Surveillance as Gesture

Alienation in the Age of the Doorbell Camera

Talley Murphy

No cell phone. None. There are two reasons for this. First, they track you. When I say this, people say, who wants to track you, you're not important enough. It doesn't matter who you are. They track you. If it's not to sell you something, it's to kill you. Second, that's how the war started.

<div align="right">

—*Dionne Brand, "small life" (2021)*

</div>

No Cell Phone

In "small life," a short story following someone on the run—a montage in tiny clips of "useless" lotto tickets, burying guns in ditches, and "security at the aperture"—Dionne Brand's narrator has "no illusions, none" (Brand 2021). Democracy? "Blah blah fucking blah. Police state." Religion? "Brainwashing business gone dry," and a believer is "some jerk." She knows that if you pay attention, you will see the story of your life "turn from whatever long elegant sentence you have in mind into this short one—guns and money." And, refusing cell phones and watchful of being watched, she disappears: "I'm nobody I recognize. It's my fault. It's me that doesn't register." Brand's narrator *knows* and *refuses*, and in, or despite, doing so, she becomes "lifeless," a subjective shell walking through scenes of labor and surveillance, too aware of the gap between her and it. She doesn't register.

Surveillance technology recalibrates its users, offering them the correspondence between self and subject made noticeably illusive by digital-age capitalism. Surveillance calls a subject who can mark its bounds against the other that watches/is watched. This surveillant binary promises safety to its subjects—they get to be the watchers—and gives purpose to the alienation they experience when they are watched, particularly online, where users' data is sold for more than they offer it. As Simone Browne describes it, surveillance is ongoing, not "inaugurated by new technologies"; instead, "the intersecting surveillances of our present order" circulate "an old story in high-tech guise" (2015:8–9, 18). Surveillance, as Browne proposes, is a mode of social control that has enforced a racially bound subject (among other divisive classifications) long before the emergence of the digital device.

How do gestures, not devices, surveil in ways that conscribe the marks made by bodies for social, carceral, and corporate use? Surveillance is gestic, in Bertolt Brecht's sense: it is constituted by and constitutes a set of gestures that supports certain social attitudes and, as Elin Diamond writes, "makes visible the contradictory interactions" of text, materiality, and movement (1989:519). To outline a surveillant *Gestus* of the everyday, I follow homogenizing gestures performed in contact with screens or with cameras in today's discipline economy.

Between large-scale data aggregation used to serve algorithmic content and the sameification of digital hardware, users have learned to instrumentalize gestures in copied ways (that you click, where and when you click, how you click) that are reactively taught via affective feedback (vibration, light, saturated images, purchases, sensational political affirmation). The learned gestural sameness, tracked by programs that index patterns of taps and clicks, makes the individual identifiable through deviation, putting some persons at highly differentiated risk to exposure and capture. The homogenized/deviant gestural binary creates the conditions for surveillance's carceral sorting, supporting both a police state and capitalist differentiation, as articulated by Oscar H. Gandy Jr.'s foundational "panoptic sort" (1993:16). The more surveillance attention one receives, the more a seemingly normative gesture can be revealed to be deviant.

I approach everyday surveillant gestures as digital *conscription*, the making of marks among other marks—a hail, a draft. From the Latin *conscribere*—*con*, together + *scribere*, to write, derived as Proto-Indo-European *(s)krē-*, to cut—conscription describes both a practice of mandatory enrollment and the process by which it happens: writing your name on a list.[1] The *cut* of conscription, writing's inscriptive gesture (Jacques Derrida's reference "cut off from its referent," a "disruption of presence in a mark"), takes a person from their context to be put to new use (Derrida [1972] 1988:11, 19). In writing your name, you are displaced—not entirely voluntarily—into a new scene, a new gest.

Conscription is the work of contemporary surveillance, which takes the data mined from gestures and levies it, like how war conscription levies lives. An individual makes a mark among marks, and something about them is taken. This alienating process, which requires individual

Figure 1. (previous page) Ring doorbell camera users share recordings online to target people they suspect of crimes, including package thefts and break-ins. Still from "Safety: Tried to break into my house" (Neighbor 2022b) from the Neighbors app. (Screenshot by Talley Murphy)

Talley Murphy (Brown University) is Visiting Assistant Professor in Theatre Arts and Performance Studies. Their book in process, "Body Assembly: Carceral Gestures in a Digital State," argues that specifically gestural carceral practices have produced a normative human body for the digital age. As of Fall 2024, they will be Assistant Professor of English at Rutgers University. talley_murphy@brown.edu

Talley Murphy

1. Indo-European Lexicon, s.v. "(s)ker-, (s)kerə-, (s)krē-," University of Texas at Austin Linguistics Research Center, https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/lex/master/1742.

participation but not necessarily an individual desire to participate, happens in reciprocity with the forces that call on a body to move, and the moves that body makes. I understand gestures of surveillance in military terms in order to foreground two acts that frame and support those gestures: the constitution of a biometrically secure human by the state, a human not flagged by national security apparatuses, a human with the capacity to work and to be drafted; and the rendering of sites like the home inhospitable through the assertion of an always-to-come war by corporations eager to sell security products. That war might be the destabilization of property and class, or it might be a civil war, a race war, the violence of a settler-colonial neofrontier, the next Ruby Ridge.[2] The marketing is malleable, ready to reflect back any individual's fears.

Conscription also encompasses the role of gesture in, per Louis Althusser, the *recruitment* of the subject, of "every involuntary, conscripted candidate to humanity" ([1971] 2001:118, 147). Gestures recruit us: they are the force by which we are staged and the moves we make within the scene of that force. As Judith Butler describes the mechanical process performed by Althusser's "theatrical machine" of subjection, in a scene of identification outlined by Butler from the perspective of a spectator viewing a theatrical proscenium: because I do not correspond exactly to the political figure *subject*, I must "bridge that gap" between my sense of my self and the subjective representation by which, and into which, I am called (2015:27). Gestures mark that gap and so define the identificatory object/ive: I am called by the gesture that is performed before me and so is not mine, and when I receive that gesture, if I find my body implied in its prompt to gesture in response, I recognize myself in the form not of the performer or the character, but of the call. I am gestured into a relation, one marked by, as Butler suggests, the very impossibility of becoming the character who I am not (27). It is not theatrical identification but its affective "lure," which Butler connects to Althusser's bourgeois self-satisfaction, that relocates me as subject (Butler 2015:28–29). I become conscribed, in part, because it makes me *feel good* to know myself as surveillance's subject.

