| **Dialogue** | **A Critique of Surveillant Assemblage:** Bodies, Desire, and the Limits of the Data Double |

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Introduction

Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) theorisation of the surveillant assemblage has greatly influenced scholarship in surveillance studies since its publication at the turn of the century. In this brief article, we build on Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) legacy by bringing elements from feminist, new materialist, and Actor-Network theories into the discussion. We first dissect the notion of data flows to reveal their agency in creating select realities within the performative materialities of the wider surveillant assemblage. In doing so, we problematise the approach to abstraction in the surveillant assemblage that flattens the unevenness of surveillance placed on different bodies and totalises surveillance as a unique force in society. We specifically focus on bodies, desire, and desiring bodies to highlight the dyadic relationship between data and the body in the co-construction of code/body (Akbari 2025). Hence, we challenge Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) idea of disappearing bodies and data doubles' pure virtuality by underlining the body's ongoing messy presence in the surveillant assemblage. As part of this messiness, contrary to Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) argument about desires *for* surveillance dominating the assemblage, we return to the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of desire to account for the equally important desires *against* surveillance. By proposing a more nuanced understanding of the body in relation to desire, we offer an opening for considering resistance and political action against surveillance from within the surveillant assemblage.

From Data Flows to Performative Materiality

> A great deal of surveillance is directed toward the human body. The observed body is of a distinctively hybrid composition. First it is broken down by being abstracted from its territorial setting. It is then reassembled in different settings through a series of data flows. The result is a decorporealized body, a "data double" of pure virtuality. (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 611)

Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson (2000) briefly ponder Donna Haraway's (1985) notion of the cyborg after writing the above lines; however, they soon return their focus to claims of pure virtuality: data flows are reassembled as a data double, a new form of individual subjectivity is formed under datafied, informational governance. In our article, we stay with the notion of flows a bit longer. Assemblage theory tells us that networks of relationships not only reflect reality but also actively shape it, sometimes foreclosing alternative possibilities. For example, Annemarie Mol (1999) emphasises the vital role of assemblages in

creating distinct realities. These assemblages determine what is regarded as valid knowledge or permissible action, sidelining approaches that fall outside their organising norms. This selective inclusion is crucial in constructing reality. Applied to the surveillant assemblage, Mol's (1999) insights suggest that surveillance can actively forge selective social realities. Similarly, Karen Barad (2007) argues that every apparatus enacts particular realities through intra-actions while simultaneously obscuring others. In the surveillant assemblage, the data double can be seen as what Barad (2007) calls an "agential cut": a moment when those humans or machines conducting surveillance make decisions to act based only on specific gathered data. This cut has material consequences, invoking particular realities for some while erasing others. In this way, alternative realities can be sidelined through the operation of the data double.

Eva Haifa Giraud (2019) further reminds us that exclusions within various political entanglements are just as ethically significant as inclusions. This means that assemblages do not merely produce realities; they also obstruct political actions that fall outside their organising logics. Each data double, then, could be seen as stabilising certain possibilities while foreclosing others: it is not simply a flow. Drawing on this scholarship, we can see that the data double is a movement against flow within the surveillant assemblage as described by Haggerty and Ericson (2000). While they do not use the term, this operation resembles what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) describe as striation: the imposition of structure on space through divisions, hierarchies, classifications, and territorialisations that restrict movement and fix relations. So, while the surveillant assemblage emphasises flows, the data double acts as a moment of striation—a point of control over the body. Mol (1999), Barad (2007), and Giraud (2019) help us see this striation as a cut that limits what the body can do or come to mean, while simultaneously excluding the body itself from analysis. Although the surveillant assemblage offers a sophisticated account of surveillance, its focus on the abstracted body depends on two processes that we revisit here: first, the abstraction of the body in the surveillant assemblage and, second, the failure to recognise the different, multidirectional manifestations of desire within the surveillant assemblage. Our aim here is to reintroduce both the body and other types of desire into the discussion of the surveillant assemblage.

