The Surveillance Commodity, Unequal Exchange, and the (In)Visible Subject in Hasan Elahi's *Tracking Transience*

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On his return flight from an overseas art show in 2002, artist and assistant professor Hasan Elahi was detained in an Immigration and Naturalization Service holding facility and interrogated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI was acting on information given by a local Florida resident who had reported seeing an "Arab man" fitting Elahi's description removing explosives from a nearby storage unit.[1] To clear himself Elahi used his electronic PDA (personal digital assistant) to corroborate his whereabouts during the dates in question, which was the first, but not the last, act of self-surveillance that would exonerate him. He was released at that time but asked to "check in regularly." The FBI subjected Elahi to repeated questioning over a six-month span, during which he endured nine lie detector tests.[2]

To maintain his mobility and prevent future detentions, Elahi began preemptively calling and e-mailing the bureau to notify them of his travel plans in advance, gradually increasing the frequency and thoroughness of his communications. Elahi's apparent cooperation became subversive as he strategically overwhelmed the FBI with information detailing his every movement and transaction. This self-surveillance eventually became a website project, *Tracking Transience*, that turned into a multiyear record of Elahi's daily life. The site displays real-time GPS tracking of Elahi's daily movements and contains over seventy thousand images of airports, hotel

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rooms, meals, receipts, and other images, available to anyone from both the government and the public who access it online.[3]

Elahi explained his motivation in an interview on the *Colbert Report*:

> Elahi: Intelligence agencies, regardless of who they are, all work in an industry where their commodity is information, and the reason their information has value is no one else has access to it. The secrecy applied to the information is what makes it valuable, so by me disclosing all this to everybody—
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> Colbert: —it becomes worthless.
>
> Elahi: Exactly.[4]

In a more recent interview with Brooke Gladstone on National Public Radio's *On the Media*, Elahi repeats this same argument nearly verbatim.[5] In these interviews he describes information as a commodity and makes the claim that he can reduce the value of his personal data by flooding the market with it, the logic being that increased supply will reduce demand. Yet I suggest Elahi's understanding of value fails to take into account how the information commodity is initially formed. According to Elahi what makes the information commodity valuable is limited access and secrecy, but this does not take into account the issue of exchange, which is central to Karl Marx's understanding of how the commodity form is assigned value and is separate from the logics of supply and demand.[6]

In what follows I engage three lines of questioning prompted by the *Tracking Transience* website: How can we theorize surveillance information as a commodity form? How does Elahi's project complicate our understanding of the subject in the post-Patriot Act control society? And how does *Tracking Transience* visualize this contemporary dynamic between subject formation and surveillance? Using Elahi's work as a case study, I argue that surveillance operates according to the logic of exchange derived from Marxist theory. Specifically, I demonstrate how surveillance enacts the figurative trope of catachresis as accumulated data violently supplants the subject, who is in turn reconstituted as an empty signifier of abstract personhood. This process is analogous to the formation of the commodity, which extinguishes the labor that went into its making. The extraction of subjectivity then makes it possible to treat certain individuals, often those marked as racial outsiders, as nonsubjects who can be acted upon outside of the law. This figurative maneuver exemplified by *Tracking Transience* speaks to the broader relationship among surveillance, late capitalism, and systems of control as outlined by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, among others. While the relationship between these spheres of influence has been explored elsewhere, this essay specifically looks at how Elahi's artwork visualizes the process of desubjectification

that surveillance performs, providing deeper insight into the mechanisms of power working on Elahi and others like him.

Artveillance

Elahi has accumulated thousands of images on his *Tracking Transience* website, many of which he repurposed in subsequent artworks that address his concerns about contemporary surveillance culture. Most recently Elahi drew from his *Tracking Transience* archive for a series titled *Thousand Little Brothers* (2014), which weaves together his self-surveillance images in large tapestries that resemble the SMPTE (Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers) Color Bars.[7] Like much of Elahi's work, *Tracking Transience* and *Thousand Little Brothers* both fall under the heading of *artveillance*, a term introduced by Andrea Mubi Brighenti to describe artworks that share an attention to the social and political implications of the surveillance industrial complex.[8] Elahi's art thus sits within a larger constellation of works, including Jill Magid's *Evidence Locker* (2004), Michael Mandiberg's *IN Network* (2005), Camille Utterback's *Abundance* (2007), and Wafaa Bilal's *3rdi* (2010). These artists mobilize an aesthetics of observation and control in their art, often utilizing technologies of surveillance as their medium, such as video from closed-circuit television or photography using a telephoto lens.

