Securing Suspicion:
The Visual Economies and Vigilant Subjects of the US Security State

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Introduction

Haunted by the figure of insecurity and disorder, the contemporary US security state is increasingly asking and recruiting citizens to be vigilant in observing and reporting “suspicious activities.” Central to this project is the fusing together of organized campaigns of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other public safety agencies that ask subjects to be the “eyes and ears” of the state. For instance, in 2010 the DHS adopted from the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (NYMTA) a high-profile public relations campaign called “If you see something, say something.” This program utilizes Public Service Announcements (PSAs) such as Hollywood-esque video commercials, glossy print advertisements, posters and flyers, and various reporting methods such as phone hotlines and cell phone applications. The point is to encourage US citizens to identify and report people, things, or activities deemed “out of place” so that the authorities might better “secure” what DHS refers to as “hometowns” and “the homeland.” Authorities in Los Angeles, California have developed a similar program called iWatch. Likewise, the Kentucky Office of Homeland Security has launched the “Eyes and Ears on Kentucky” campaign, not unlike the “Eyes on Laredo” police campaign in Texas – both of which has designed and created an iPhone app so that citizens can more easily report their suspicions of terrorism and crime as they go about their day. In addition, the US Army has recently launched the iSalute program that encourages soldiers to report “suspicious activity” within their own ranks.

As a particular “technology of security” (see Ochs, 2011) that aims to produce vigilant, not docile, subjects, the DHS’s “If you see something, say something” campaign is but one
important example of what Louise Amoore (2007) has called the “vigilant visualities” and “watchful politics” of the so-called war on terror, that is often said to be an ongoing, endless, project of security. Interestingly, a cursory overview of this campaign, and really similar campaigns mentioned above, highlights how it often conflates routine criminality such as drug and property crimes with domestic and international terrorism. This conflation of identified transgressions exemplifies what Allen Feldman (2004) calls “securocratic wars of public safety” that help to reproduce state power through the circulation of a perpetual fear and suspicion that merge criminal transgression into enemies of war. Indeed, campaigns such as “If you see something, say something” are undoubtedly circumscribed by the logics of security and “public safety” that fuse together state power with citizen subjectivity and agency. As one campaign exclaims, “Help us keep you safer.” Importantly though, these state discourses and images are often parodied by activists and social media artists, such as a group of biracial artists that have produced t-shirts reading, “If you fear something, you will see something!” – pointing out how state security discourses also fabricate much of the insecurity and fear they claim to relieve, address, and “secure.”

With this in mind, the SJRP-funded research project briefly discussed below critically interrogates the links between the fetish of security (see Neocleous, 2008), suspicion, state power, and everyday vigilance discourse as embodied in the “If you see something, say something” campaign. To do this, I originally proposed to pay particular attention to the ways in which 1) the category of “suspicion” is constructed by the state, which is also to say the way that spectres of insecurity and threats are constructed and circulate, and 2) the specific, empirical articulations – discourses, images, and grounded practices – these citizen vigilance projects deploy to suture the liberal subject to the state regime. Could it be that forging citizens into the
“eyes and ears” of the state, the security apparatus, who often claims to be “the knowing subject” (Neocleous 2003), is ostensibly admitting a certain ignorance, “unknowing,” and hence limit to its own capability to secure insecurity? Yet if this is so, might it also be true that through the security state’s admission of its own limits to seeing and knowing, the state simultaneously bolsters its own power by inducing fears of insecurity and disorder and hence legitimates its own “securing” response? – while in the process aiming to produce subjects that not only “see” for the state, but actually come to “see” like or as the state (see Scott 1998).

Yet somewhat unsurprisingly once my research and more detailed exploration of these questions and issues developed around the DHS vigilance campaign, new questions and problems arose and became intriguing and worthwhile of my consideration. Such is the nature of exploratory research. With that said, I do think that my original questions have remained central to this still in-progress research project. Nevertheless, I would like to briefly outline the current status of the research and outline the two writing projects that have developed out of this SJRP-funded research. I would like to be clear that at the time of this writing, the writing stages of the project are still in-progress and yet to be completed. But just as my last SJRP-funded grant produced a published article on the politics of the police use of military drones, I anticipate that the most current SJRP-funded grant project that this report refers will also produce publishable work – at least that is the ultimate goal. Specifically, I am currently in the process of plotting, framing, and continuing to write on two articles that have resulted from the grant funding. To each I will now briefly discuss and outline.