Describing the Body in the Surveillant Assemblage

Where does the body exist within the surveillant assemblage? Instead of being entirely replaced by the data double, the body continues to reappear in messy and contradictory, ways. Despite the drive to abstract the human into data, the body does not simply disappear. Instead, it remains entangled in the surveillant assemblage. To begin, we will denote what we mean by the body. In many critiques of biological essentialism, the body is described as shifting, relational, and multiple-formed through encounters, environments, and intensities (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Hallensleben 2010). Drawing on Barad (2007), we approach the body as material-discursive, in which the material and the discursive are not preexisting entities that interact, but are mutually constituted through their entanglement. The body, in this sense, "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad 2007: 33). Even if we understand the body as always in relation, that relation still needs something to relate to, from, or through. As Doreen Massey puts it, "the body is all process, certainly, but we still have bodies" (qtd in. Featherstone and Painter 2013: 255). The body does not dissolve into pure fragmentation, nor does it retreat to some fixed essence. It sits in tension—never fully a substance, but never fully abstract either. Thus, multiplicity is not something added to an otherwise whole body, as if the body had secondary attributes—its "movements, consumption patterns, reading preferences, tastes in erotica, personal contacts" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 618)—that could be abstracted from the "actual" body. Thinking about the body this way means accepting a paradox: there is no final truth to what a body is or can do, but it is also not merely flux without materiality. There is always something doing the work of *becoming*: the body's abstraction always remains incomplete not because surveillance fragments a previously whole body, but because the body was never whole in the first place; its flesh moves into the surveillant assemblage as primary conditions, not secondary attributes, even if we can recognise an alteration in proximity. What the surveillant assemblage concept struggles to pin down is this in-between state—a body never fully captured but never entirely absent either. As also argued by other

contributions in this forum (see Lageson, this issue; Eneman et al., this issue), while surveillance remains bound by the impossibility of ever knowing everything about the individual (Abbey 2025), the body itself is also incomplete, with the false promise of unity functioning as an imagined endpoint of wholeness. If, as Deleuze (1990) via Spinoza suggests, we do not yet know what a body can do, then there is likewise no way for this body to become complete—whether for surveillance or itself. Becoming is not a midpoint on the path to wholeness; it is constitutive of being. Fragmentation is therefore not a deviation from the body's supposed unity but the very condition that unsettles the surveillant fantasy of total knowledge. The body's incompleteness is both epistemological and ontological.

Code/Body: Locating the Body in the Data Double

Instead of the body being abstracted, the body has a dynamic relationship with the data double. The body is not lost upon entering the surveillant assemblage, but instead this body travels inside the data double, an extension of materiality, of substance, flowing into a wider network from within the data. While data doubles increasingly include data or inferred meanings from wider populations too, the individuals' encounter with surveillance equally means that the body folds into a data double. This means the fleshy, material body is, and always has been, part of this data double. While Haggerty and Ericson (2000) are right to say the data double is not necessarily about "accurately" representing an individual, we might look at this relationship as best signified by a Moebius strip instead of one of abstraction: where inside and outside, interiority and exteriority, subject and object, and finally, body and data double, can fold into each other.[1] This type of relationship has been explored by one of us in conceptualising the code/body as a dyadic relationship between the two (Akbari 2025). By disrupting the claim to pure virtuality, the code/body puts the body back into the data double and underlines the presence of the body in its abstraction. Code/body recognises the co-construction of (certain) bodies and their data doubles, as made evident in cases such as the iris scanning of refugees receiving humanitarian aid, heart rate monitors used at borders, and the measurement of bodily reactions in asylum interviews. As Akbari (2025) argues, the body does not disappear but becomes ever present: the body becomes the border; it becomes a trap. Figure 1 shows a Moebius strip painted on documents related to an immigration appeal court, where the appellant is denied entry despite years of living in the UK. Although the judge agrees to her many links to the British society, her case is dismissed because of the possibility of connecting with friends and family through video-chat applications—the virtual body can perform belonging while the physical body is kept outside the borders. This co-creation of the virtual and the material is visualised as a feeling of entrapment in a Moebius strip. The mathematical form of the Moebius strip symbolises the tension between inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, belonging and not belonging. Similarly, in a performance by the Istanbul Queer Art Collective (2019), shredded documents for an application for the Leave to Remain in the UK are turned into Moebius strips; recognising that the shape is "a 'queer' topological phenomenon where there is no border between the outside and the inside" (see Abbey 2022b for a discussion on this performance). The entrapment is made clear in cases of surveillance where elimination is the goal, as portrayed by Ghantous's contribution on the state of surveillance in Palestine in this forum. By foregrounding the joint construction of the data double and the individual, the body can be understood not as something that is merely translated into data, but as something that emerges *concurrently* alongside its interactions with data. Surveillance invites the body into the surveillant assemblage through a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion that sustains a selective social reality. The data double can even correct or guide the body in behaving in certain ways, such as immigrants who will choose a certain accent or mannerism during asylum interviews, run across border zones at twilight to avoid infrared cameras, or fabricate the truth about their sexuality (Abbey 2022a).