As part of their political intervention these artists frequently practice *sousveillance*, a term coined by Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman to describe an inversion of the dynamics of surveillance from its conventional top-down structure to one where observation comes from below.[9] *Sousveillance* refers to people using digital tools to observe the observer, or at least to take control of their data. By using various computing devices and visual strategies, individuals can access their data and see who is watching them, effectively holding up a mirror to institutions of power.[10] For example, by making his website accessible to anyone from the public with the ability to go online Elahi is, in essence, subverting conventional operations of surveillance. Elahi has made it so that, rather than closed institutions having sole access to his data, anyone who visits *Tracking Transience* has the capacity to see what the FBI sees. Moreover, as the owner and operator of the website, Elahi can "look back" at institutions of power by tracking the various IP addresses of computers that visit his site, many of which he has publicly identified as belonging to specific state agencies and even the Oval Office.[11] While Elahi exhibits a level of agency through his artwork by taking control of his data, maintaining his mobility, and inserting his voice in the cultural sphere, I seek to complicate the idea that artworks like *Tracking Transience* have the capacity to

"neutralize surveillance," as Mann, Nolan, and Wellman have claimed.[12] By taking up Elahi's proposition that information is a commodity, I trace how surveillance enacts a complex process of subjectification that does not necessarily adhere to linear top-down or bottom-up models.

The Information Commodity

To understand how information operates like a commodity we must look to the modern era of Western capitalism, which links the operations of surveillance to capitalist expansion through the observation and control of workers.[13] The contemporary information society is not a new phenomenon but an extension of Fordism, the "total way of life" that promised growth and predictability in the highly volatile boom-and-bust capitalist system of the early twentieth century.[14] Based on Frederick Taylor's book *The Principles of Scientific Management*, first published in 1911, and the increasing availability of new machines that automated the production process, factory workers became a locus of scrutiny for experts on efficiency during the period.[15] Each aspect of their working day was recorded, indexed, and analyzed to help increase the speed and productivity of the labor force.

Taylor's scientific management is a prototypical example of Michel Foucault's "biopower," which refers to state power secured through the management of life in the modern "society of discipline."[16] Taylorism is the workplace corollary to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison design, which Foucault uses to describe the process of subjectification in the modern era. In Bentham's prison model the guard observes prisoners located around the periphery of the building from a central, elevated vantage point. Unlike the guard's unlimited vision, the prisoners cannot return the look and therefore cannot discern when they are being observed. This asymmetrical looking relation encourages inmates to internalize the gaze of the person in power and thus police their own behaviors, in effect becoming docile subjects. Foucault explains, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles [the seer and the seen]; he becomes the principle of his own subjection."[17] The panopticon, in other words, is a model that links vision with the dual processes of subject formation and subjection to power.

Foucault uses the panopticon to extrapolate a model for how social relations operate, arguing that institutions possess the ability to look and extract knowledge, while the population becomes the locus of their controlling gaze. In the case of *Tracking Transience*, the panoptic apparatus operates not only between Elahi and the government but also between

Elahi and his neighbors. One of these neighbors, observing Elahi without his knowledge, alerted the FBI and set the machinery of formal surveillance in motion. Policing the body then transferred from the institution to the watched individual as Elahi quite literally began self-surveillance, thus internalizing the material operations of power. In late capitalism, however, the locus of power has shifted from the factory to the corporation, transforming control into a more constant, modulating, and decentered force. While Foucault focuses on closed institutions of power that individuals pass through over the course of their lifetimes, Deleuze recognizes the decoupling of power from institutions. Power becomes instead a dispersive force that circulates along with bodies, affects, and ideas. We are no longer in the society of discipline but, rather, a society characterized by "ultrarapid forms of free-floating control."[18] The free-floating power of the "control society" contributes to, for example, the social pressure that many workers experience to respond immediately to work-related e-mails even when away from the office. This new labor model is spurred in part by smartphone technology that has become ubiquitous, perpetually tethering individuals to their work.