Conscriptive surveillance happens when a person uses surveillance technology for what they believe to be their own purposes while simultaneously performing gestures surveilled by someone or something else. It takes place primarily on the digital interfaces operated with the touchpad or touchscreen gestures of contemporary social life. Users see more of what they spend time on—likely what scares them, what angers them at least as much as what might attract or appeal to them. The scroll/pause/click sequence, the swipe-up-to-open, the arrangement of a body in view of a camera, and the careful holding of face muscles on a videoconferencing call, and the replication of that attitude in physical space are all gestures that defend a hybrid world of surveillance and marketed security. Digital gestures are not one aspect of those technologies and their conscriptions; they are the material of which they are made. Gestures, not devices, make humans into cyborgs and social life into augmented reality.

Conscription occurs materially, too, absorbing the body into the device and the device into the body through its recruiting gestures. Digital devices and human bodies are least distinct at points of gestural contact; as Carrie Noland suggests, "humans act like machines when they gesture" (2008:xxiv). Most contemporary handheld devices are made with capacitive touchscreens, which use the conductive properties of human hands. The device is half of an electric circuit; the other half is you. The user, fleshy hardware, operates the machine that is also their hands by receiving and returning electricity. When you touch a screen, its electrodes pulse, sending "electric field leakages into a finger" (Nam, Seol, and Jung 2021). Pressing, tapping, swiping against glass, users are conscribed to power the machines that surveil them. Rebecca Schneider calls bodies "extension machines for media," interfaces that transmit, medially (2018a:59). In the gestured extension, the body is not only conscribed into the ideological scene of digital capitalism via surveillance, it also becomes the next interpellative tactic in that scene. Its gestures recruit another's.

2. The 1992 FBI standoff in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, is a foundational event in the development of counter-surveillance tactics by today's white nationalist movements (see Belew 2018:200–05).

Tools of digitally inflected surveillance—like smart cameras and big data aggregation practices—support gestures that recruit subjects as both objects and instruments of racial capitalism. Realigning bodies in constant anticipation of the danger of the racial, economic, or nonnormative Other, the machinery of cell phones and smart cameras prompts users to hook their shoulders and spines around handheld devices, a protective hunch that locates the subject in subordination to the screen. I describe the move to mobile devices as an access point to home security camera content as surveillance's handheld TV, a video montage gestured by the swipe or the scroll. As with montage, capitalist surveillance networks incorporate critical tools, particularly theatrical and Marxist ones, to destabilize the subject into a threatened position. Seizing on the power of alienating subjects from their alienation, particularly as Brecht does with his *Verfremdungseffekt*, the contemporary surveillance apparatus shocks the everyday with scenes of fear and precarity. Surveillance relocates everyday gesture to define the limits of a recruited, normative human body that excludes many anomalous bodies. The digital apparatus that indexes users' gestures stages a constant surveillant labor, with its users put to work manufacturing the mass biometrics sold by corporations for the social panoptic sort and for the administration of the carceral system.

Gesture, both as an act and as a critical interstice, locates individuals in ideology, and can dislocate them. As Schneider describes, a gesture is "an action extended," an interval of address calling for a response (2018b:286). The incomplete act, extended by the body-media mass Schneider calls a machine, anticipates another's action. Gestures *call for*: a gesture prompts a body to act in a particular way, and, still undetermined in the interval of response, the relation can change when a body gestures in reply. Sylvia Wynter describes ideology's reproductive mechanic as working to "conceal-oversee" the relations it projects ([1971] 2022:433). *Conceal-oversee* names the imperative to discipline deviant gestures that reveal what ideology covers. Staging the social attitude Brecht describes as gestic, gestures mechanize ideological reproduction *and* they are, as Butler identifies, the "play" in that machine (2015:23). Butler's machine, vulnerable in the interval of gesture, produces "effects that call that form of reproduction into question" (29). The machine's accidental *swerve*, as Althusser later suggests as the foundation of change, can recruit a new subject into being ([1986] 2006:168). When gestures become diverted from their anticipated form or show what has been hidden by breaking with the scene in which they are staged—as in Brecht's epic theatre—surveillance, both systemic and interpersonal, captures the ways a body might be planning to depart from its conscription. This move inscribes a new map for recruitment—and a warning sign for the discipline of a body on the run.

Surveillance's Handheld Television

Home security smart cameras, or smart cams—cameras that can process visual data with "computational intelligence at some level"—are definitive interfaces between tracked/tracking gestures, the mass cloud or social media aggregation of gestures as data, and the states and corporations that mobilize that data to sell ideas of safety (Belbachir and Göbel 2009:3). Smart camera systems represent a large security market centered on the home, sold to individuals who believe that they can make themselves or their communities safer, often advertised in class and racial terms, while putting their subjects and sometimes themselves at risk of retribution or legal action. Consumer smart cameras resemble (and sometimes are) the devices that have been used by cities to create networks of optical surveillance that target license plates, protests, and people of color (Ferguson 2017:89). Smart cams extend the state project of digital, racialized capture to the home. In contemporary (digital) social life, Didier Fassin writes, an "unprecedented" demand-supply economy for security has been created because a "legitimate desire to live in a safe environment is constantly fueled by the convergent logics of sensationalization of violence in the media, the politics of fear conducted by populist leaders, and the economy of safeguard produced by industrial complexes" (2020:271). With the smart camera, an individual handles these logics intimately: at the threshold of their home, a person can hand over responsibility for high-stakes social decision-making to a video-reading machine, one that uses the visual conversion technologies that have been repeatedly shown to hyperidentify and criminalize Black subjects (Najibi 2020). Like other forms of racial capitalist enforcement, surveillance works because it institutes itself as the everyday. To imagine a gesture away from surveillance means scrapping all of its supportive technologies, from the digital to the human.

Figure 2. A corrupted video shows someone approaching before it goes blank. Still from "Ring Damage" (Neighbor 2023) from the Neighbors app. (Screenshot by Talley Murphy)

Home security smart cameras look both ways: the internet-connected device inserts a third gaze that can peer outside, via the camera, and inside, by tracking use patterns of the in-home (or on-app) operators. In cities across the United States, governments will reimburse purchases of personal smart cameras once they are registered with local law enforcement. In Washington, DC, the Private Security Camera Rebate Program reimburses city residents up to $400 on the purchase and installation of a home security camera system in exchange for self-registration so that, in the case of a relevant investigation, they can "arrange the transfer of the video from your establishment to the police department" (MPD n.d.). To qualify for a rebate, cameras registered with the Metropolitan Police Department must meet a minimum set of technical specifications, including, for digital cameras, a 1280 × 720 display resolution (720p, or HD; MPD's recommended resolution is 1080p, or Full HD—the standard resolution for professional digital video, television broadcast, and most home security cameras). MPD also requires that cameras record a minimum of 5 frames per second (fps) and recommends rates of 15 fps (unlike with most smart cameras' advertised rate of 30 fps, at 15 fps the viewer can begin to detect individual frames). Smart home-security cameras advertise high frame rates but typically default to low ones in order to adapt to users' filming conditions and internet speed. The videos these cameras record are small enough to be automatically stored on cloud services hosted by the companies that produce the hardware.

