directs you to examine the ways in which space and discourse shape how we are viewed in the public sphere.

II. The Task
A. Your goal for this paper is to come up with an independent thesis statement that answers the following questions
   1. How do unique spaces allow for different acts of surveillance and regulation?
   2. How is this reflected in your individual experience?

III. The Process
A. After work shopping in class, compose a thesis statement that sets out your agenda
B. This thesis should be reflected in the body paragraphs of your paper, wherein you describe your experience as an “other” in a specific time or place (2-3 pages)
   1. Describe your own experience as an Other. Using the excerpt “Antonio’s Story” from Milton’s chapter as a source text, describe an experience where you felt “visible” because you were subject to “correctional surveillance” (Milton 80) or caught up in a system of “meticulous tactical partitioning” (qtd. Milton 80).
   *The experience you describe does not have to be with a police system or other judicial authority. You can discuss any social, personal, academic or judicial moment where you were had to negotiate scrutiny within a hierarchical system.
   2. What will make this section strong is if you continue to employ coherent paragraph frames that focus on clear topic sentences and vivid details and dialogue as “evidence” to support your paragraphs claim.

Sample student narratives (names and some portions of the text have been redacted)

1. While biopower works to regulate subjects in very dramatic and often violent ways, a recent experience has shown me that biopolitical discourse can have a negative impact in a smaller setting as well. I was observed and categorized because I am a minority. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon in the city. My sister and I thought nothing would be better than to spend this day shopping. Shopping brings me happiness and excitement, new clothes, variety of colors, stunning accessories, and experimenting with different types of clothes is something me and my sister love. However our happiness was cut short due to offensive whispering and scolding glares by the staff at a semi-high end store in which they felt we did not belong. We were pre-judged and made assumptions of as soon as we walked in making it known that the staff and shoppers felt superior was shockingly hurtful.

   Walking into the store I mostly focused on the beautiful and vibrant spring colors, but unfortunately I couldn’t help but notice some female workers and their horrible reactions to me and my sister, two Mexican-American teenagers walking in. Knowing that we were going to go shopping in a very judgmental and observed environment, my sister and I decided to dress the part in hopes that we would be seen as normal teenage girls with no judgments attached. We wore fashionable blazers, immaculate pants, stunning heels and wavy soft curls in our hair in hopes of presenting ourselves in more of a professional manner. However dressing this way didn’t necessarily help us as much as we had hoped for, it actually worked against us because we were seen as attempting to fit in and be something we are not. As soon as we walked into this bright and alluring shop I heard a beautiful, tall, blonde hair, blue eyed female worker whisper to a caramel skin, decent height, and professionally dressed woman with voluminous curly hair gracefully bouncing as she walked, as if to say "Who are these girls
trying to fool? This is not their kind of scene” which made me feel very inferior and intimidated. Her attitude struck me as knives being thrown my way. However, I chose to walk around and look at the beautiful and eye captivating spring clothes around me.

As me and my sister walked around, we noticed the blonde female worker keeping an eye on us, and watching our every step. This made me feel very uncomfortable because I’ve never stolen a thing in my life, yet these women were treating me as if I were a criminal because of my race. To seem as if their actions didn’t affect us, my sister and I would pick up an item, observe it, then made an unpleasant face to let the workers know this wasn’t our style I would say things like “This shirt is atrocious, who would even wear this” and “It takes an acquired taste to ever buy this”. We bought a couple of items from the store, in order to prove that we weren’t poor girls window shopping, we didn’t claim to be rich, but these women’s assumptions and glares made it clear that we were very different from the typical women whom usually shop at their store.

As Milton observes in his discussion of the West Bronx as Panopticon, it gave higher authorities who were superior to minorities the power to observe and reform them. “The most important function of prisons is to allow prison officials the power of observation without giving inmates equal power (Milton, 80). With being observed in the high-end store I felt as if I was constantly being watched, and as if my every move was monitored it became very clear to me who was the authority and who had the power in that situation.

2. Being a ______ female whose bisexual is as bad as killing fifty people. I would constantly have to watch my actions, the way I dress and the way I speak, which are all very difficult because I feel as if I slip someone will notice and it would be a grave disadvantage for me. In a way I was no different from Antonio, according to the excerpt Antonio’s Story: Warfare and Redemption, “To him, this instilled a feeling of powerlessness; a way of constantly keeping his actions in check.” Antonio felt that he had to change the way he appeared in order not to constantly be stopped by officers every day. He had no control of himself, his identity. If I wear sweatpants with a shirt and timberlands I feel as if someone could tell who I am. Like Antonio if he dressed a certain way he could get stopped, walk a certain way, hang out at a certain place, he had to change himself in order to protect himself because he is always being watched.

