Regulating belonging: surveillance, inequality, and the cultural production of abjection

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ABSTRACT

Conditions of abjection are increasingly viewed as problems to be managed with surveillance. Across disparate domains, bodies that challenge normalized constructions of responsible neoliberal citizenship are categorized, monitored, policed, and excluded in dehumanizing and often violent ways. This paper explores the role of surveillance in such processes. The registers covered include everyday abjection (welfare systems, battered women’s shelters, and homelessness), criminalized poverty (police targeting of the poor and emerging ‘poverty capitalism’ arrangements), and the radically adrift (the identification, tracking, and containment of refugees). In each of these cases, surveillance is yoked to structural inequalities and systems of oppression, but it also possesses a cultural dimension that thrusts marginalized and dehumanized subjectivities upon the abject Other. Therefore, I argue that in order to critique the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of contemporary surveillance, it is necessary to take seriously the mythologies that give meaning to surveillance practices and the subjectivities that are engendered by them.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 April 2016
Accepted 12 December 2016

KEYWORDS

Surveillance; abjection; racism; poverty capitalism; culture

Although there has been renewed critical attention to surveillance in the realms of national security and corporate data gathering, especially in online contexts, the gendered and racialized dimensions of contemporary surveillance remain largely underexplored. This appears to be the case especially with regards to the treatment of poor and marginalized populations, where conditions of abjection are increasingly viewed as problems to be managed with surveillance. For instance, the poor on welfare submit to scrutiny of their purchases, as they are enmeshed in systems designed to detect transgressions and exclude or punish those who are found unworthy. People on probation, especially in the United States, yield to invasive electronic monitoring for minor infractions and are charged fees for this ‘service’, which is often outsourced to private companies that profit handsomely from this form of poverty capitalism. When seeking jobs, the unemployed encounter a battery of surveys, background checks, and drug tests, also frequently at their own expense, in order to qualify for the possibility of obtaining a job. Homeless people are treated as populations to be managed and tracked through electronic systems deployed at shelters, as their privacy is continuously eroded, their makeshift dwellings dismantled, and their fragile sense of stability undermined. Refugees fleeing the radical insecurity of civil war are scrutinized as potential health or terrorist threats and forced to provide biometric data for United Nations tracking systems, paradoxically categorizing refugees both as discrete individuals to be sorted and followed and as an undifferentiated mass to be contained in camps.
Viewing these dynamics through the lens of surveillance can draw attention to the ways in which unequal control mechanisms define the operations of contemporary institutions and profoundly shape people’s experiences and life chances. As David Lyon explains, surveillance can be understood broadly as ‘the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction’ (Lyon 2007, p. 14). Thus, more than simply watching, surveillance practices exert influence and reproduce power relations through technological and non-technological means alike. Through the imposition of categories, processes, and differential forms of exposure, surveillance becomes a project of social ordering and world-making, even if its efficacy at achieving its primary intended goals (e.g. crime control) is limited or inconsistent (Coleman 2012). As deployed here, surveillance manifests as a multiplicity of techniques that conjure, coalesce around, and mediate the experiences of abject subjects.

Abjection signifies not only extreme need or destitution, but also a kind of social exclusion wherein the existence of the individual is called into question. Abjection implies a fundamental lack of fit with existing social and spatial orders (Sibley 1995), rendering the abject subject unknowable and largely invisible, at least as a collective ethical responsibility (Kristeva 1982; Murphy 2006). Further, modern states are constituted in part through the paradox of the socially abject, or the ‘inclusive excluding’ of various outcasts within states, justifying the enforcement of border controls and legitimizing dominant mechanisms for the provision of order (Tyler 2013). As the examples above indicate, surveillance plays an important role in policing bodies and maintaining boundaries between inside and outside, self and other. Moments of unwanted visibility or presence – of the poor, the homeless, the refugee – seem to compel mechanisms of intensified control. Such control mechanisms delineate parameters of temporary existence for the compliant, while excluding those marked as dangerous or socially illegible. Therefore, through categorization and sorting, surveillance enacts forms of structural and symbolic violence against marginalized Others.

Surveillance in this sense is about the maintenance of social order and the production of subjects. As Lisa Nakamura writes, compulsory forms of surveillance increasingly ‘serve two functions: to regulate, define, and control populations; and to create new gendered, racialized, and abled or disabled bodies through digital means’ (Nakamura 2015, p. 221). In the first instance, surveillance is a mode of ‘social sorting’, of categorizing populations according to perceived risk or value and treating those respective groups differently (Gandy 1993; Lyon 2003; Bigo 2006). Such surveillance is fundamental to how modern organizations operate: identifying, monitoring, analyzing, and sorting in frequently automated ways that are ambiguous to those affected by them (Giddens 1990; Thrift & French 2002; Graham & Wood 2003; Gilliom & Monahan 2013). In the second instance, surveillance fuses with existing cultural prejudices to coproduce unequal subjectivities and render them natural. Simone Browne describes this as a process of ‘digital epidermalization’, where surveillance systems ‘do the work of alienating the subject by producing a truth about the racial body and one’s identity (or identities) despite the subject’s claims’ (Browne 2015, p. 110). When interpellated by such exercises of power, individuals are prone to adapt their sense of self to the discriminatory classifications and treatments that characterize their lives.