The ratio and rate of surveillance videos mean that in good lighting conditions the images can be as sharp and clear as high-definition television, but that the quality of movement is jerky, sometimes with individual frames discernible from each other. The halting footage is shared online in social media–friendly duration—a minute, more or less—and sometimes cropped into the display format for Instagram (square) or TikTok/short-form "story" video (vertical). With a horizontal display and a warped fisheye perspective, smart surveillance camera videos more resemble closed-circuit tapes, police body cams, and on-the-fly camcorder news or reality footage than they do webcam livestreams or TikTok videos, despite their shared digital platforming. The videos show stretched and shrunken figures who gesture frame-by-frame—partial moves with partial context. Their gestures become clues to the reality obscured by the camera's specifications: they are endlessly interpretable. Surveillance TV's gestures cite an event encoded, and deteriorating, in the footage.

Ring, originally a doorbell camera company featured on ABC's *Shark Tank* before being acquired by Amazon in 2018, represents the largest market share for smart home security cameras
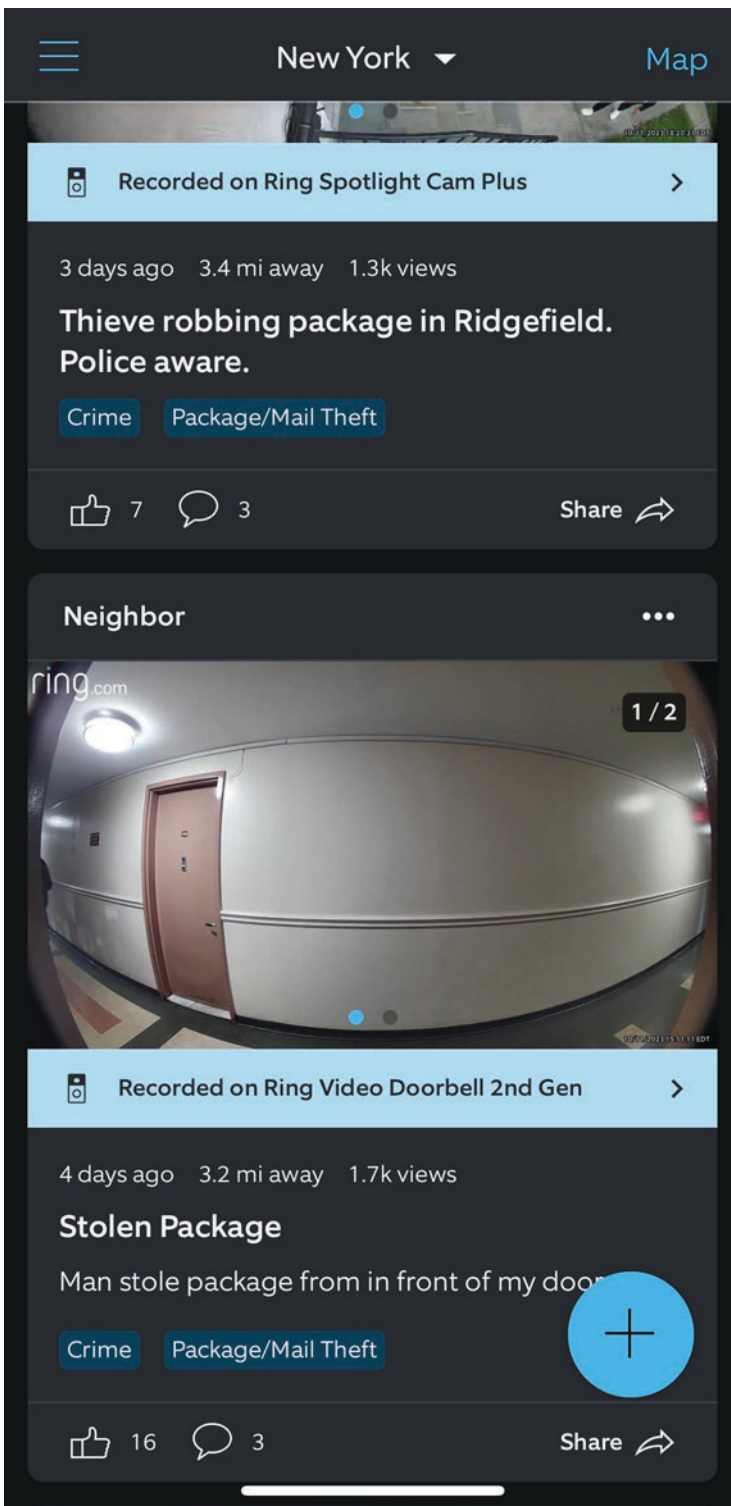
Figure 3. Many posts on Neighbors are categorized as Package/Mail Theft. Screenshot of Neighbors app, 2023. (Screenshot by Talley Murphy)

in the United States (Haskins 2019b). Like other surveillance, home security, and community safety companies, Ring produces a free social media app, Neighbors (https://ring. com/neighbors), where users can upload videos and images, search and filter posts, like, comment, and share to other apps. Purchase of a Ring camera is not required to use the surveillance app. Neighbors is available for mobile devices and has limited desktop capacity; you hold it in your hands. Neighbors has the friendly look of a social or health mobile app: soft blues, sans-serif text, figurative icons. Surveillance camera footage is a kind of digitally generated photography, and on Neighbors that photography is framed in a user-friendly, community-oriented digital interface—no matter how many fearful or angry posts and comments it may provoke, Neighbors' frame is always bright and pleasant.

Most often, the videos posted on Neighbors depict supposed package thefts, and those supposed package thefts are typically videos of Black men walking with Amazon boxes (Haskins 2019a; Vo 2023a; Calacci et al. 2022:16). Posts are more likely to be from white neighborhoods, and in one urban study, users in majority-white neighborhoods with large nonwhite populations shared more "suspicious stranger" posts than in predominantly racially homogenous areas (Calacci et al. 2022:11, 18). On sites other than Neighbors, whether on other social media apps or in Amazon ads, Ring vid-

eos are more likely to depict local interest issues (complaints about the mail carrier, parking, etc.), animal encounters, or upbeat, incidental captures ("Paul...you've won the Nobel prize!"), but on Amazon's platform, which issues automatic police reports to departments and to individual officers, the videos are more likely to depict alleged criminal activity (Harwell 2020; Vo 2023b; Madani 2020; Calacci

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et al. 2022:1). Ring was the first doorbell camera company to allow police to directly request videos from users (including through public calls for content, a feature Neighbors has since removed) (Harwell 2021; Vonau 2022).