**Suspicion, Vigilance, and the Hunt**

The first article that is being mapped out and worked on is attempting to situate the “If you see something, say something” campaign as a particular technology of the “manhunt.” Here
I have been influenced by the recent work of Gregoire Chamayou’s (2012), *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*. In short, Chamayou (2012) identifies the concrete, historical, and practical hunt for humans by humans as a particular relation of domination where a hunter pursues and chases a human prey. I have become increasingly interested in the logic of the hunt and the ways in which it structures the power of the liberal democratic state, particularly as a technology of security and police power in the service of class domination. But whereas Chamayou (2012) situates his fascinating discussion of the hunt in historical contexts, I am interested in situating the hunt in more contemporary terms. How does the “manhunt” structure the operation of state power, or police power, in contemporary capitalist society? And here it is important that by “manhunt” I am not referring to simply the popular spectacles of the hunt, such as the pursuit of Osama bin Laden, but also the much more mundane, everyday hunts that police power enacts daily: the pursuing of fleeing suspects, the patrolling that scans the alleys and streets for “deviants” or “suspects,” the surveillance technologies used daily, and many more examples could be discussed.

Therefore, my current work-in-progress article from the SJRP-funded grant is exploring this idea of the hunt as it takes shape in the DHS everyday vigilance campaign and more generally the logics of suspicion and security that animates this campaign. That is, the logic of suspicion as it is animated in this security vigilance campaign can usefully be situated as a particular emanation of the state’s hunt for bodies deemed, by the citizen and the state, threatening and risky. Here we see the state as not the only hunting subject, but the state sanctioning citizens-as-hunters. In this light, the citizen and state merge in the logic of not only vigilance, but of hunting for actual human bodies deemed “security risks.” Yet the “If you see something, say something” campaign also stresses to its citizenry that if they do in fact see
“something suspicious” that they are only to report their suspicions to authorities and then let the authorities investigate further. The citizen, then, becomes the scout, and the state the official body that actively tries to “capture” identified prey.

This notion that this DHS campaign might usefully be understood as a project of the state hunt is demonstrated nicely in the state’s response to a particular tragedy. Soon after the bombing of the Boston Marathon in April, 2013, President Obama went on national television and pleaded to the US public to work with the authorities in identifying and locating those responsible. The authorities, Obama stated, “will remain vigilant” by conducting “appropriate security measures to protect the American people.” Yet he simultaneously admits that security authorities can only do so much, and that the public must aid the authorities by also being vigilant: “And this is a good time for all of us to remember that we all have a part to play in alerting authorities — if you see something suspicious, speak up.” Here, Obama is not only clearly evoking the “If you see something, say something” campaign; he is also firmly locating this logic in the context of a concrete, actualized “manhunt.” Therefore, this particular work-in-progress paper plans to engage this particular hunt and the ways suspicions, security, police power, and everyday vigilance were mobilized in response to the bombings. Yet the paper is not just focusing on the Boston case. That is, the goals is to simply use this case as a way to discuss more broadly the ways that the logic of the hunt circumscribes the routine, non-spectacular implementation of the DHS campaign. The case of Boston, I want to suggest, only crystallizes more starkly, and therefore remains a diagnostic moment, to understand the way hunting logics are at the heart of the “If you see something, say something” campaign. In addition, this article also plans to briefly contextualize this DHS campaign within a larger genealogical investigation.
of similar state hunting efforts: watchmen, snitching, wanted posters, hue and cry, community-policing partnership discourse, and vigilance committees during Reconstruction, for example.

Currently, this first planned writing project is still in-progress but I hope to have the writing finished no later than summer of 2014. I also hope to present this work-in-progress at an academic conference.

**Suspicion, Police Power, War Power: Drones Abroad and Policing At Home**

As I discussed in the previous section, I originally proposed an exploratory study that focused solely on the DHS's "If you see something, say something" campaign. However, I have also been pursuing a second writing project. Put another way: the original project idea of researching the DHS vigilance campaign has taken me in an unexpected but I think fruitful and stimulating direction. Once I started to really examine this particular campaign my interests really started to broaden towards the ways the categories of "suspicion" and "suspect" animate the politics of security more generally and in different ways than the vigilance campaign. As I collected and analyzed materials related to the DHS campaign, it became more and more clear to me how extremely important suspicion and its figure of the suspect are in the operation of state power “abroad and at home.” Therefore, I started to think more critically about suspicion as a technology of security as a theoretical problem in itself.

Out of this broadening of my interests to the state’s deployment of suspicion more generally, then, has come an incomplete and work-in-progress draft of a paper. This paper explores the ways that US drone warfare "over there" and US domestic police power is linked together through the category of suspicion and its figure of the suspect. That is, this particular project is considering the ways that both war power abroad and police power at home merge and mirror each other, and one way this happens, at least as I have come to understand it recently, is through suspicion. The cultural politics of suspicion, I think, is one particularly fruitful way of
drawing together disparate sites of state violence – the spectacular and the banal and the domestic and the foreign. My goal, then, is to unpack the suspicion inscribing targeted drone assassinations alongside the routine suspicion animating domestic police power. I want to suggest that the suspicion productive of drone violence abroad gains its cultural and political force from the very language, categories, and logics circumscribing routine police power at home.

