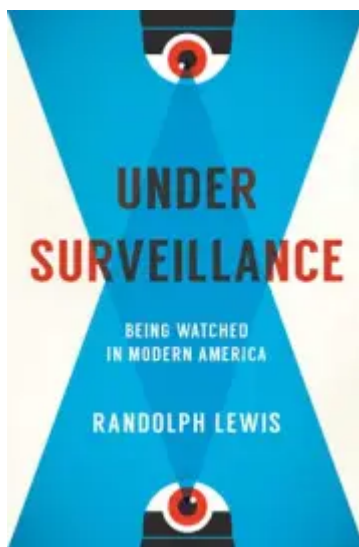


## AMS :: ATX

# Five Questions with Randolph Lewis, Author of New Book “Under Surveillance” by American Studies



*Dr. Randolph Lewis, Professor of American Studies at UT-Austin, has recently published his newest book entitled *Under Surveillance: Being Watched in Modern America*. AMS : ATX sat down with Lewis to discuss the inspiration for the new book, the relationship between surveillance and democracy, the interaction between Lewis' scholarship and teaching, and much more. Please read on!*

**Can you tell us a little bit about your book *Under Surveillance*, and how you came to the project?**

The book looks at what I call the “soft tissue damage” of surveillance culture—the ethical, aesthetic, and emotional toll of living with ubiquitous CCTV, big data, drones, TSA scanners, and other surveillance technologies in the contemporary US. After all, we’ve moved into an unprecedented state of visibility in which our secrets—what we say, what we buy, what we want—are constantly laid bare to various systems of social sorting with long memories. I find this disconcerting to say the least, especially because we haven’t really had a thoughtful conversation about what it means for our democracy.

That’s where the book comes in, I hope. A few years ago I looked around and was surprised there wasn’t a good American Studies book on contemporary surveillance culture. So I jumped into a new field with both feet, feeling quite passionate about exploring the impact of these new surveillance technologies on our lives.

**What projects or people have inspired your work?**

I learned so much from the emerging field of Surveillance Studies, which has an excellent journal called Surveillance and Society (<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/>). The work of many contemporary visual artists was also important—some of them set the tone for what I am doing. I also loved the personal tone of the work I heard in the Public Feelings workshop in Austin over the past five years. Finally, I got important encouragement from my editor, Robert Devens, to write in my organic voice, which is more accessible and somewhat more literary than what is sometimes found in academic journals.

**How do you see your work fitting in with broader conversations in academia and beyond?**

The book is smack between academia and “beyond,” I think. I’ve stood on the shoulders of many previous scholars, added my own experiences and excavations, and tried to clearly explain what I learned. I certainly tried to write the book in a way that was careful, vivid, and accessible. Some chapters were rewritten 20 times to get the writing to where I was happy.

**How do you think your research has affected your teaching at UT?**

I often craft new courses from my research interests, but I’m just as happy doing them from scratch. In fact, my favorite courses are often ones that take me into new directions that I haven’t yet written about. For instance, my urban studies course for first year students comes out of running the End of Austin project, while my new seminar on popular music comes out of my experiences as a musician and fan as much as my cultural studies training.

**Conversely, how do you think your teaching has changed your research?**

The conversations with students are always clarifying—you can test out ideas and see what really works, and are alerted to things that you might have overlooked. It’s one of the great benefits of working at a research university—you get to toggle productively between teaching and research.

**Finally, do you have any advice for students in our department about how to get the most out of their experience at UT?**

Really get to know people. After all, we have a fairly lively and welcoming cast of characters on the fourth floor of Burdine Hall. But we’re just a starting place. Especially in the case of our own grad students, I would say that American Studies is a great creative community, but don’t forget that UT is a vast universe of potential collaborators. Meet people outside of the department whenever you can—that nurtures the deep interdisciplinary spirit that is possible in American Studies. Frankly, it’s a spirit that infuses my book, which couldn’t really exist in any single discipline, but is very much the product of ranging widely across multiple fields and looking for new connections and insights.

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