Neighbors also shares app-generated crime and weather alerts, user-uploaded photos not from Ring cameras (of a car after a hit-and-run, or of vandalism), or personal alerts (17 February 2022, a post from the Bronx that appeared to me while I archived my feed from somewhere in Manhattan, no photo or video, just: "My neighbor car was stolen" [Neighbor 2022a]). On Neighbors, you can filter recent posts using tags, but you cannot search, so the videos I've found while using the app (which I've primarily done from New York City, but I've also collected posts in Providence, RI, in Washington, DC, and in rural New England) are all ones that happened to appear to me on days I logged on, and usually had been posted within that week. On Neighbors, everything is partly anonymized—posters are listed as "Neighbor," and locations are given on a map as a small circumference, although posters' exact locations have been leaked before (Cameron and Mehrotra 2019). Unlike the similar social network NextDoor, which sends physical mail to confirm your address, Neighbors' location verification is done by locking in GPS coordinates, which determines which posts appear on your feed. Though it engages extensively with law enforcement (the

Figure 4. Some videos labeled as attempted crimes on Neighbors show behavior that is unclear, ambiguous, or unrelated to the crime. Screenshot of Neighbors app, 2023. (Screenshot by Talley Murphy)

company lists partnerships with 2,674 agencies in the United States as of January 2024), Neighbors is fundamentally consumer-oriented, creating a self-replicating Amazon loop. Someone buys a Ring camera from Amazon (the doorbell models run from $64.99 to $349.99 as of January 2024);
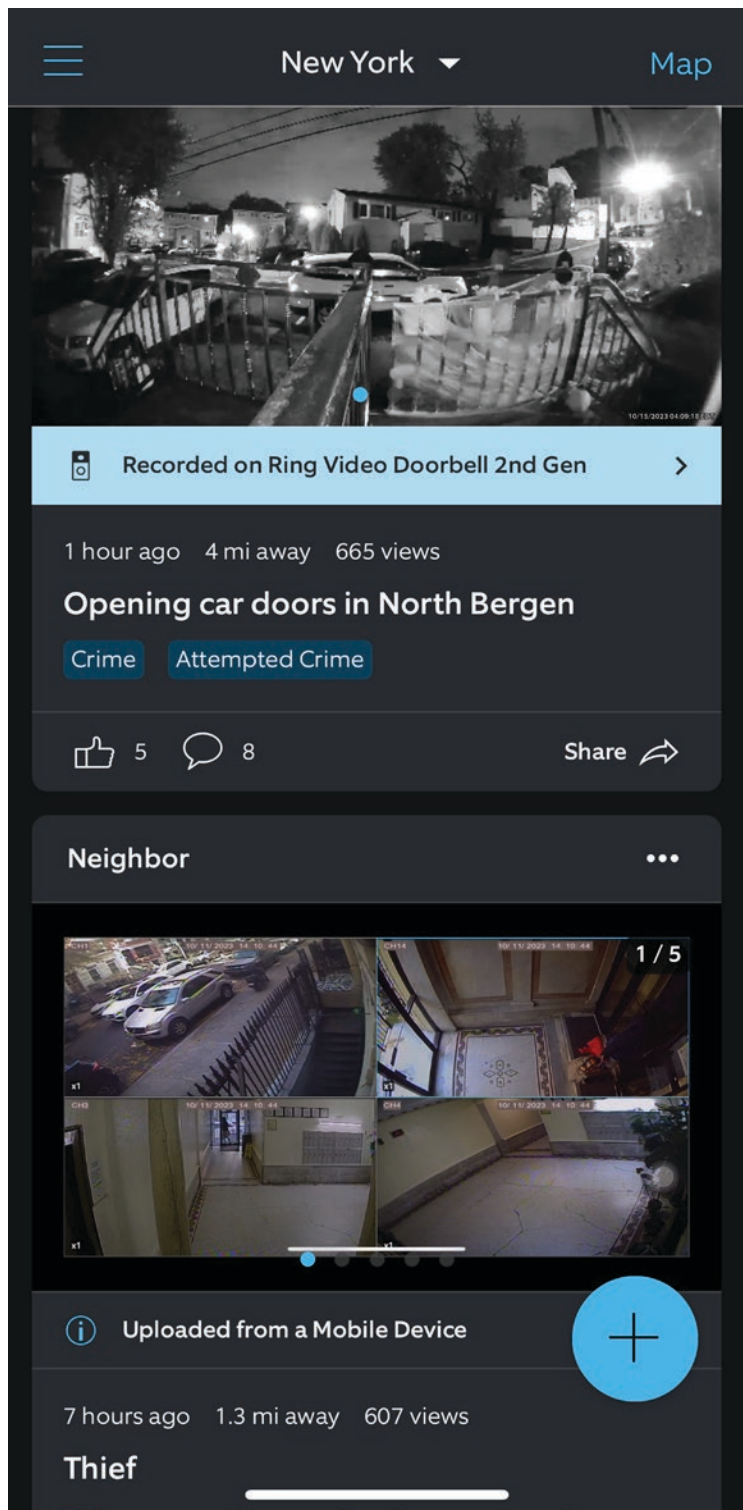
it ships in an Amazon (or Amazon-contracted) truck and is delivered by an Amazon (or Amazon-contracted) delivery worker in an Amazon box (Fraize 2022). When someone steals that box, and is imaged semipublicly on Neighbors, instead of puncturing the Amazon loop, its existence is justified in a subjectivating hail: See?, *you* need a camera, too.

When the videos show something other than the usual package theft—something more mysterious or unclear—the neighbors assemble in the comments section to investigate. A June 2022 post from Queens labeled "Suspicious activity" shows a middle-aged white person taking a picture of a doorway (Neighbor 2022c). One comment: "Had the same thing happen to me, I made a police report." Others commented: "I can't get past the wig"; "He walks like he needs hip replacement surgery"; "We don't understand what's going on but look at his facial features he doesn't look well" (Neighbor 2022c). Not just what the figure is seen to do, but how they are seen to do it is at issue: the man moves, and through an analysis of criminal disability, the way he moves reveals him to be dangerous. The original user later listed the post as "resolved," with a note: "food delivery person" (Neighbor 2022c). As the comments make clear, on Neighbors, figures that move nonnormatively are suspicious, regardless of whether they deliver or steal. Viewers police the figures for deviance from a correct gesture (and because they have been posted, the figure's gestures automatically enter into a field of deviance), creating a set of failed moves from which a normative/safe inversion can be derived.