This paper explores the merging of these structural and cultural dimensions of surveillance for the regulation of abject bodies. The field of surveillance studies has been adept at theorizing structural forms of inequality that are reproduced through surveillance (e.g. Koskela 2000; Rule 2007; Gandy 2009; Staples 2014). Classification and social sorting are the primary ways that this occurs, as unequal power relations and political contingencies are masked by processes of technological abstraction and mediation (Haggerty & Ericson 2000; Currah & Moore 2009; Guzik 2009; Morozov 2013). A cultural turn, however, productively shifts the focus to the mythologies that give meaning to surveillance practices and the subjectivities that are engendered by them (e.g. Monahan 2010, 2011; Ball 2009; Andrejevic 2013; Browne 2015; Dubrofsky & Magnet 2015; Hall 2015). Such an emphasis is vital in trying to account for the ways that surveillance contributes to gendered, racialized, and classed violence. For instance, cultural narratives (e.g. about dangerousness or unworthiness) are often key drivers for the adoption of surveillance systems that in turn reify those discriminatory
categories and subject positions (Coleman 2012; McCahill 2002). In combination, structural and cultural dimensions of surveillance synergize in destructive ways: on one hand, affording a seemingly apolitical objectification of the disadvantaged, and, on the other hand, providing a cultural script for the dehumanization and demonization of the Other.

In the sections that follow, I analyze three different but overlapping registers of surveillance: everyday abjection of being on welfare, in battered women’s shelters, or homeless, subjected to the possibility of constant scrutiny and judgment; criminalized poverty, which pulls the poor into extractive and violent relationships, mediated by surveillance, while public and private institutions profit; and the radically adrift, where refugees seeking survival and stability are channeled into regimes of state surveillance and control. The concept I build upon for this analysis is that of marginalizing surveillance (Monahan 2010). Marginalizing surveillance means the production of conditions and subjectivities of marginality through the application of surveillance systems. For each register analyzed, cultural narratives – from politicians, the mainstream media, or threatened citizens – powerfully inflect the forms of marginalizing surveillance deployed and the treatment of those under the gaze. While structural and cultural dimensions of surveillance weave together to govern the abject and make them legible, they simultaneously reproduce forms of violence and exclusion.

### Everyday abjection

Forms of everyday abjection are often most visible at their institutional interfaces. Such interfaces could include welfare systems, public housing, battered women’s shelters, and homeless shelters, just to name a few – each of which depend on sophisticated surveillance mechanisms to regulate the practices and subjectivities of the various ‘clients’ they serve. Welfare systems in the US, for example, mobilize client information systems, health information systems (for those receiving Medicaid), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ‘food stamp’ systems, and cash benefit systems as part of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), among others. Each of these systems creates data for analysis and assessment, especially of clients’ current resources, need, and worthiness. As a condition of receiving state assistance, people must submit to heightened scrutiny of their purchases, income-generating activities, job searches, parenting capabilities, and more. Obviously there is a moral dimension to such assessments, where the stigma of being on welfare is coupled with suspicion of deficiencies with one’s character.

With welfare, especially in the US, subjectivities of marginality are reproduced through social stigma, compelled transparency, and the double-bind of needing to prove one’s worthiness when it is nearly impossible to make ends meet without violating program rules in some way. For instance, while the average monthly food-stamp benefit for a family of four was $459 in 2015 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2015), the average amount for a ‘low-cost’ meal plan for the same size family was $859 (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2015). With the increasing privatization of benefits programs, which are run by financial institutions like Citicorp, recipients can also find themselves saddled with additional service fees for each transaction (Monahan 2006). Given this financially unsustainable context, welfare recipients subsist by underreporting income, taking side jobs, engaging in barter economies, paying babysitters by letting them use their electronic benefit transfer (EBT) food-stamp cards, and so on (Eubanks 2011; Gilliom 2001). Obviously, such techniques of everyday resistance can be affirming too, as ways for individuals to contest the stigmatized subjectivities that the state and others force upon them. That said, these and other resistance techniques do not alter the overwhelming power asymmetries of individuals facing merciless mechanisms of bureaucratic surveillance, which operate alongside biopolitical pressures of self-surveillance (e.g. adhering to program stipulations) to fulfill the neoliberal state’s norms of worthiness (Mason 2016).

Battered women’s shelters introduce a whole other layer of indignities perpetrated through institutional surveillance. Such shelters have been compared to prisons and other ‘total institutions’ for their meticulous rules, disciplinary practices, and judgment of character (Wharton 1989; DeWard & Moe 2010; Smith 2015). From the start, workers at such shelters collect detailed information on
women seeking assistance and screen out those whom they deem problematic or less receptive to moral reform. Andrea Smith relates:

Many domestic violence shelters screen out women who are not documented, who have criminal histories, who are sex workers, or who have substance-abuse issues. One advocate told me that her program did background searches on potential clients and had them arrested if they had any outstanding warrants! This, despite the fact that these women have warrants out for their abusers and are trying to escape abusers who have forced them into criminal activity. (Smith 2015, p. 33)

Once women have been admitted, they must acquiesce to a wide array or rules and expectations, alongside close monitoring to ensure compliance. These rules can include things like sign-out policies, where residents must list their destinations; prohibitions against drugs and alcohol; requirements that medicine be managed centrally by staff, letting workers know who is on birth control pills, for instance; allowing staff to search private rooms at any time; restricting visitors to common areas, where conversations can be overheard; and compulsory attendance at weekly counseling meetings where ‘confessional’ performances are expected (Pitts 1996). The violation of any rule or expectation could be grounds for eviction.