While surveillance technologies are mobilized to police workers and promote capitalist expansion, biopower alone does not help to explain how information can be commodified. To bridge this gap I turn to Matteo Pasquinelli, who argues that the extraction of information is not only a means of control but also a means of accumulating and moderating value. He cites what Romano Alquati calls "valorizing information," or the worker's cognitive labor that is absorbed by machines and crystallized as "data."[19] In other words, information is another kind of value extracted from workers who input their creativity as they make various decisions during the production process. Creative labor can be translated into discrete bits of information that become part of the broader system of "machinic knowledge." This process is the precursor to what has been called cognitive capitalism. Thus, today's laborers are "intellectual organs" of a "vast 'social brain,'" which is all part of the larger machine of capital.[20]

The valorization of information enables the capitalist imperative for expansion to move into new territories: from the physical domination of land, resources, and indigenous peoples to the virtual realms of cyberspace and the inner recesses of the human mind, thereby "incorporating *information* into the commodity form" as noted by Vincent Mosco.[21] As the burden of material production shifted to developing countries, large multinational corporations focused their attention on producing and circulating finance capital.[22] We have transferred from the modern exchange pattern of M–C–M′—money for commodities— to the postmodern model M–M′, indicating that capital is freely exchanged for more capital, signs for signs, without the need for material

goods to act as intermediaries. Going further, Jonathan Beller suggests the model might be rewritten as M–I–C–I′–M′ to indicate more precisely that money is now exchanged for images (I) and code (C).[23] This shift to an economy of signifiers, combined with a corporate push toward deregulation, automation, and digitization, exponentially accelerates the flow of capital.[24]

Even as finance capital opens the door for an economy of signs, it is important to establish that labor is still integral to the production of value. For example, Tiziana Terranova argues the largely invisible labor of programming, debugging, and assembling hardware constitute the underlying condition of possibility for the Internet. She contends that digital labor, in the form of programming and then maintaining the back end of the cybernetic system, is the hidden source of value in late capitalism.[25] Even workers who are not involved in the programming and maintenance of the Internet are nevertheless inputting their labor as users. That is, in addition to providing new means of extending the labor time for all workers at their jobs, new technologies also enable looking to become a form of labor as the sphere of cultural production meshes with the information industry. In this way digital technology blurs distinctions between processes of production and consumption, between leisure and labor. Such an attention economy is built around viewers and users who perform "sensuous labor" from which value can be extracted. According to Beller, the viewer's attention is "sedimented in the image" just as Marx argued the commodity is crystallized labor.[26] Thus, viewing media online can be seen as an extension of the workday, and the act of watching is the contemporary translation of Alquati's valorizing information.

As viewers and users input their sensuous labor, they are simultaneously constructing what David Lyon calls their "data-double" or "virtual self."[27] In the control society subjects are no longer individuals but what Deleuze calls "dividuals," or bodies transformed into codes, whose movement through space is enabled and tracked by passwords and electronic key codes.[28] For example, computers continually log cookies associated with web browsers, which can track user interests so companies may better market products to consumers, effectively transforming real people into data sets that can be run through predictive algorithms. Those algorithms extract information derivatives, or metadata, that can be circulated online and accrue value in a process analogous to financial derivatives accruing value on the stock market.[29] Such "dataveillance" is also a means of biopolitical discipline by predicting and constraining mass behaviors, generating an inextricable intertwining of commodification and control.[30] The larger point to be made here is that Elahi is correct to say information is a commodity, but its value is not based on secrecy and scarcity as he implies. Rather, information acquires value through human inputs. As

Alquati explains, valorizing information is drawn from living labor that is then absorbed by the machine; the machine itself cannot produce surplus value because, unlike a person, a machine cannot be exploited.[31]

As he conducts self-surveillance Elahi performatively enacts the expanded forms of labor that are driven by digital technologies. In the process of producing and accumulating hundreds of images, he transforms his daily life into discrete fragments of information backed by digital code. Thus the work of surveillance transfers from state agencies to the individual, who continues it in perpetuity. Yet Elahi's website is purposely inefficient and opaque. Rather than archiving images chronologically by day, month, and year, the images on his site are grouped by subject matter. When the user opens the home page of his website, the upper half of the screen depicts a single image randomly selected from his massive archive. If the user clicks on the image, a large grid of related images appears without contextual information. Rather than articulating any coherent narrative, the images are drawn from a massive database, having been tagged by a nonspecific category, such as "train stations," and then retrieved by a randomizing algorithm that groups images by tag.