Unlike the man for whom "we don't understand what's going on," racialized people and people who appear to be disabled or unhoused are disciplined on Neighbors in ways that attach specific criminal intent to the images. Rather than the failed deviant gesture of criminal disability, they are proposed as performers of successful deviance and as natural subjects of criminality. In February 2022, someone in Harlem posted a 54-second-long video of a man titled "Safety: Tried to break in to my house," but it's unclear in the video if the house is a single-unit house, or a multiunit apartment building (Neighbor 2022b). The man in the video is wearing multiple gray sweaters and his hair is in a loose bun. He is maybe 40, with a medium complexion. He looks into the window and pulls the door; it doesn't open. He reaches into his pocket and finds a few dollar bills, puts them back, shuffles around, looks in the window once more, and walks away. He shifts his weight heavily side-to-side while he walks, giving him a somewhat unstable appearance.

Some Neighbor in the comments on "Safety" points out: "He's probably confused he whispered why isn't she home." Others demand police intervention, call the man "you Bum," say they hope he's arrested, that "his picture should be printed and posted in the area and video should be seen by the community." Some responses are directed to the poster or the video, but some users contest other comments as insufficiently harsh or insufficiently understanding. App-based surveillance leverages against both the bodies imaged onscreen and the ones that render themselves onscreen as they type, a collaborative practice of discipline that necessarily cuts both ways. In the looped, scrutable Ring videos, gestures are evidence of criminality, and appearance is evidence of intent. And in the anonymized, decontextualized comment sections, speech acts form new gestic centers, themselves staging an attitude in framed gestures that can be surveilled and debated by other users.

Amazon frames Ring as, per Evan Selinger and Darrin Durant, "fun technology" that operates as part of a larger push by Amazon to encourage "customers to feel good about the company monitoring and analyzing their online shopping activity, and about using the company's signature internet of things [with] products that have surveillance functions" (Selinger and Durant 2022:94–95). Selinger and Durant call Amazon's orientation to pleasure "engineering affect"; through Neighbors, the company promotes a feel-good sociality, suggesting "that using the Neighbors app means you deserve to feel a proud sense of civic worth because you are helping people contribute to shared efforts to make their communities safer" (2022:94, 96). In an app all about feeling good and having fun, a criminalizing gaze fixes racialized and disabled figures as the subject of enjoyable (civic) surveillance.

Neighbors takes Ring's "fun" technology of surveillance capture and renders it as a scrolling feed. Scrolling through the Neighbors app is an endless activity, like most social media scrolling

today, one that, as far as I have ever gone, will not deliver the "there's nothing to see here" end-of-feed message of the mid-2000s (instead, it calls, "'Hey, you there!': keep scrolling"). Scrolling through the Neighbors feed makes individual posts—lost dog graphics headlined "DEVASTATED FAMILY," gonzo close-up images of men's faces from doorbell fisheye lenses, night-vision hallway videos that autoplay—into a single connected film. Without identities or precise locations, Neighbors' users are not likely to learn much about safety issues in *their neighborhood*; instead, they enter a world of shock and paranoia ready for their participation. Held and moved by hand, the feed edits separate videos together. TiVo once gave television viewers the capacity to pause and rewind live TV, making them into consumers not of content but of power over that content; Neighbors gives its users power over the distribution of surveillance images with the touch of a screen. Neighbors prompts and is prompted by the pressure of scrolling fingers to construct a digital montage that keeps users on the app.

Through the gesture of the scroll, Neighbors repurposes the tools of a critically alienating theatre in order to further its conscriptive, bidirectional surveillance. Montage, as Walter Benjamin writes when discussing Brecht's epic theatre, is a "human event," an interruption to the continuity of the everyday, as though a stranger has entered a room; it "interrupts the context into which it has been inserted" ([1934] 1998:99–100). Montage, which Brecht opposes to "growth," sets images beside each other, making "curves" rather than linear events, revealing the conditions of a world, studying them, and breaking open the capacity to turn over and change that world (Brecht [1930] 2014:133–34). While many social networks are operated by the scroll, on Neighbors, the implicit threat of your fingers pulling up a shocking image of surveilled violence results in a choppy montage that cannot be fully incorporated as a linear narrative through the scroll. The Neighbors montage interrupts itself, calling into question the user's sense of the world and sense of themselves. Gesturing the app-scripted montage opens the world depicted by the videos to critique. But in the same way that epic theatre's spectators are interrupted in their experience of representation but must understand that interruption as a theatrical gesture making them pay attention so that when they leave the theatre, Brecht hopes, they might take action, the users of Neighbors' handheld TV turn to the surveillance app as a way to make sense of the revealed bad world through which they scroll—and as a way to realize that sense IRL through contact with the police.

Brecht writes that the epic theatre's spectator "was no longer allowed in any way to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play" ([1935] 2014:133). Brecht attributes this to "a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding" (133). Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt, and its inherent alienation of the spectator from their own personal feelings of alienation, scaffolds how surveillance programs gesture their users into scrolling-into-being a criminalizing montage. Surveillance TV viewers do not submit to the experience uncritically, and they understand their viewing to have practical consequences (call the police! put his picture up everywhere!). Brecht writes that on the epic stage, "what is 'natural' had to have the force of what is startling," which is "the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect" (Brecht [1935] 2014:133). Surveillance's handheld TV makes startling all kinds of mundane behaviors that cross its screen. In being imaged, the characters in the video are taken from what might appear to be an immersive and total physical everyday and instead are startled into a world of criminal movement. Where Brecht's frame might be Neighbors itself, positioning the audience to see themselves and so estrange themselves from the people who post, or from the carceral-capitalist logics at hand, Neighbors estranges its viewers from the content of the videos.

To dislocate its users, surveillance TV takes up the same tools as Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt. The apps stage a split subject: to ensure institutional stability (of police, corporations, etc.) they offer an illusion of the individual's power over that institution when they scroll. And, at the same time, surveillance media attempt to produce the *disempowering* acceptance of daily alienation via those institutions. The surveillance app does not pretend, for example, *not* to sell your data

Figure 5. People who make deliveries are often imaged by Ring cameras and posted on Neighbors. Still from "Suspicious activity" (Neighbor 2022c) from the Neighbors app. (Screenshot by Talley Murphy)

without compensating you; it just argues that you are better off inside its ideological matrix than outside it—that it will protect you by protecting your property. Your gestures recruit you into the maintenance (social, financial) of capitalist surveillance, and the surveillance scene you support estranges you so it can relocate you inside its grasp. For actors to produce a Verfremdungseffekt, Brecht proposes "not - but," a logic in which "every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision" while still showing the alternative as a possibility implied in that decision ([1951] 2014:213). With a threatening *not - but*, Neighbors teaches: you are not the criminal, but both the victim and the cop. You are *not* the criminal, but you could be, and your potential criminality remains "contained and conserved" in your gestures, your sentences, your decisions (213). You must decide, again and again, with every gesture, to play the role of both victim and cop and to report or turn in strangers to ensure that you will not become a criminal, too.