Women living at shelters with their children find their parenting skills placed under a microscope too. Poor and minority women, in particular, are assumed to possess deficient parenting skills and to require firm guidance to train them in ‘hegemonic middle-class childrearing strategies’ (Gengler 2011, p. 131). Some of the expectations for mothers are that they enforce house curfews, limit children’s television viewing, eschew all forms of physical punishment, avoid raising their voices when correcting children, and engage in ‘shelter-approved positive parenting techniques’, such as redirecting kids to acceptable choices, rather than ever saying ‘no’ to them (Gengler 2011, p. 139). Prohibitions against physical punishment, such as spanking, are the most strictly enforced, and any violations could lead to prompt dismissal. Because there is very little privacy, residents with children find themselves heavily monitored and judged, compelled to embrace the shelter’s normative therapeutic agenda and demonstrate gratitude (Gengler 2011). If women are found wanting, shelter staff may recommend that children be placed in protective custody, so the risks for noncompliance are incredibly high.

Such surveillance and moral management compels a submissive role on the part of women: an acceptance of their subordinate position and conformity to the bureaucratic (and culturally specific) dictates of others. In other words, these practices add layers of symbolic violence, which is a kind of violence that leads ‘those who are subordinated to “misrecognize” inequality as the natural order of things and to blame themselves for their location in their society’s hierarchies’ (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, p. 17). There is a cruel irony in that having fled one controlling and disempowering environment, residents at battered women’s shelters may find themselves in another. Drawing upon ethnographic research, Davis (2006) describes the surveillance performances at shelters as ‘ceremonies of degradation’. Davis finds that black women especially must prove their worthiness by allowing constant monitoring and ceding control to staff, which produces relationships that structurally mirror those that many women had with their abusers. At the same time, through self-help focused counseling sessions, women are encouraged to analyze critically their own behaviors and propensities for landing in abusive relationships. In other words, women must willingly and humbly submit to invasive forms of surveillance and control, while accepting at least partial responsibility for the situations in which they find themselves. While disturbing, these messages reflect dominant conversations about violence against women, which tend to blame the victim rather than interrogate root causes of gendered violence (Mason & Magnet 2012).

Another troubling manifestation of everyday abjection is homelessness. Homelessness is a condition of unrelenting ontological insecurity. As bodies out of place, moments of stability or predictability are typically hard won and fleeting for people operating in the interstices of society. Moreover, the dangers to one’s physical and psychological wellbeing are constant, whether one is on the streets or in a shelter. The state mobilizes surveillance practices to police homeless populations, usually in
the service of capitalist interests or to appease middle-class anxieties about exposure to destitute others. By monitoring and regulating homeless people, the goal seems to be one of invisibilization, of pushing indigent people beyond collective sight and responsibility. The state then turns to criminalization and incarceration, as techniques of securing the neoliberal social order, for the homeless who persist in asserting their visibility. As Loïc Wacquant explains:

When it comes to programs for the poor, devolution implies bureaucratic retrenchment leading to the reduction of services from the social wing of the state, which in turn necessitates an extension of those services provided by its penal wing to ‘mop up’ the ensuing public troubles. (Wacquant 2009, p. 90)

Perhaps the most concentrated organizational contexts for surveillance of the homeless are homeless shelters and food pantries. First, it must be noted that the homeless are routinely turned away from shelters even when they seek them out, as there are vastly more people in need of shelter, food, and transitional beds than there are resources available (Mitchell & Heynen 2009). For those who do gain access to such sites, many of the techniques of observation and control are similar to those of battered women’s shelters described above, but these sites are subjected themselves to governmental scrutiny in the form of audits and data reporting requirements through what is known as the Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) program. As Willse (2015) describes the effects of the program, shelters are motivated to keep tabs on homeless clients in order to prove compliance with legal guidelines and quality for government funding to offset operational costs. The outcome is not simply a predictable one of enhanced disciplinary control of homeless clients; rather, by responding to the data-generation demands of HMIS, shelters participate in a form of what Michel Foucault called biopolitical power, reducing a population of homeless people to a dehumanized abstraction of ‘universal data elements’ to be managed (Willse 2015).

Legal, spatial, and technological regimes conspire to regulate and exclude the homeless. Apart from urban design innovations to deter sleeping or loitering in public, the law seems to be the technology of choice for criminalizing homelessness, indirectly, by proscribing activities fundamental to survival. Don Mitchell and Nik Heynen explain:

Laws (or increased policing) that make sleeping more difficult and dangerous, panhandling riskier, and tending to bodily needs all but impossible, push the homeless as well as the housed poor more deeply into the urban shadows, the hidden abodes of poverty that continue to mark every North American city, no matter how shiny its gentrified appearance. (Mitchell & Heynen 2009, p. 613)

For instance, inadequate access to public bathrooms, coupled with laws against public urination or defecation, give the homeless no choice but to break the law (Amster 2003). Similarly, dumpster diving and other forms of ‘urban foraging’ are made illegal and reinforced via technological means, such as barbed wire and video surveillance (Ferrell 2006; Mitchell & Heynen 2009). Some cities, like Las Vegas, have made it illegal to share food in public parks, effectively criminalizing humanitarian efforts to provide sustenance to the hungry (Mitchell & Heynen 2009). Sleeping is also increasingly prohibited in parks or on sidewalks (Mitchell & Heynen 2009), and such prohibitions have spread to quasi-public places such as train stations (Doherty et al. 2008), making them accessible, in practice, only to potential consumers.