Elahi claims he created an intentionally "user-*unfriendly* interface" on his website so the user must take on the role of an FBI agent, cross-referencing between different databases to produce a more coherent picture of his activities. It is not unlike the work of former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who compiled information on thousands of Americans he deemed suspicious during the Cold War era in a massive "security index." Hoover developed an elaborate categorization system of index cards containing information on thousands of individuals that could be cross-referenced according to different criteria.[32] Likewise, the user of *Tracking Transience* must labor to find a way to make sense of discrete fragments of information to draw conclusions about Elahi, a task that is made quite difficult by the organization of the site.

Nevertheless, *Tracking Transience* visualizes the reality that in the new millennium data are endlessly gathered, indexed, and analyzed in an interminable project to administer life for the purpose of maintaining the body politic and enable capitalist expansion. And in the wake of the Edward Snowden leaks regarding PRISM and other National Security Agency programs, it appears that data are still gathered by traditional centers of power—namely, the federal government—in a preemptive move to track and control perceived undesirables among the American (and international) population. Moreover, some of the documents leaked by Snowden seem to indicate that government surveillance programs are designed not only to protect the American public but also to protect American corporate interests domestically and abroad, inextricably linking capital and control at an unprecedented level.[33] It seems as though

the control society has not entirely supplanted the discipline society, but rather, the two work in tandem.

The Surveillance Subject

Understanding how information is transformed into a commodity opens up new ways of thinking about the relationship between information and subjectification in the digital era. Yet the subject of *Tracking Transience* is mysteriously absent from the frame. A notable nonfeature of *Tracking Transience* is the lack of any identifying information linking the images on the website to a specific individual. There is no self-portrait, no biography, and no artist's statement—indeed, nothing at all to help users ground their encounter with the artwork. This contextual information comes from outside the primary text via personal statements made by the artist on other platforms and websites. In effect, Elahi has become invisible despite the excess of visual information on his website, which raises questions about the nature of the contemporary surveillance subject. To parse out what happens to the surveilled subject when the information commodity is extracted, I turn to Thomas Keenan's rhetorical reading of Marx.

Keenan lays out four important rhetorical moves Marx performs in volume 1 of *Capital*. First, Marx explains how two things with differing physical properties and use values can be placed in equal proportion so they may be exchanged. Marx makes the supposition that we can form an "axis of similarity" between two commodities by placing them in relation to a "third thing."[34] The first rhetorical move, therefore, is one of substitution, or metaphor, since the value of a commodity is the expression of another thing that is similar but not exactly the same. To determine what third thing the commodities have in common, however, there must first be a process of reduction. That is, the objects need to be reduced to a single quality to find a suitable similarity. Thus, Keenan argues, the second move Marx makes is one of synecdoche, which enables a part of the commodity to stand in for the whole.[35] Marx then determines that the part that stands in for the whole, or the third thing that forms a bridge between commodities, is human labor.

Yet Marx realizes we are often unaware of this labor when we exchange commodities, which then raises the question, how can the commodity come to stand in for human labor, which itself recedes from our view? This substitution, Keenan concludes, is accomplished through Marx's third move, abstraction.[36] In other words, each thing must be emptied out of its particularity. Its properties must be "extinguished" so the commodity becomes an empty signifier of value that can be easily exchanged with any other commodity.[37] Marx determines that the human labor that went into its making must similarly be dissolved, which happens

when human labor is turned into quantifiable labor time. Significantly, then, the erasure of the specificity of the commodity also abolishes traces of the human, rendering the processes and people involved in its production into abstractions that can be placed in equal proportion. This process of abstraction leaves a remainder or "ghostly objectivity" behind, which "grants the common axis of similarity hitherto unavailable, precisely because it is a ghost and no longer a thing or a labor."[38] Each commodity, therefore, ends up with a "phantomatic reality" that masks their material reality, making them easily interchangeable with one another.[39] Like the images on Elahi's website that are abstractly categorized and made interchangeable at random, commodities can be swapped freely for one another, having been made equal (that is, equally abstract) through the process of exchange.