Put another way: the drone violence of the so-called state of exception and the “normal,” routine, “unexceptional” violence of the domestic police mirror each other in ways that might not be readily apparent without first laying side by side the ways each technology organizes and mobilizes suspicion in the service of security – hence this paper is trying to do this work. Despite ostensible appearances suggesting radical differences, targeted drone killings in places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia share many of the logics, tactics, and technologies inscribing routine police power in US cities: broad discretionary deployment of suspicion, little legal accountability, and classed and racialized logics of targeting and profiling. I am actually suggesting in this piece that a little discussed issue in military drone politics is that the police category of "suspect" structures targeted drone killings, and hence drone warfare is very much a project executed in the name of the police power.

To take but just one example just alluded to: the targeting logics animating drone killings abroad is anticipated by the routine police targeting of “suspects” of color inhabiting inner-city communities across the United States. For instance, to those doing the suspecting, being a military-aged male in Pakistan becomes quite literally a suspicious characteristic, regardless of any other evidence that this person might be linked to “anti-American” activity. This particular “signature” of suspicion only multiplies or strengthens when there are a group of military-aged
males. Interestingly, it has been reported that officials close to the drone attacks have joked that a group of Pakistani boys doing “jumping jacks” can easily be construed as a “terrorist training camp.” Usefully, we can juxtapose this creation of terror suspects with the popular notion of the “usual suspects” in terms of routine police power where the figure of the black male or a group of black males congregating on a street corner becomes signals to grant police justification for intervention – since, of course, this group might be a “gang,” “drug dealers,” or just generally “up to no good.” As Robin D. Kelly (2013) recently wrote, “What are signature strikes if not routine, justified killings of young men who might be Al-caeda members or may one day commit acts of terrorism? It is little more than a form of high-tech racial profiling.” Obviously, my project is engaging and trying to develop further Kelly’s provocative suggestion.

In both drone killings and routine policing, suspicion is often formed through a geographical imaginary that acts on the conviction that suspects primarily inhabit particular spaces or locales. As attested to by the countries where the US practices targeted killings, the drone programs of either the CIA or Pentagon extends an already operative neocolonial, racial animus at the core of US military imperialism. Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, are lumped together through an Orientalist logic that understands these diverse countries as homogenously backwards, uncivilized, and inherently violent. Of course, this is not all that different from police understandings of the inner city and other spaces with disenfranchised populations. Here the notion of policing “hot spots” or “high crime areas” configure the unmanned targeting of military-aged males in “known” spaces spawning terrorists. As the New York Times has reported concerning Obama expanding the definition of “militant” to “military-aged male,”

Counterrorism officials insist this approach is one of simple logic: people in an area of known terrorist activity, or found with a top Qaeda operative, are probably up to no good.
‘Al Qaeda is an insular, paranoid organization – innocent neighbors don’t hitchhike rides in the back of trucks headed for the border with guns and bombs,’ said one official, who requested anonymity to speak about what is still a classified program (Becker and Shane, 2012).

From this it is hard not to see how this same logic circumscribes the policing of the urban “ghetto” and other outcast geographies, as demonstrated by simply changing the phrase to reflect domestic policing logics: “people in an area of known crime/drug/gang activity, or found to be associated with others engaged in crime/drugs/gangs, are probably up to no good. Innocent neighbors don’t ride in the same vehicle as criminals, druggies, and gangbangers’, said one police official.” The above two paragraphs are just a portion of the ideas I am developing in this work-in-progress.

Ultimately, what I am trying to suggest in this work-in-progress is that the military drone and its targeted assassinations are not necessarily an exceptional event, it might be an exceptional technology or a nascent use of this technology, but it is animated by much more mundane, administrative, and normalized logics of police power. Here the legal, targeting, and security logics of the drone become logical extensions of police logic exercised daily in the United States. The argument I am trying to make, then, suggests that we have to be careful that the drone is seen as an exception or a radical break from what is normal – especially for those disenfranchised US populations that live daily “under suspicion.” This notion of exceptional violence of the drone, then, could be send to obscure what is an equally violent domestic police power that is animated by broad discretionary powers of suspicion. Case in point: Since 2002, US drones have killed approximately 3000 “suspected terrorists” and 800 civilians, according to many estimates. Interestingly, just over the last 2 years, according to FBI statistics, US police officers have “justifiably” killed approximately 2000 US citizens. The category of suspicion and its figure of “the suspect,” then, is one of the primary ways the state operationalizes and
codifies relations of domination both locally and globally. At least these are the arguments I am currently trying to develop, and largely due to the fabulous funding of the SJRP.

Thankfully, in May I was fortunate enough to present a working draft of this paper at the Cultural Studies Association (CSA) in Chicago. At least from my vantage point it seemed my ideas were well received by the other participants and audience members. I am hoping to have this paper completed by the end of summer 2014.

References