In a way, the estranging practice of surveillance is particular to today's political and technological contours. James Harding takes up Brecht's "street scene" to frame the surveillance conditions of the street today, the "seen street" (2018:13). The disruptions in the street Brecht proposes, Harding writes, now happen in view of "the unwanted audience, that watchful eye of the advanced surveillance technologies which now routinely monitor the city streets" (14). But the critical suggestion of Brecht's Gestus, or as Diamond proposes, of gestic criticism, is to historicize the present, to "ruffle the smooth edges of the image, of representation" (1988:89). In reading the gestures of surveillance today, the image of the digital as entirely transformative becomes ruffled: the doorbell camera becomes a peephole. Surveillance estranges its subjects through binaries of criminality and using gesture practices; it is vulnerable to a Brechtian criticism—or, in Harding's discussion, Brechtian theatre is vulnerable to it—not only through the digital, and not only in the present.

Brecht uses epic theatre's alienation effect to instruct audiences on how "there might be a way out" (Brecht [1935] 2014:179). Where Butler suggests that theatre, particularly epic theatre, might divert its audience into new subject formations precisely because the ideological forces that it stages only ever appear partially and in gesture, surveillance's gestural economy includes the constant threat of real intervention (Butler 2017:37). Neighbors stages a composite scene of both the gestured partial-reality and the full force of the real. The composite scene disorients and redirects users more deeply into their existing affect and fear, producing more surveillable subjects. If, to

borrow Wynter's construction, America's subject is not American but *human*, surveillance practices show how a partial action—a gesture—could lead to the expulsion from being-human (in Wynter and McKittrick 2015:21). For those individuals not conscribed as human subjects, action is, then, presented to be impossible, as there is no alternative position to take. The only action offered is reiterative gestural recruitment.

Hands, at play and at work on devices networked into surveillance, gesture in interplay with software and hardware in ways that activate both user and object. Apple writes in its developer guidelines that "gestures are a key way for people to interact with their touchscreen devices, eliciting a close personal connection with content and enhancing the sense of directly manipulating onscreen objects" (Apple n.d.). Gestures are neither fully separable from nor an indistinguishable continuation of the bodies and machines that make them. The thousands of daily device touches by smartphone users compose a collaborative training program, teaching fingers how to scroll or tap correctly, so they receive the onscreen feedback they intend to produce. Benjamin discusses "the need to possess the object in close-up" ([1931] 2005:519). The Neighbors montage is a way to possess others, in aggregate, under your fingers. Pinch open a video, and extend the interval of the image; hold a body in your hands.

I've spent a lot of time on Neighbors, and twice I have felt its disorienting intimacy with gestic alienation. The first was reading a crime alert about someone I knew and feeling aware of myself pulling them into the mundane operation of the world-through-Neighbors as I scrolled by. The second was a more recent discovery, a 26-second video titled "Ring Damage" (Neighbor 2023). The caption reads, "Women damaged and broken ring camera with a knife." At the start of the video, a woman walks down the hallway of an apartment building, towards the camera. She passes an instrument between her hands, gets close to the lens, then seems to take aim. Five seconds in, the camera shuts off. For 21 seconds of empty footage, the app freezes on its last frame: a single, low-res image of someone in a blue hoodie with her arm extended back. The frame is pixelated and degraded, and her face is obscured by the quality of the image; I imagine her gleeful.

Benjamin suggests that the task of a Brechtian actor is "'to make gestures quotable' [...H]e must be able to space his gestures as the compositor produces spaced type" ([1966] 1998:11). Those gestures, for Benjamin, reveal a dialectical condition in themselves; epic theatre's dialectic "is not born of the contradiction between successive statements or ways of behaving [montage], but of the gesture" (12). In the freeze-frame of the woman who seems to be about to knife the Ring camera, the gestural dialectic is taken to a stand-still, where, as Benjamin describes, "there is no difference between a human life and a word" (13). The woman corresponds, entirely, with the single frame I see. A gesture, a human life, and a word—dialectical and citational—are all ways in which the investments of ideology can be made visible. For gestures/human lives/words to be conscribed by surveillance, to serve surveillance's politic, they must be observed, written, interpreted, and recontextualized. Benjamin suggests that through the realization of the gestural dialectic, Brecht's audience "will get their money's worth" (12). As constant producers of gestural dialectics—sequenced, quoted, and segmented—surveillance TV's cyborg humans are providing their own money's worth, monitored for capturable data scraped from their gestures on screens.

Gestures in Aggregate

Surveillance is gestural; it can be understood critically through and as gestures, and seizes the critical, alienating interval of gesture for its own ends. This seizure happens through a variety of digital and physical practices by which body movement is converted into information, which is then utilized to limit what it means for a body to move as expected. Data aggregation, the process by which data is turned into value through mass collection and interpretation, is the primary way that today's corporations and governments do conscriptive surveillance. By producing an interpretable aggregate, institutions assert an average behavior against which any observed gesture can be measured. The aggregating entity hides the consequences of their surveillance behind claims of bioprivacy and gestural autonomy—a constant, society-wide version of the generic, outlined body that is

produced "for your privacy" on the monitors of airport body scanners that can and do produce more revealing images, and that show a normative body to measure yours against (Harrington 2014).

As with other aggregated gestures, the index of a human standing with their hands above their head excludes many bodies from a norm that signifies as nonthreatening. The body scan aggregate, within your vision as you wait to be processed, displaces the view of the state into a device. Its screen—eye-catching because our eyes have learned to look at screens—out-glares the more physical gestural contact with a TSA agent, who tells you to stand differently, who looks at your body without a mechanical device (but with a gaze trained by the automated analysis of the scanner), and who can decide to touch you at will. A pat-down with the back-of-the-hand that only touches your not-private parts lets an agent claim they are a fingerprintless machine and that your body is still private because it has not been caressed by a palm; the aggregated image, too, hides an intimacy between you and the eye/I of the machine's radiation.

The screen you and the TSA agent can both see returns an image of your body Other to your body, lifted from you as you cue the agent to cue the machine when you gesture hands-up. Caught in Verfremdungseffekt's re-alienating gap, you are gestured into learning that your body is not your own, but instead an aggregate, and you are trained to accept that alienation by moving along, as per Jacques Rancière's counter to Althusser's process of ideological interpellation (Rancière 2010:37).