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[1] As understood in topology, the Mobius strip is a paradoxical surface where inside and outside fold into one another, undoing any clear boundaries between oppositions to reveal instead a single, continuous topology. As a figure of non-duality, it represents the impossibility of fixing difference into stable partitions.
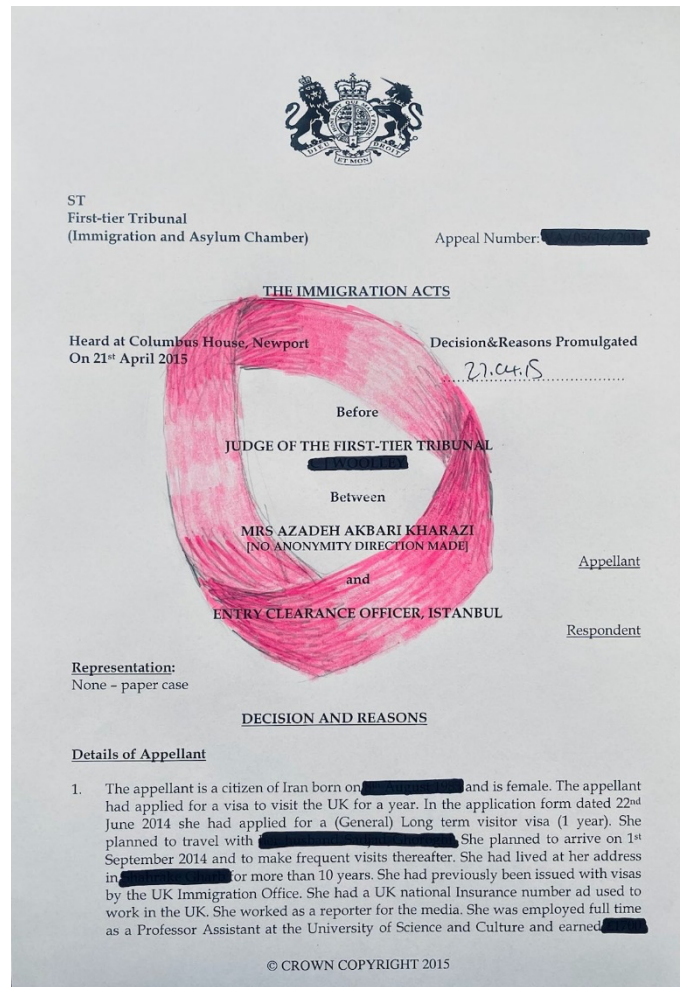
Figure 1: Moebius strip on personal immigration court's verdict. Copyright: Azadeh Akbari, 2022.

Code/Bodies that Matter

The presence of the body within the surveillant assemblage becomes most apparent when we recognise that different bodies have complex, uneven experiences of living under surveillance. Given that violence and oppression do not operate in a homogenous way, it suffices to say there is nothing homogeneous about how surveillance functions either. The unequal treatment of bodies within the surveillant assemblage recognises that abstraction is not a sufficient way to approach the body's presence. In their article, Haggerty and Ericson (2000: 607) highlight the "extension and intensification of surveillance across all sectors of society. While this is true, there is a flattening of surveillance in this statement, as if surveillance were neutrally applied. This overlooks the vast differences in the depth and scope of surveillance used on specific racialised, classed, gendered, sexualised, and disabled bodies, both historically and in the present day.[2] While the surveillant assemblage recognises the connections between different manifestations of surveillance, it does not help us grasp which aspects of the surveillant assemblage are the most intense. Although not all surveillance encounters become known to the individual, those that do can have visceral, disorienting effects. Hence, the power of the surveillant assemblage is unequally distributed and felt, a point not adequately addressed in Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) article. Acknowledging the unfolding, dynamic intensities of the surveillant assemblage can aid our understanding of its potential for violence, given that

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[2] As extensively researched and discussed in several issues of this journal.

there is no equal distribution of power but varying intensities that traverse time and space. The surveillant assemblage may theoretically encompass all these temporal and spatial zones, but it is essential for us to recognise that intensity affects the functioning of the surveillant assemblage, meaning different bodies are integrated into the surveillant assemblage in different ways and to different extents. As we shall see next, this is a critical point to consider when recognising that desires against surveillance also inform the surveillant assemblage.