Facing monumental challenges to maintaining privacy and dignity, surveillance – whether technologically mediated or not – threatens to expose homeless people to violence. Ironically, as the state tries to invisibilize the homelessness problem, many forms of violence come from being too visible. There are threats of theft, harassment, or assault, including the possibility of brutal beatings and killings of homeless people (Huey 2012). Then there are complaints to the police from residents, consumers, businesses, or tourists, which can lead to police intervention (e.g. citations and arrests). Video surveillance, while it may have the effect of making some homeless people feel safer (Huey 2010), is also used as a detection tool to spot prohibited behaviors and alert security or police personnel (Norris & Armstrong 1999; Dubbeld 2005; Doherty et al. 2008). Surveillance of the homeless, on the whole, contributes to the further marginalization of the neediest people in society.
The cultural narratives surrounding everyday abjection tend to mark marginalized subjects as responsible for their own plights, or sometimes even as manipulative or dangerous threats to society as a whole. First, in the case of welfare, stigma persists despite widespread use, where in the US more than 20% of the population drew upon public assistance programs in 2012, as the country continued to struggle economically in the wake of the Great Recession (Elliott 2016). A sort of misrecognition occurs where personal experience of accessing welfare can be seen as exceptional and temporary, whereas depersonalized others on welfare can be painted as irresponsible, exploitative, and morally deficient (e.g. ‘welfare queens’). The inherent racism in such narratives is not difficult to detect. One prevalent Internet meme, for instance, depicts a close-up photograph of a puffin bird stomping on green grass, as bold text reads, ‘Welfare is stopping natural selection’ (Memegen 2016). Invoking neo-Malthusian perspectives, the implied policy recommendation with this meme would be one of eugenics: of eliminating state assistance (with food, shelter, or healthcare) in order to eradicate ‘weak’ members of society for the greater social good.

Second, concerning violence against women, postfeminist narratives encourage the responsibility of women for landing in – and contending with – abusive relationships. Celebrity culture offers one influential lens for perceiving these dynamics. For instance, in the well-documented abusive relationship between Rihanna and Chris Brown, where photographs circulated of Rihanna’s beaten face after being assaulted by Brown, she contested the ‘victim’ framing, shifting the media focus to her actions and decisions, and away from Brown’s violence (Galla 2013). As Natasha Patterson and Camilla Sears argue:

Rihanna’s experiences can be interpreted as a postfeminist narrative conveying the idea that she is a ‘can-do’ girl who takes responsibility for the abuse by monitoring her actions and being careful not to be viewed or framed as a victim … Consequently, celebrity culture, as part of a postfeminist media culture, helps promote ideas of choice and individual responsibility in relation to issues such as domestic violence, and assists in the surveillance and regulation of women’s actions. (Patterson and Sears 2011, p. 1)

Similarly, in the aftermath of football player Ray Rice punching his fiancé Janay Palmer unconscious and then dragging her out of an elevator (which were actions captured by video surveillance), ESPN commentator Stephen Smith cautioned women to watch their behavior and not do anything to ‘provoke’ men into assault (Nguyen 2014). So whereas the media’s gaze in celebrity cases could be thought of as having the potential to punish or deter would-be abusers, this does not appear to be the norm. Rather, in cases of violence against women, surveillance is more about self-monitoring by potential victims, as well as the cruel scrutiny and judgment victims might receive from others (Mason and Magnet 2012; Sweet 2014; Thapar-Björkert & Morgan 2010).

Third, homelessness can also engender views of self-responsibility and self-blame, where the empirical fact of widespread downward economic mobility and precarity cannot mesh easily with dominant cultural narratives of entrepreneurial possibility (Monahan & Fisher 2015; Willse 2015). Perhaps more pernicious than this are characterizations of homeless people as dirty or dangerous bodies out of place, in need of monitoring and removal. For instance, in her ethnographic research on homeless populations in Ventura, California, Mokos (2016) found that local governments and community groups would target removal of the bamboo-like plant Arundo along waterways as a way of dislocating homeless people who used the dense plant cropping for privacy and shelter. In rationalizing such ‘cleanup’ efforts as forms of conservation, both plants and homeless bodies were treated as ‘invasive species’ whose eradication was necessary to recapture the mythic purity of untainted ecosystems. This discursive move affords dehumanization and displacement of homeless people under the seemingly progressive guise of restoring natural ecosystems for collective access and enjoyment. Thus, across these examples, cultural narratives infuse understandings of abject bodies, marking them as in need of regulation – and possibly reform – through surveillance.
Criminalized poverty

As hyper-incarceration in the US becomes increasingly untenable and unaffordable, reformers embrace the decriminalization of misdemeanor offenses as a seemingly progressive and practical response to the crisis (Gottschalk 2010; Roberts 2013). Such offenses might include things like public intoxication, possession of marijuana, or driving with a suspended license. This class of offenses has served as the core target for a ‘broken windows’ theory of policing, which posits that by mitigating lifestyle offenses, the police could proactively alter social environments to prevent more serious crimes (Wilson & Kelling 1982). Critics have challenged the efficacy of such an approach, even on its own terms, but have also called attention to the ways in which these policing practices unfairly target poor and racialized communities, infringe upon the constitutional rights of individuals (e.g. through stop-and-frisk searches), create antagonistic relationships between minority communities and the police, and fuel the hyper-incarceration epidemic (Harcourt 2001; Wacquant 2009).