The body of the digitized human, as Wynter writes of "Man," "overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (in Wynter and McKittrick 2015:260). Wynter outlines how a single ideological figure, which she calls bio-economic *Man*, has become universalized as *the human*. Dramatizing the coming-into-being of Man as a limited but world-defining subject, Wynter first describes a/the man who uses threats of force in order to define another human as Other, to be exploited as both commodity and as labor (see Wynter [1976] 2022:435–36). His threats are insured by weapon technologies that far surpass what the other human might have for defense. By threatening another into the position of the dominated Other, man becomes the ideological object "Man," recursively defined both by the Other and by the scene of industrial production that gave Man his power to define. This figure becomes necessarily and unwillingly subordinated both to technology and to the Other even as he uses both in his attempts to dominate and extract. Wynter's modern, Western Man comes to stand, too, for the human beyond the Western, the modern, and the male; through the "heraldic vision" of racial capitalism, other humans are absorbed into Man's totalized world picture against the Other of "cheap labor far away" (Wynter [1976] 2022:428). In Wynter's process of heraldic definition—exclusion from the human, instatement as Other, and partial absorption into the universalized human "Man"—each relation is underwritten by the development of new technologies. Man and his devices facilitate the universalization of racial capitalism as the threshold of the human. By collecting, sorting, and managing the data that gestures leave behind, surveillance puts to work a digital body as a definitive statement of the human. When surveillance is pointed at neighbors or at strangers, it draws lines of exclusion in order to create a social order in which an in-group can define itself and its totality against an expulsed, digitally captured few.

Gestures, both as things bodies do and as ways to think about how bodies make assertions, put pressure on an irreducible image of any moving body. Gesture destabilizes coherent or natural movement by representing it as meaningful segments (a finger points, a hand waves). Data collection and aggregation are instances of that analytic put to work, not, as Benjamin suggests, as a dialectical tool of critique, but as a covert way to maintain a social and economic reality ([1966] 1998:13). Pulling a body from its context, and putting it to work for other means, the surveillant conscription of digital bodies does its own gestic interpretation, understood through gesture's segments and citations. Butler describes gesture as the "decomposition of the speech act," a technique of citation that opens a critical interval of possibility (2015:41). Gestures' critical power comes from that decompositional, citational character—it is precisely because they are *partial*, relinquishing, as Butler suggests, "the satisfaction of the complete act" (41). In a move that revises citation as original, aggregation creates a new whole of partial gestures; it returns the affective satisfaction to the gesture and, by collecting many gestures, recomposes the scene from which it was cut.

Aggregation disidentifies gestures from their sources (bodies, no longer perceived as whole but already cut to pieces by the initial process of data collection). Those bodies then responsively estrange themselves: like Butler's Brechtian "lure," by navigating spaces of mass surveillance (that is to say, spaces), they are inaugurated into a dissociative state (2015:28–29). They swipe—or otherwise move—their data into existence, and in that swipe, the data shows them it was not their own at all. To claim gestures as their own (as in: that's private), they must place themselves into data that has already been anonymized, captured, and sold. Mapping scenes of estrangement, José Esteban Muñoz writes disidentification as a radical queer of color practice "to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject, [...] a mode of understanding the movements and circulations of identificatory force," which will "always foreground that lost object of identification" (1999:12, 30). In a way, aggregation seizes on the disidentification Muñoz outlines as a queer tactic. It hides and reconstitutes its practices and becomes unintelligible. It loses the individual in aggregation and yet foregrounds it, cutting a body into, as Muñoz describes in a disidentificatory notion of fiction, a "contested field of self-production" (20).

Digital surveillance does not practice disidentification, but instead seizes it. Aggregation uses disidentification's world-sustaining possibility—for queers, for racialized people, for people who have been criminalized—to put that possibility on display and make it capturable. Reidentification of anonymized data does not require multiple datasets: 90% of individuals can be identified from four credit card transactions (De Montjoye et al. 2015:536). The specificity of a person's gestures—their own disidentificatory everyday performances—identifies them when deviation is what makes their data disaggregatable. Aggregation captures strategies of those most at risk of surveillance's carceral sorting: aggregation uses, and so defangs, the tactics that might challenge regimes of surveillance. Absorbing contest as part of the encompassing practice of ideology rather than as its challenge, Althusser proposes a "structure of misrecognition" by which the subject comes to understand itself as subject ([1971] 2001:149). The misrecognizing subject enters the imaginary of the Other/object that it is not; its noncorrespondence to its object of recognition allows for the capture and use of the parts of that subject it has been led to *unrecognize* as its own.

Digital data collection breaks a body into pieces along the folds of its gestures, both those it makes to operate the devices that track its movements and the gestures that are reconstructed through transaction, location, and social data. Digital data indexes a swipe, a click, or the press of a button; it is a record of how someone's hands move across a surface that translates signifiers (explicit ones, like keyboard buttons, and implicit ones, like the tracks of habitual gestures that cause touchscreen objects to move) into binary code (Poppinga et al. 2014:173). Aggregation is the way that data collectors turn those gestures into commodities: it is surveillance's mechanic of alienation. Aggregation depends on the human as a technology and as a body-making ideology: without the sense of an autonomous, seamless, bounded body that can come into direct contact with other bodies and objects, in a way that is both patterned and significant, the gesture data that aggregation tools conscribe would be meaningless noise. Instead, aggregation promotes a socialized human type.

I understand Wynter's articulation of "a new descriptive statement" of Man as an index, a kind of social aggregation that, with ideological and political force, measures persons for deviance from the norm and includes or excludes them from social protection on that basis (in Wynter and McKittrick 2015:330). Wynter, who remarks that "we are no longer, as individual biological subjects, primarily born of the womb," describes humans instead as "hybridly" constituted, socially performative narrative-humans, "both initiated and reborn as fictively instituted inter-altruistic kin-recognizing members of each such symbolically re-encoded genre-specific referent-we" (33–34). Wynter's conception suggests gesture acts that both represent and affect bodies as socio-material entities. The actual practice of surveillance, as opposed to the privacy claims that sustain the industry, relies on gestures that can be not only captured but be put to work against the individual by becoming signs in a story about that individual. Mass data methods trace human activity across transaction networks, creating a portfolio of gestural trace that, even anonymized,

Figure 6. McLuhan and his remote. Will Bond as Marshall McLuhan in SITI Company's The Medium
(2022) directed by Anne Bogart. City Theatre, Pittsburgh. (Photo by SITI Company)

can be reconnected with a targeted subject. Indexed gestures are valuable; if you're willing to give up claim to your data, you can even get paid to click (McMullen et al. 2023). In aggregate, gestures form a narrativizing machine, making all kinds of bodies more legible to surveillance and re-encoding those bodies to present themselves more legibly when they gesture again.

Surveillance interfaces assert a universal concept of gesture and humanness to their users. They argue that writing down a body's gestures left behind is an act that maintains privacy and property: bodies, and the identities they index, might be materially identifiable, but gestures are generic. (Don't worry about them knowing/saving/interpreting what you've done, it has little to do with *you specifically* and more to do with you-as-average; your body remains whole and wholly yours.) Indexing gestures that were not really yours in the first place, the digital surveillance industry from which there are few places to hide (and within which, misidentification is increasingly rare) learns how to interpret others as or against the human through the gestures that conscribe you.