Surveillant Assemblage and Desires Against Surveillance

By acknowledging the unequal treatment of bodies within the surveillant assemblage, we can begin to understand where some of the most forceful critiques of surveillance emerge. This matters because if we accept that individuals are inextricably linked to their data doubles, then desires *against* being surveilled must also form part of the assemblage itself. Ultimately, Haggerty and Ericson (2000) theorised the surveillant assemblage in a way that implied it only contained the unidirectional desire *for* surveillance. Although they briefly mention the psychoanalytic notion of desire as one of lack (see Abbey 2025 for discussion), Haggerty and Ericson (2000: 609) instead draw on Deleuze and Guattari to argue that the surveillant assemblage relies on a specific understanding of desire as "an active, positive force that exists only in determinate systems," "a field of immanence," and "the inner will of all processes and events." They further suggest that "a range of desires now energise and serve to coalesce the surveillant assemblage, including the desires for control, governance, security, profit, and entertainment" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 609). As our previous invitation to stick with the *flows* suggests, we invite the reader to ponder the concept of *desire* here. Abbey (2025), in their exploration of what surveillance studies could gain from the psychoanalytic notion of desire, has argued that the surveillant assemblage assumes the only desire circulating is an active, positive one, motivated mainly by the drive to conduct surveillance. While the surveillant assemblage is not as centralised a model as the panopticon, implying multiple flows, Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) article privileges a one-sided force *for* surveillance. Of course, this approach recognises that surveillance can be used for violent ends, whether to intimidate, coerce, manipulate, or even prompt other forms of violence such as imprisonment, deportation, and murder. Instead of merely invoking the possibility, or fact, of being watched, surveillance serves as a method of power used to subjugate individuals and groups to violence. Hence, the desire for surveillance discussed by Haggerty and Ericson (2000) is indeed a violent one.

Nonetheless, recognising the surveillant assemblage as a host of desires not only for surveillance but also for those that resist it reveals how the assemblage itself is shaped by desiring bodies in friction with surveillance. While Haggerty and Ericson (2000) help us grasp how surveillance operates, it leaves little room to account for practices that seek to disrupt, confuse, or break with surveillance; the article does not address the anti-surveillance frictions permeating the assemblage. These forces often arise from the body, not necessarily as external interruptions or clear signals of dissent, but as internal fractures within the assemblage. The surveillant assemblage is not a closed or coherent totality; it is also shaped by absences, silences, obfuscations, opacities, lies, mistranslations, fabrications, hauntings, and other forms of non-compliance or refusal made possible via the body. These are not always conscious acts of resistance, nor necessarily oriented toward freedom, but they complicate the fantasy of a surveillant assemblage that can facilitate the "disappearance of disappearance" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 619). The surveillant assemblage does not operate solely through control; conflicting desires, disjunctions, and blockages emerge from the individual and its relationship to the data double. Indeed, the resisting, desiring body is not always outside surveillance—it exists within it. This challenges the notion of the surveillant assemblage as a "smooth plane" or "field of immanence" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 609). Instead, the data double is full of "cuts" made possible by the body; the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of how things are connected while differentiated. Understanding the body in this way makes room for something else to emerge—not transcendence to an imagined outside, but a redirection of desire from within the system itself. Thus, the surveillant assemblage is not a totalising power. In contrast, through its attempts to build an accurate profile

of a person, along with their body or desires, the assemblage fosters a reality that can simultaneously be contested by the same source of data, producing the possibility for new emergent assemblages.

Desiring Bodies and Their Politics

Judith Butler's (1993) seminal work on the discursive limits of sex emphasises how discourse forms the *matter* of the body. We built on the important work of feminist scholars to critically examine this body, not as an external source of data readily available for extraction but as a living part of the surveillant assemblage. For the concept of the surveillant assemblage to remain faithful to the scholarship of Deleuze and Guattari, it needs to account for this multidirectional desire, particularly the desire against surveillance, which complicates the idea of its flows moving only in the direction of surveillance. From a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, the focus on data doubles risks producing a kind of striation—underplaying the body's generative force for deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which manifests within and beyond the body itself. In this view, the body is never fully captured by surveillance because it is already a dynamic constellation of flows, affects, and intensities that cannot be erased by an abstraction into data. Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) concept of the "Body without Organs" (BwO) most clearly names this capacity for transformation and resistance that emerges from the body itself. Rather than marking a loss of embodiment, the data double can be understood as one of many expressions of the body within an ongoing process of becoming. How can this play out in practise? Within Indigenous and marginalised data collectives and data justice campaigns, it is already claimed that "data and bodies are commensurate" and that recognising this can provide "leverage for advocacy of marginalised communities in particular" (de Souza and Taylor 2025: 5). The political capacity for taking account of bodies in the datafication processes is missing from Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) original conceptualisation of the surveillant assemblage. For the concept to reach its full potential, it must take account of the fact that the body continues to generate divergences, refusals, and unpredictable lines of flight that facilitate political action from within the surveillant assemblage itself.

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