However, misdemeanor decriminalization, as a corrective to ‘broken windows’ policing, fuses with a neoliberal market economy to enmesh the poor in punitive debtscapes of control. As Alexandra Natapoff explains:

> Decriminalization has a little-known dark side. Unlike full legalization, decriminalization preserves many of the punitive features and collateral consequences of the criminal misdemeanor experience, even as it strips defendants of counsel and other procedural protections. It actually expands the reach of the criminal apparatus by making it easier – both logistically and normatively – to impose fines and supervision on an ever-widening population, a population that ironically often ends up incarcerated anyway when they cannot afford fines or comply with supervisory conditions. (Natapoff 2015, p. 1055)

Thus, misdemeanor decriminalization should not be interpreted as ‘legalization’ in any real sense, because it merely reduces the chance of immediate incarceration for activities that remain illegal (Natapoff 2015). This is especially true in the context of income and employment inequalities. By substituting things like fines, community service, electronic monitoring, ‘house arrest’ arrangements, and compulsory drug testing for incarceration, decriminalization supports an exploitative mode of ‘poverty capitalism’ that depends fundamentally upon surveillance and can lead to further disenfranchisement and state violence.

Poverty capitalism can be understood as the financial exploitation of the poor through neoliberal arrangements, such as privatizing government services and charging the poor for them (Edsall 2014). For example, courts in the US are outsourcing to private companies the tasks of electronic monitoring and fee collection. Rather than charging local governments, offenders on probation, parole, or in pretrial confinement are charged up to $100 a month for this surveillance service (Edsall 2014). Such non-incarceration arrangements typically include compulsory drug testing too, even if the original offense was not drug-related. According to one report, ‘Companies now charge about $25 per [drug] test, meaning that a person serving a year-long probation sentence is likely to be saddled with a $1,250 drug-testing bill’ (Schenwar 2015). If individuals fail to pay electronic-monitoring or drug-testing fees on time, they are charged late fees and eventually imprisoned. With roughly 9 million people currently on probation in the US, the private market for ‘offender-funded probation’ services is vast (Geller & Cohen 2016).

The US South, with its history of racial exploitation and violence, is home to most of the country’s for-profit probation arrangements. In Georgia, for instance, private companies handle 80% of its roughly 182,000 misdemeanor probation cases, netting a total of $40 million per year (Geller & Cohen 2016; Albin-Lackey 2014). For-profit probation companies in Georgia have even created competitions that grant cash bonuses to its staff for exceeding fee-collection quotas (Geller & Cohen 2016). Apart from outsourcing schemes, courts and local governments are also increasingly relying on offender-funded probation arrangements to remain fiscally solvent in a time of reduced public funding for government agencies and services (Albin-Lackey 2014). Because misdemeanor fines are more easily paid by the relatively affluent, if such people are even targeted in the first
place, the result is a ‘kind of regressive tax, turning the poorest populations into funding fodder for the judiciary and other government budgets’ (Natapoff 2015).

Surveillance imbricates with poverty capitalism, reifying states of abjection through the unequal application of monitoring and enforcement systems. Those under house arrest may be subjected to GPS-embedded ankle bracelets that signal to authorities if they cross a dictated spatial perimeter; breathalyzers to check for alcohol consumption; voice- or face-recognition systems to verify a person’s identity at a certain place and time; and routine drug tests to confirm that the person is abstaining from illicit substances. These surveillance mechanisms clearly perform a normative function: they assume the subject can be reformed, or at least controlled, through constant monitoring and the threat of punishment. As Coleman and McCahill (2011, p. 115) observe: “While the “new surveillance” is often said to indicate a shift away from the old “normalising” strategies of social control, many of these [electronic monitoring] practices are pervasive and retain an emphasis on transforming the behaviour of individual offenders” (see also Nellis 2007; Norris 2007; Paterson 2007). Marginalizing surveillance presupposes, as an initial condition, the untrustworthiness of subjects, which is a form of judgment delegated to (and imposed by) the technological systems in question. The very presence – and coercive acceptance – of electronic-monitoring systems works to legitimate the forms of judgment they tacitly assert.

The various systems of monitoring the crimes and debts of the poor are forms of marginalizing surveillance with potentially devastating effects. For instance, take the 2015 shooting death of Walter Scott by Officer Michael Slager in North Charleston, South Carolina. The killing was captured by a citizen’s mobile phone recording, which showed Scott, who was African American, being shot multiple times in the back as he fled from the white officer (Shoichet & Friedman 2016). The exercise of racialized state violence is fairly clear, but less obvious is the way that poverty capitalism inflected the police encounter, giving Scott a compelling reason to flee. Scott was trapped in a vicious cycle of falling behind on child support payments, being fined and imprisoned, and then losing his jobs because he was jailed (Hitt 2015). He was trapped in poverty capitalism, and, in effect, he ran from the bill collector dressed in a police uniform. Thus, these particular systems of economic inequality aggravate tensions with the police, such that police surveillance (e.g. locating individuals with warrants) and violence become tools of capitalist exploitation and punishment of the poor.