According to Keenan, Marx makes an "extraordinary move" at this point in *Capital*, which Keenan sets up with an intractable paradox: the Enlightenment concept of human equality that defines Western democracy came about only after the emergence of the commodity form, and yet, as has already been established, the condition of possibility for the exchange of commodities is the ability to place human labor in equal proportion.[40] In light of this historical paradox Keenan surmises that human abstraction must be a chiasmatic process that both enables the exchange of commodities and at the same time is produced by commodity exchange.[41] Indeed, it is this exchangeability at the heart of the subject that facilitates the formation of the contemporary body politic composed of "equal" citizens. This idea is shared by Slavoj Žižek, who, in tracing the movement from the pre-Enlightenment subject to the modern split subject, argues that modern self-consciousness involves the subject's self-decenterment. That is, subjectivity emerges from an unequal exchange between the subject ("I think") and its metaphysical being ("I am"). In other words, the exchange involves the abstraction of being in the form of the enunciation "I," so it may be substituted for the enunciated, embodied being, which must be effaced to maintain a sense of self-mastery. Detached from its substance, the subject then becomes an empty, exchangeable signifier that can come to recognize itself as an equal bearer of the "will of the people" just as the subject is an "anonymous 'bearer' of paper money."[42] Thus, there is a parallel between the equalizing process of commodity exchange and the equalizing process of the modern subject of the state.

Based on this exchangeability at the heart of the subject, Keenan concludes, "all humans are ghosts. Humanity as such, empty and abstract, alike and equal . . . is indistinguishable from the commodity."[43] It is this fundamental idea that leads Keenan to add a fourth and final trope to the figural workings of exchange. The final rhetorical move is based on Marx's supposition that a "ghostly" remainder persists after the pro-

cess of exchange, which suggests the process may not, in fact, be equal. Keenan wonders, if one commodity is exchanged for another, "doesn't the so-called common or third term have to be substituted for nothing?"[44] In other words, while the third thing enters into the equation to enable the exchange, it receives only a spectral version of itself in return. Thus, Keenan determines that Marx's final rhetorical move is catachresis. Just as we speak of the "leg" of a table or the "head" of a pin because we have no unique word to name these features, the figure of catachresis "can be said to produce of and by itself the entity it signifies, [which] has no equivalence in nature."[45] Catachresis forces a substitution that empties out the space behind the figural concept. Likewise, the third thing—the laborer or modern subject—is exchanged for nothing, substituted into an abstracted space, which is the fulcrum upon which the entire process turns.

The subject of *Tracking Transience* is similarly governed by the logic of exchange. Strikingly, Elahi's self-surveillance does not include any psychological or sociological information about his life. The website user can see what Elahi ate for dinner on any given evening, but the user is not privy to who he dined with, what they talked about, or any number of factors that typically make a person appear individuated, autonomous, and real. Instead, his subjecthood is documented by bodily transactions. Humorously, Brooke Gladstone describes Elahi's website as less ad infinitum than ad nauseam because acts of consuming and defecating food take up a large portion of his digital archive. Elahi has taken thousands of time-stamped images of each meal before he consumes it and of bathrooms that he visits after. Photographed looking down at the dinner table or the toilet, the images display his bodily perspective just before an action takes place. The subject in these cases is just a body that performs a basic function—food in, food out—without actually showing the body (his limbs or reflections are rarely, if ever, in the images he takes). The body is merely a site that materials pass through as the body itself passes through space. Visually, Elahi has reduced himself to a vulgar bodily subject even as he is emptied out of any unique bodily particularity. He has in effect effaced the body entirely, relegating it to the periphery of *Tracking Transience*, always implicated as a transactional figure but never visibly present in the archive.

Extrapolating from Keenan, I propose that the value of the information commodity is generated through a process of unequal exchange like any other commodity. But rather than extracting value from the labor that went into collecting surveillance information, a process that is often done by automated computer systems, I suggest the value of surveillance is extracted from the person being surveilled. Like the figural trope of catachresis, which marks out an empty space by substituting a word where there was none originally, surveillance reduces the subject to a phantom

data-double that supplants the person who is extinguished in the process. In other words, the subject enters the surveillance equation on one side and emerges on the other side as an abstraction in the form of quantifiable information. *Tracking Transience* visualizes this dynamic by rendering the subject invisible to the viewer. Elahi becomes the ghost that haunts his website, an undifferentiated remainder of the unequal exchange that surveillance enacts. By excluding his appearance and any personally identifying information from the website, Elahi demonstrates how subjectivity becomes alienated from the person and congealed in a set of data in an ever-accumulating archive.