Last fall on a warm day, my girlfriend and I decided to go to ______ as we always do. There’s always a set a students from ______ and ______ High school hanging out there. We got food and went there to eat, after we ate we were taking out picture and talking when a group of about five ______ boys walked past us. One of the guys from the group decided to swoop by and sit at the end of our bench. My girlfriend had her cell phone in her hand; he interrupted us and began to flirt with both of us. I put a stop to him and was getting smart with him; he didn’t like that and realized what I was doing. So he figured out that we were together but he didn’t care. He took my girlfriend’s phone and followed himself in instagram and continued to flirt with her. My girlfriend knew I was getting irritated so she pulled me away from there so we can leave before I had done something. I felt powerless and disrespected because I couldn’t do anything about a little high school kid flirting with my girlfriend. If I had done what I intended it would have been a problem. The reason for me being quite is because my girlfriend’s family doesn’t know about her much less us. Dating for almost two and a half years, having to constantly dealing with whose around when we are together, what we do when we are in public, etc because someone might see and word might get back to her mom is a constant headache. Like Antonio I always had to watch my back and changed my behavior in order to protect myself.

Antonio was frequently being stopped because he lived in a high crime neighborhood and was Latino. According to the excerpt, “for Antonio, police contact is about as frequent as waking up in the morning. The fact that he is young, Puerto Rican, lives in a high crime area, and chooses to dress in typical Hip Hop fashion only increases his chances of being searched” (83). Because the area he lived in had high crime rates he, along with all his neighbors would be under surveillance. When I would go by my girlfriend’s house and spend the day with her four siblings and her mother, I felt as though my every move was being watched. What I would say, how I dressed, how I acted, everything. This only made me more nervous and more suspicious.

South Bronx is not known for having the richest, high class people living there, just lower income families. African Americans and Latino’s living in the neighborhood probably barely get by. They don’t have money like people in Manhattan so they don’t have the same rights. According to the Bill of Rights we do, but do we really? If
we do then why African Americans and Latino are being stopped more than whites? According to the excerpt “In Gelman study, they concluded that “for violent and weapons offenses, blacks and Hispanics are stopped about twice as often as whites” and represented “51% and 33% of all stops while representing only 26% and 25% of the New York City population.” (83) Obviously minorities such as African Americans and Hispanics are not the ones in power. They don’t have as much as the whites; they are being dominated by the whites since they are the lower class. Constantly being stopped and frisk many people are deprived of their rights, especially young minorities teenagers. Being thrown on the ground and treated like criminals when most of them don’t even have anything on them just shows the disadvantage of being a part of the weaker group.

3.

As an immigrant and a part of the Black community I have experienced a sense of otherness and surveillance as result of the groups I belong to, it is an experience similar to that expressed in Milton’s chapter Antonio’s Story: Warfare and Redemption, just as Antonio had uncomfortable incidents with police in West Bronx I too experienced the same discomfort with a store security guard. I went to a popular accessories store and started browsing through the merchandise as I was moving I felt as if I was being watch so I looked up and saw a lone security guard standing a few feet away with a focused stare. I continued to walk through the store trying not to be bothered by the incident but everywhere I went he followed closely behind even though there were other Caucasian customers in the store. The overwhelming sense of isolation that I experienced was uncomfortable for me but sadly it was expected just as Antonio normalized police supervision in his neighborhood.

Antonio’s neighborhood was deemed dangerous and violent and as he was a member of this community he was also deemed as potentially dangerous and subjected to surveillance. The same principle of association applies to me. I became visible since I was in a space where I was deemed as untrustworthy being a member of a heavily surveyed minority group, my movement within the space was heavily regulated to reduce the possibility of disruptive behavior. Antonio and I function as ‘others’ when our social background/standing and race come into consideration when socializing in everyday life.

‘Correctional Surveillance’ (Milton 80) is employed in order to regulate others and provide a presence to deter undesired behavior. Others are categorized as such by the powers of society who view those who may be different or separate from persons like those in power as potentially disruptive or dangerous. This notion becomes embedded in the fabric of society to a point where it becomes an accepted societal norm. ‘For Antonio, police contact is about as frequent as waking up in the morning’ (Milton 83) this normalization is seen most obviously in the lives of those who are under surveillance. Being scrutinized by the security guard did not surprise me it was a regular thing for me to hear about and experience for myself, of course it’s uncomfortable even humiliated but it is almost anticipated by members of minority groups namely Hispanic and Black. The normalization of regulation and surveillance gives formality and legitimacy to the act especially when statistics may depict a decrease in disruptive incidents “The 46 percent decrease in crime rates correlates well to the tripling of the size of the NYPD since 1993” (Milton 83).

Otherness creates a sense of isolation that the person isolated identifies and becomes aware of when the regulatory bodies reinforce their place in society. It is not likely something that will change any time soon, there’s a sense of hopelessness to fight therefore the path of least resistance is preferred by Antonio “You know, I just don’t care. I just let them search me and get it over with. I am not going to fight them.” (Milton 82) one is reminded where they stand and instead causing more discomfort to ourselves many cooperate for the sake of a fleeting sense of peace. My resolution was to call my mother’s and the store manager’s attention to the hounding as I felt it was sorely unjust and unwarranted to monitor me suspiciously, even though I felt isolated I felt it was pertinent to seek redress.