Far from being a structural problem only, however, surveillance and poverty capitalism are firmly rooted in US cultures of antiblack racism. Narratives of racial inferiority, irresponsibility, and threat provide guiding rationales for the existence of surveillance and policing practices directed at the racialized poor. Thus, it is telling that in the wake of Walter Scott’s death, some organizations referred to him as a ‘deadbeat dad,’ as if that were an accurate, neutral label and that this assessment of his character should somehow shift a portion of the blame to Scott for his own death. For example, the Council of Conservative Citizens stated:

For days, every media outlet in the nation has been screaming ‘white officer charged with murdering unarmed black father.’ Walter Scott was a habitual deadbeat dad that had an outstanding warrant for non-payment of child support. The media clearly is pushing an agenda. Every day white people are murdered by blacks and none of them are national news stories and usually race is never mentioned. (Council of Conservative Citizens 2015)

In addition to demonizing Scott, this position also projects a threat to white supremacy and security, which is a threat – as the authors imply – that the mainstream media are complicit in advancing. Widely circulating Internet memes further stoke racism through such messages of blaming the victim. For example, one reads: ‘Nearly every instance of a black man getting killed by police … The black man was doing something wrong to begin with’ (NIGHTWOLF 2015). Even opinion pieces in the so-called mainstream media, as represented by CNN, tempered condemnation of Scott’s killing with asides about ‘deadbeat dads’: ‘Deadbeat and absent dads are one of the most serious and often overlooked threats to our collective well-being today. Forget the school-to-prison-pipeline.
Lousy parents are the prison pipeline; particularly symptomatic of this problem are absent and deadbeat dads’ (Cevallos 2015).

These few examples underscore the importance of cultural context in shaping interpretations and experiences of surveillance and violence. Just as structural conditions, such as poverty and social inequality, profoundly shape the application of surveillance and its differential ramifications upon populations, so too does a pernicious culture of antiblack racism inflect police encounters, media representations, and public policy. Poverty capitalism catalyzes new developments in the surveillance of the poor, new innovations in state and corporate debt creation and debt collection. Poverty capitalism is not so much a departure from hyper-incarceration as it is an explicit fusing of its racial and penal logics with capitalist imperatives, which are then reticulated across a wider social terrain.

Radically adrift

The current refugee crisis sweeping across North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe is fundamentally about the poor, vulnerable, and radically adrift. As a result of the ongoing civil war in Syria, a documented 4.6 million displaced Syrians alone have been registered as refugees in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq (Kerwin 2016). In 2015, Europe was confronted with over 1.3 million asylum claims and over one million new refugees crossing its borders, presenting a monumental humanitarian and political challenge for destination countries (BBC 2016). The crisis also presents a massive surveillance and logistics problem for countries and aid organizations trying to predict flows and routes of refugees, identify and track individuals, provide medical screening and care, ensure safety, and expedite asylum and immigration processes.

The United Nations, in its attempt to rationalize the chaos of refugee management, has partnered with Microsoft to implement what they call the ‘ProGres’ database to register and track refugees. The system involves the use of a proprietary platform from another company, IrisGuard, to capture biometric data (iris scans) from refugees and create unique profiles for each individual. The data collected from individuals are detailed and potentially expansive, including, but not limited to, ‘personal details, plus time of arrival, place of origin, occupation, education, family members, contact information, and permission to share information’ (Favell 2015). Personal and biometric data are further entered into an internationally shared system, but also encoded onto vouchers or cards for aid distribution at stores, banks, or other locations. Importantly, the data records for individuals are dynamic, such that they can be updated on an ongoing basis by a host of European agencies or relief organizations; the digital dossier follows the individual and accretes fine-grained detail along the way. Registered individuals are further granted priority access to humanitarian aid and asylum review (Marr 2015). By 2015, IrisGuard claimed that 1.6 million Syrian refugees had been registered through its system (Computer Weekly 2015).

Despite concerns that similar refugee and migrant management systems fail to meet privacy and data protection safeguards required under European law (La Fors-Owczynik 2016), it is not surprising that individuals fleeing civil war and the threat of torture or death would willingly submit to registration in these electronic systems. It is interesting, however, the ways in which authority is delegated to the ProGres system to designate abject, liminal bodies as ‘refugees’, as people deserving of entry into a larger bureaucratic system for eventual triage or placement. Legally speaking, ‘Until registered, they are not officially a refugee, thus not entitled to protection or eligible for aid – shelter, food, money, healthcare, education – from other UN agencies or the NGOs which fulfil day-to-day operation’ (Computer Weekly 2015). Enrollment in ProGres, then, transforms an undifferentiated, precarious mass of humanity into individual ‘refugees’ and unique data elements to be rationally managed.