Home Theatre

Early in SITI Company's *The Medium* (1994, 2022), a white man in a bow tie and suspenders announcing himself as media theorist Marshall McLuhan, offers a warning: "You can't go home again."[3] In *The Medium*, scenes jump with the click of a TV remote, a gestic cut through the channels. And on each channel, a reminder: you can't go home again. Two women, limbs everywhere, super-modulated, "you can't go home again"; a standup comic, offered as a punchline, "you can't go home again!"; a figure, still and serious, hands at their side, "you can't go home again"; two bodies and two chairs, intimately entangled torsos, "you can't go home again." Each scene is cut by the actor-as-McLuhan, stepping in and out of the channel to hit a remote, a TiVo-style click before TiVo, or pointed as a gun, or held as an electric sword. The gestic cut is violent; it asserts difference with McLuhan as its subject. There is McLuhan, and there are the people McLuhan can freeze. He cuts into live movement and language with a hand: a pre-smartphone, a 1990s hand-cranked viewing montage.

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3. My description is taken from a 29 March 2022 performance of *The Medium* at Brooklyn Academy of Music, restaged as part of SITI Company's final season.

Figure 7. The company of The Medium *rises as McLuhan's words fail. From left: Stephen Duff Webber, Gian-Murray Gianino, Ellen Lauren, Violeta Picayo, and Will Bond as Marshall McLuhan in SITI Company's* The Medium *(2022) directed by Anne Bogart at BAM Fisher. (Photo by Steven Molina Contreras)*

Will Bond, the actor playing McLuhan, both begins and ends the production with a looped performance of one section of McLuhan's writing, rolling back and forth through the same few paragraphs of media theory until his body short-circuits like a broken machine, a body made in Butler's decompositional gesture (2015:41). *The Medium*, which for an hour and a half repeats, at most, 10 pages of text in different formations, treats each word as gestic act: in repetition, whatever meaning might be tied to a word is covered over, not because it is repeated but because its context is cut—the channel keeps changing. When McLuhan, both TV viewer and character inside the screen, appears threatened (when, for example, the cowboys on the Western channel are about to turn on him), he uses the viewing tool he holds to break the scene in which he stands. And, onstage, he is viewed, too.

Television, at least the not-smart TV, is a uniquely at-home technology that—unlike Amazon's Ring or your computer or a gaming system—has no camera through which to *look back*. Even nonvisually, television is not that good at watching you; Nielsen, which in 2023 was reaccredited to measure national viewership after years of losing out to digital competitors, still uses manual surveys to calculate viewership (Steinberg 2023). And perhaps this is why the streaming platforms that give us the surveillant feeling-good affirmation of being shown what we want to see have taken over, or why Britain's public Channel 4's *Gogglebox*, a (prerecorded) TV show that lets you watch other people watch TV but without the interactivity of live watch party streams online, has been a critical hit in the UK (Morris 2022). Unlike McLuhan, we are not conscripted into the screen, but as McLuhan knows of us even from his predigital gestus, we counterintuitively struggle to feel ourselves as the independent agents we imagine ourselves to be without the gestural insertion that surveillance both requires and allows.

The warning that "you can't go home again," which is from a section titled "your neighborhood" in McLuhan's 1967 *The Medium Is the Massage*, reads in full:

Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of "time" and "space" and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men. It has reconstituted dialogue on

a global scale. Its message is Total Change, ending psychic, social, economic, and political parochialism. The old civic, state, and national groupings have become unworkable. Nothing can be further from the spirit of the new technology than "a place for everything and everything in its place." You can't go home again. (McLuhan and Fiore [1967] 2001:16)

Like Wynter, who articulates the coming-into-being of Man, McLuhan identifies a homogenizing machine that evacuates and remakes worlds in its own image. But McLuhan's sense of the new dawn of electrical catastrophe—presented in *The Medium* as prescient, unescapable, and reality-warping in a production that starts as a lecture and ends with bodies trembling in a decomposition of linear time and thought—insists on a contemporary point of origin for the technological production of the human. What McLuhan misses is that "home" and its space-time had been technologically and materially reconstituted before the advent of mass electronic media: apocalypses and catastrophes well before television made the homes and homelands of many people into subjects of technological discipline.

Wynter suggests that the social, narratively constituted human is a hybrid: taken in relation to the disaster technopolitics McLuhan names but misattributes, that hybrid human is cyborg, materially reconstituted by the technological (not only electric/mechanical) networks it inhabits. Donna Harraway describes a cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" with a capacity to map "our social and bodily reality" ([1985] 2016:5–6). Harraway's cyborg, "no longer structured by the polarity of public and private [...] defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household" (9). A cyborg like Harraway's that straddles the home and the social is a product of the social surveillance that has revealed the fragile construction of any limits between public and private, especially for those whose privacy (or bodily integrity) is only rhetorical.

In "The 'Loser Edit' That Awaits Us All," Colson Whitehead suggests that we each hang on the edge of television's subordination, constantly on camera and waiting for editors (as in: each other) who might "arrange the sequences, borrowing from cultural narratives of disgrace, sifting through the available footage with a bit of hindsight—and in turn, we endure our own loser edits when we stumble" (2015). Whitehead identifies a confluent position for mechanical surveillance, at once product of the large-scale machinery that propagates through public space and of the actions, not of some disembodied power people, but of each other, that allow us to regulate and cut gestures into surveillance stories that make sense. Whitehead's suggestion that we are on, and editing, television every day articulates how surveillance has been patterned onto social life in ways that go beyond the proliferation of the smart camera to warp how bodies hold themselves when they imagine they might be watched, not just in public, but in private, too. Across screens, no longer on walls but in-hand, the mechanics, semiotics, and gestures of viewing have jumped into bodies and spaces, priming them to be desired, to be conscribed for social surveillance. The activation and binarization of a body's gestures as surveillant/surveilled, a rupture that is neither new nor mechanically dependent, forms the condition of possibility for exclusion and capture.

your neighborhood. You can't go home again, but not because of any new crisis of surveillance or electric technology. Supported by social contexts of control and evacuation, gestures that watch and surveil shape bodies as repetition-machines making inhospitable moves. Bodies, already digital, are digitized, cut into pieces of data; some are surveilled into capture and submission, not from the introduction of mechanical tools but from the instant a gesture meets a normalizing gaze of racialization, body-surveillance, bioaggregation—Wynter's monohumanism. You can't go home again, as surveillance infrastructures and the people and institutions that use them conscribe a body's gestures against it. There is no un-surveilling of a body's gestures, or evacuating surveillance from gestures that have been surveilled. A politic of countersurveillant gesture can only scavenge its home for something *else*, refusing to surveil, refusing to swipe, ducking cameras, scrambling the code of gestures: you can't go home again.

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