Thus, we might say the contemporary surveillance apparatus works not by producing and managing subjects but, rather, by enacting a subtractive process that Georgio Agamben calls "desubjectification."[46] Echoing what has been said about the attention economy, Agamben gives the example of a television spectator who, "in exchange for his desubjectification [receives] the frustrated mask of the couch potato, or his inclusion in the calculation of viewership ratings."[47] That is, the television spectator performs sensuous labor that is crystallized as Nielsen ratings, information that comes to stand in for the person who becomes an anonymous "viewer." The attention and information economies work in parallel as viewers and users produce large quantities of data collected by the surveillance regime. In producing the surveillance commodity through his or her desubjectification, the modern subject receives the compensation of perceived security, but it is a precarious security in that the same process that "secures" subjects also enables their exclusion by first emptying them of their personhood.

Tracking Transience

The artist's statement on Elahi's professional website reads:

> It is in the border between society and technology that I am interested, and my work attempts to bridge the human and virtual worlds. I juxtapose the tangible aspects of traditional art practice with the electronic elements of current and developing technologies in order to blur the distinctions between the two realms. At the same time, this conjunction of the physical and the virtual parallels my exploration of the intersection of geopolitical conditions and individual circumstances.

In his statement Elahi recognizes and actively interrogates the ways the digital realm facilitates and organizes social relations, especially relations that involve acts of surveillance. As someone personally affected by operations of power, Elahi is invested in exposing viewers to the material reality of those who tend to be targeted by the surveillance regime. Thus, *Track-*

ing Transience touches on his embodied experience in addition to the more abstract, figural process of desubjectification that surveillance enacts. Attending to the intersection between "the human and virtual worlds" is necessary because a physical body is located in the spaces between the images on the *Tracking Transience* website, a reality that comes through in the artwork's unusual attention to bodily transactions.

While Elahi's site exaggerates and therefore perfectly exemplifies how the surveillance subject becomes an empty universal equivalent, this abstraction does not enable him to step outside traditional systems of control despite the artist's numerous declarations to the contrary. The FBI originally targeted Elahi because he had been identified as a threat based on certain embodied ethnic and racial markers, which are materially consequential even if they are culturally constituted. This social and historical reality that frames the website constrains and defines Elahi's position as someone simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, doubly undermining his political agency. For these reasons viewers should not ignore the issue of race and the asymmetrical operations of power that go with it, even if the body has been relegated to the periphery of the artwork. Indeed, art historian Jennifer González questions whether invisibility equates to deracialized subject positions online, arguing that examples of racial passing on the Internet are still constrained by a larger network of social, psychological, and corporeal realities that exist off-line. Race is not an intrinsic property but a social formation that is continually reinforced by individual bodily performances during social encounters, be they "real" or virtual. González argues that race is a discursive construct that should be understood as "a dynamic system of social and cultural *techniques* carefully calibrated to constrain, define, and develop a nexus of human activity where the ontology of the human, the representation of the body, and the social position of the subject intersect."[48]

Tracking Transience is similarly constrained by the broader ideologies that govern the surveillance apparatus. Even as the surveillance process reduces corporeal subjects into equally abstract bits of information that can be accumulated, organized, and circulated, the material operations of power that determine this process tend to privilege some individuals over others. Historically, operations of surveillance have been disproportionately directed at disenfranchised groups—laborers, women, and minorities—and new developments in the digital era are simply an expansion of pre-existing power structures.

Indeed, the linkage between labor exploitation and surveillance in the twentieth century parallels the relationship between surveillance and racial oppression in the modern era. For example, Frantz Fanon demonstrates how looking relations reflect and reinforce hierarchical race relations by recounting the experience of a white boy pointing at him

and exclaiming, "Look, a negro!"[49] Analogous to Fanon's experience, the surveillance apparatus also tends to "point" its gaze at some and not others through common practices like profiling. Just as Fanon was publicly recognized and treated as other by the white boy, so too was Elahi recognized and treated as a dangerous intruder by the state. Once he became the locus of the controlling gaze of the surveillance apparatus, it began its work, extracting his personhood. Through surveillance his subjectivity is crystallized as an information commodity that can be traded for "security" in an era of increasing insecurity. The thousands of images depicting liminal spaces such as airports, highways, and subway tunnels on *Tracking Transience* visualize the surveillance subject's desubjectification and expulsion from the social sphere. In the visual archive Elahi is never quite situated in space, which might communicate belonging. Instead he is perpetually moving through space, like a bit of data circulating the web, reflecting his status as a transient outsider and the project's title, *Tracking Transience*.