4.

In Antonio’s Story, the depiction of citizen surveillance was the basis to the NYPD’s omnipresence in New York neighborhoods. The NYPD used MSV units and spread them throughout his burrow. The NYPD also started a stop and frisk program. Through the use of observation people eventually became institutionalized to the supervision and the antagonism of the police officers. Antonio tells of his personal experience with police officers. He finishes by saying he doesn’t have a problem with all officers, but a good amount. Some of them look for actual crime rather than petty marijuana busts.
Ironically, my experience had to do with police officers and being frisked because I’m Spanish. One day last year I was walking down the street with a friend when a car pulls hard and fast into the drive-way and him were about to pass. Without thinking much of it, I commented to my friend that he was a jerk and we tried to walk around the vehicle. Without any indication of them being DTs, me and my friend was forcibly turned around and frisked. At this point, I obviously realized they were police officers.

While I was being frisked, even though I already knew the answer I just wanted to hear his response, I asked the officer “why are you frisking me?” He responded with “We don’t know if you have weapons, knives or illegal narcotics on you.” I didn’t want to ask any more questions due to my prior knowledge and stories I’ve heard so I complied with the rest of the ordeal. Just about a month ago I heard of a young male getting shot dead for playing loud music in his car. My mother got a “talking on the cell phone while driving ticket” once. She doesn’t even have a cell phone; she brought the officer to court and was paid $40 in compensation because she obviously won. The judge asked the officer if he saw a cellphone and he replied “no your honor, I didn’t”. Back to the story, He didn’t give me or my friend the reasoning to me and him getting frisked and left with saying “alright, have a nice day”.

Not once through the whole ordeal did I see a badge or any indication of them being police officers. They didn’t even say they were policing officers so for all I know, I could’ve randomly been frisked by 2 men with shades. They were also very built men. With the presumption that they were DTs, now that I think about it, if I would’ve been another person thinking I was getting robbed, I could’ve punched a police officer without knowing and been charged with assaulting a police officer and “resisting arrest”. Even if I would try to defend myself by saying I thought I was getting robbed who would they believe? The police officers or the 17 year old kid getting frisked, punching a police officer? Luckily it was morning hours and I assumed I wouldn’t get held up in broad day light by two people in a car.

I had one other personal experience with getting stopped for something minimal also. I was on my bicycle and I was turning a corner, but for about 5 seconds I ended up on the side walk because it was a red light. It was a big 6 lane 2-way street, Northern Blvd. to be exact. When from the other side of the boulevard the officer in a van used to pick up kids that are cutting school, it was the summer, shouted at me telling me stay right there. He then proceeded to make a U-turn on Northern Boulevard and told me the reason he stopped me was because I was riding my bike on the side walk. He said in NYC it’s considered a “motor vehicle” so I had to be on the street. He then asked me what my name was and if I had any past convictions. I proceeded to tell him my name and no, for the next question. He then said “well I don’t believe you so let’s check and if you’re lying to me I’ll bring you in.” He then wasted about 10 minutes of my life asking my D.O.B and looking me up in the system. After seeing that I was telling the truth he said “ok you’re free to go, but don’t ride on the side walk again”. I’m not an idiot I know what he was going to do with my information. Although he did it indirectly, I was offended by the way he treated me as a liar and telling me by his actions that I’m not smart enough to know why he wants my name. Of course I didn’t say anything fearing the worst.

I was surveyed by a security guard at “Claire’s” a teenage girl’s store for accessories for dressing in their desired attires. I was there with a friend because he was going to buy a gift for his girlfriend. As soon as I walked in I noticed the security guard was following me and looking at me. He was looking at me like if he can’t believe it’s not butter. So immediately feeling offended, and knowing I didn’t actually need to do anything in the store nor had no interest about what was in the store, I stared at him back. I stared until he felt so uncomfortable he looked away; but I kept staring and every time he would look in my direction he looked away. I stood absolutely still staring at him from about 15-20 feet away for what felt like an eternity but in reality it was probably 5 minutes until my friend poked me saying “ok let’s leave”. I knew I was being racially profiled it was obvious.

Within my everyday life I am being surveyed. When I walk down the street, I’ve seen the MSVs Antonio talked about and I’ve been frisked for little to no reason. Being surveyed everyday I’ve realized it will keep happening so there is no point in fighting it and after reading Antonio’s work, he brought the words right out of my mouth. Through my 18 years of being in NYC, I’ve come to terms that our biggest gang at times is the NYPD. I’ve seen a knife getting pulled out in a street fight at a park once and to put it in a comparison, Dominos would’ve probably arrived quicker if they were called. The park was about 4 blocks from a police precinct. When the police arrived two people fighting had already left and when people were asked if they saw anything everybody pretended nothing happened.