Clearly, in addition to the humanitarian and bureaucratic imperatives, there is a desire to screen out or exclude people who may introduce a potential terrorist or criminal threat. As one story relates: ‘The scans also prevent members of extremist groups from misrepresenting themselves, and prevent the cards containing aid money from being stolen and resold’ (Balakrishnan 2015). Because the
identities of most so-called extremists are unknown, ProGres and similar systems must depend on subjective ‘profiles’ and risk indicators of possible extremists (by family members, place of origin, occupation, etc.) to make such determinations (cf. Amoore 2013; Leese 2014). In the process, screening systems of this sort shift the emphasis from seeing migrants as in need of aid to seeing them as security risks (La Fors-Owczynik & van der Ploeg 2016; Mueller 2010). Some commentators caution that biometric screening and tracking of refugees may become ‘a backdoor for attempting to monitor and control majority Muslim populations and tracking them in Europe’ (Balakrishnan 2015). The systems are marginalizing in the ways that they fix populations, positioning them as legible, deeply racialized ‘refugees’ whose tenuous sense of security may be revoked at any time.

While technological systems are always polyvalent, in emphasizing the screening and tracking of refugees, humanitarian systems are transduced into security systems. Transduction in this sense indicates a fundamental change in state, which, as Kitchin and Dodge (2011) explain, can be brought about by technical change, such as a grocery store effectively becoming a warehouse if the computer checkout system crashes. In the context of refugee management systems, the impetus for this change appears to be more of a political shift catalyzed by responses to the Islamic State terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016. The embodied material effects of this shift can be seen in violent attacks on and xenophobic rhetoric directed at refugees, the tightening of previously porous borders in the European Union, and the transformation of refugee ‘camps’ into potentially indefinite detention facilities.6

Camps are designed to centralize the distribution of humanitarian resources, but also to contain and manage bodies. They can exact their own kinds of dehumanizing effects upon refugees who may still be struggling to achieve human security (freedom from fear and want) and who find themselves cold, wet, sick, lonely, hungry, and traumatized. The diversity of refugee camps across countries makes generalizations difficult, and surely some achieve or exceed humanitarian objectives, but many of the stories emerging from camps speak of overcrowding and existential uncertainty. For instance, more than 430,000 people have cycled through the Za’atari Camp in Jordan, which at present houses over 85,000 refugees in a zone of tightly packed tents and trailers (Ryot 2015). Many of the camps in Europe are teeming with disease and fail to meet basic humanitarian standards set by the United Nations (Moore 2015b). The camp at Calais in France is lined with razor-wire fences to deter migrants from accessing the Channel Tunnel into England (Halkon 2015). Meanwhile, at the Bela Jezova camp in the Czech Republic, conditions are described as being worse than those in prisons, where refugees are transported in handcuffs to the barbed-wire-lined facility and ‘every evening the foreigners are pulled out of bed by police, who sometimes wear helmets or balaclavas, to be counted. If the children are asleep, the parents must wake them and make them stand up’ (DW 2015). Because of the conditions at camps, more than a few migrants have said things like, ‘It would have been better to die in my own country… At least then I would have died with my honor’ (Bajekal 2015). Refugee camps, therefore, can serve as architectural technologies of marginalizing surveillance, cultivating subjectivities of marginality through their application of dehumanizing control logics.

Finally, it is vital to account for the ways in which discourses of racism animate marginalizing surveillance for refugees. The systems cannot simply be assessed as forms of rational management or even criticized merely for their ‘objectification’ when those in need are referred to as a ‘swarm’, as former British Prime Minister David Cameron called them (Elgot & Taylor 2015). Rather, the systems are tools of abjection that enforce social exclusion of racialized others. It is telling, for instance, that the Calais camp in France is colloquially referred to as ‘The Jungle,’ which, especially given France’s colonial past, is a label with disturbingly racist overtones. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of the political right in the United States equates Muslim refugees with terrorists and proposes that all Syrian refugees be barred from entry (Fantz & Brumfield 2015; Levy 2015). Presidential candidate Donald Trump went as far as suggesting that there should be a complete nationwide ban on Muslims entering the US, as a form of institutionalized religious discrimination, until supposed Muslim hatred of America could be diagnosed (Diamond 2015). In Trump’s words:
It is obvious to anybody the hatred [of Muslims for America] is beyond comprehension. Where this hatred comes from and why we will have to determine … our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life. (Diamond 2015)

Cultural narratives of this sort fuel suspicion, fear, and hatred of the abject other; they shift policy foci from humanitarianism to security screening; they invite nationalistic violence and impede a sense of collective responsibility for refugees who are deemed to be backward, dangerous, and lawless. In such a context, surveillance becomes a tool of dehumanization. The production of marginalization is recast as a logical and rational response to the imaginary existential threat that refugees pose to civilization.

**Conclusion**

Structural forces and cultural representations exert a profound influence on conditions of abjection and on surveillance-based responses to them. In order to grasp this influence, I have sought to trace some of the links between marginalizing surveillance practices and their social and cultural contexts, with particular attention to the influence of gendering and racializing discourses upon subjectivities, policies, and relations. In effect, what is required for such analysis is a ‘cultural studies of surveillance’ that perceives surveillance as ‘embedded within, brought about by, and generative of social practices in specific cultural contexts’ (Monahan 2011, p. 496). Context in this sense is not restricted to a specific locality; rather it signifies ‘the relationships that have been made by the operation of power, in the interests of certain positions of power’ (Grossberg 2010, p. 21). A cultural studies of surveillance would need to map such manifold relationships across social formations and situate surveillance encounters within larger systems of politics and meaning. By doing so, it could open up a space for critique and seek possibilities for alternative articulations of power relations.