Conclusions

Hasan Elahi's proposition that surveillance information is a commodity opens up new avenues for theorizing the construction of subjectivity in the digital era. Building on Marx's model of commodity valuation and exchange, I propose that surveillance extracts information through a similar process of unequal exchange. Mirroring the mechanism of catachresis in language, the information commodity supplants the subject, who becomes an undifferentiated ghostly remainder in the process. His or her subjectivity becomes sedimented in data that can be easily indexed and cross-referenced across multiple database platforms. Yet the notion of equality in the modern nation-state, which is a key presupposition for commodity exchange, is belied by the specificities of material, human relations that determine who becomes the target of enhanced surveillance in the first place. In other words, the process of extracting visual data from the body supplements and exacerbates existing systems of racial differentiation and desubjectification. For this reason I take issue with Elahi's claim that "flooding the market" with information reduces its value and implicitly returns agency to the subject under surveillance. This view misrecognizes the figurative operations at play in the production of the information commodity. These operations extinguish the subject's personhood so that his or her data-double can be freely circulated within an ever-expanding data economy, which simultaneously strengthens the systems of control that govern it.

Notes

1. Although it is common in American rhetoric to conflate Muslim and Arab identity, turning religion into a race, Elahi is American Bangladeshi, not Arab. See Moustafa Bayoumi's "Racing Religion" for a historical overview detailing how Islam came to be seen as a racial identity in the United States.

2. "Hasan Elahi Detained by FBI," YouTube, 14 January 2008, www.youtube .com/watch?v=MM8OOXCeaqM (accessed 1 December 2015).

3. Thompson, "The Visible Man."

4. "Interview with Hasan Elahi," *Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 7 May 2008, www.cc.com/video-clips/07p71k/the-colbert-report-hasan-elahi (accessed 1 December 2015).

5. Gladstone, "Art of Self-Surveillance."

6. Marx, *Capital*, 181–82.

7. Elahi's *Thousand Little Brothers* was exhibited at Open Society Foundations in New York in 2014 as part of their Moving Walls 22 exhibition titled "Watching You, Watching Me."

8. Brighenti, "Artveillance."

9. Mann, Nolan, and Wellman, "Sousveillance," 332.

10. Ibid., 333.

11. "Interview with Hasan Elahi."

12. Mann, Nolan, and Wellman, "Sousveillance," 333.

13. Lyon, *Surveillance Studies*, 48.

14. Hassan, *Information Society*, 41.

15. Ibid., 38–39.

16. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 140.

17. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 203.

18. Deleuze, "Postscript," 4.

19. Pasquinelli, "Italian *Operaismo*," 50.

20. Ibid., 55–60.

21. Mosco, "Introduction," 3.

22. Goldhaber, "Attention Economy."

23. Beller, "Informatic Labor."

24. Hassan, *Information Society*, 45.

25. Terranova, "Free Labor," 34.

26. Beller, "Informatic Labor."

27. Lyon, *Surveillance Studies*, 55.

28. Deleuze, "Postscript," 5.

29. Beller, "Informatic Labor."

30. Pasquinelli, "Italian *Operaismo*," 64.

31. Ibid., 53.

32. Many of Hoover's records were released to the public during the ongoing war on terrorism, just a few years before the Edward Snowden leaks. See Weiner, "Hoover Planned Mass Jailing in 1950."

33. See Greenwald, *No Place to Hide*.

34. Keenan, "Reading Capital," 162.

35. Ibid., 164.

36. Ibid., 165.

37. Marx, *Capital*, 229.

38. Keenan, "Reading Capital," 168.

39. Ibid., 168.

40. Ibid., 171.
41. Ibid., 169.
42. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 29.
43. Keenan, "Reading Capital," 171.
44. Ibid., 181.
45. Ibid., 182.
46. Agamben, *"What Is an Apparatus?,"* 20.
47. Ibid., 21.
48. González, "Face and the Public," 42.
49. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 93.

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