The various social and cultural contexts reviewed here each illustrate the agential role of surveillance in producing and regulating conditions of abjection. Forms of everyday abjection, while incredibly varied, are materialized by neoliberal dynamics of retrenchment of the welfare state, unrealistic expectations that private companies and civil society organizations could compensate for state reductions, and imperatives for data collection and technological automation. Surveillance fuses with a culture of suspicion of welfare fraud, moral judgment of violence against women survivors, and perceptions of uncleanness or undesirability of the homeless. The context for criminalized poverty imbricates: legal changes to decriminalize misdemeanor offenses, privatization of electronic monitoring and fee collection, reductions in resources for courts and police departments, structural inequalities and employment precarity, and a persistent legacy of antiblack racism in the US. In this context, surveillance becomes a mechanism for extracting resources, rendering bodies visible, stigmatizing individuals, and aggravating the conditions for police violence. Racist cultural narratives function to paint over the complex interrelations that bring about such marginalized subjectivities and police conflict. Finally, the context for the management of refugees – the radically adrift – presents complexity on a geopolitical scale, but with specific particularities or interfaces that mediate embodied experiences (e.g. the camp, the border, the biometric identification system). Clearly, contributing factors include the civil war in Syria, regional and economic instabilities brought about by the ‘war on terror’, colonial histories, the emergence of terrorist groups like the Islamic State, economic recession, inequalities among European Union member countries, legal arrangements among countries, and much more. Whereas refugee surveillance systems might have initially prioritized human security, alongside the profit motives of technology companies, the tone has shifted to stress national security and containment. The function and meaning of such surveillance mutates in response to xenophobic nationalism that casts refugees as dehumanized and threatening others. As with the other examples, but perhaps even more so, the capacity of refugees to contest such subjectivities is attenuated by extreme vulnerability and crushing need.

These observations do not deny the important agential capacity of subjects to resist, resignify, and sometimes even appropriate forms of marginalizing surveillance (Coleman 2012; McCahill & Finn
Conditions of abjection, especially when rendered visible and problematized, can serve as a powerful resource for personal and political struggle (Tyler 2013). It should also be acknowledged that local contexts always mediate surveillance applications, institutional practices, and cultural meanings. The goal here has not been to advance an argument about a totalizing form of marginalizing surveillance, but instead to highlight some patterns in the convergence of structural conditions and cultural logics that motivate the surveillance of abject bodies.

Thus, this paper has illustrated some of the ways in which conditions of abjection are policed by and reproduced through surveillance. Surveillance is yoked to structural inequalities and systems of oppression, but it also possesses a cultural dimension that thrusts marginalized and dehumanized subjectivities upon the abject, marking them as complicit victims, societal outcasts, invasive species, or swarms. Such marginalizing surveillance pulls bodies between extremes of compulsory legibility and exclusionary invisibility. In order to critique the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of contemporary surveillance, it is necessary, therefore, that surveillance be comprehended as inseparable from social and cultural contexts. Through such analysis we can begin to address the nightmare of structural and symbolic violence engendered by such surveillance.

Notes

1. I intentionally employ the term ‘subjectivities’ instead of ‘identities’ to flag the contingent, socially constructed nature of categories of the self. As Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg explain: ‘Unlike the term identity, the concept of subjectivity does not imply individual agency or self-ascription. It treats taken-for-granted characteristics such as demographic profile or psychological temperament as discursive products of modernity rather than innate categories’ (Bourgois & Schonberg 2009, pp. 18–19).

2. Rather than being unique to shelters, this double-bind may reflect larger patterns with the use of surveillance to intervene into the lives of women considered to be ‘at risk’ of abuse, such as when systems used to monitor women and girls deemed to be at risk of sex-trafficking might unintentionally pull them into punitive law-enforcement encounters (Musto & boyd 2014).

3. It is important to note the ways in which Rihanna, as a racialized subject, was recast in the register of whiteness (e.g. police camera flashes on bruised skin, bleached hair for tell-all Diane Sawyer interview) to afford circulation as a representative of universal (white) victimhood (Moore 2015a).

4. Because contemporary global logistics is organized around the flow of goods (protected through supply-chain security systems), human security is more often construed as presenting friction to such movement (Cowen 2014). Thus, the science of logistics may be poorly equipped to manage humanitarian crises without first transforming them into opportunities for financial gain, whether through the coordination of vectors of flow (e.g. laws, transport systems) or the reduction of security risks.

5. The propensity is high for such technological systems to ‘boomerang’ back from liminal spaces to find similar applications on domestic populations (Graham 2010). In the case of IrisGuard, that boomerang effect is explicit and intentional, as the senior vice president of the company, Joe O’Carroll, has indicated his desire to use it for things like domestic distribution of welfare benefits (Balakrishnan 2015). There are obvious neoliberal inferences to iris-scanning systems for refugees too, where refugees are ostensibly given ‘greater choice’ and ‘more dignified’ ways to access resources, while being deterred from ‘theft and fraud’ (Computer Weekly 2015). These rationales mirror exactly those provided for the initial deployment of electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards for food-stamp benefits in the United States (Monahan 2006).

6. Even before these changes, the data more globally suggest that once refugees arrive at camps, they will spend an average of 17 years there (Ryot 2015; U.S. Department of State 2016).

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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