Managing the "Global" Crowd: Amazon Mechanical Turk and the
Discipline of the Virtual Worker

implications of "Turking," I first argue for a rethinking of Appadurai's representations of a flowing globality that would more closely investigate the masked material relations of an increasingly fetishized abstract and diffuse virtual by instead focusing on place and subjects as mediated through and constitutive of the virtual marketplace. Second, by comparing and contrasting some of the (dis)continuities of the managerial methods between Taylorist-inspired

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lingo from the Turker forums have surfaced on the Internet, deepening the channels of capitalization on this expanding market. Also occupying a key role in this growth are the industries of knowledge production. Some behavioral social sciences and advertisers are tapping into Turker productivity as a source for survey completers to rapidly and cheaply produce massive swaths of data (Palacci et. al, 2010),[iii] while others study the reliability of Turk-derived information (Kittur, et. al 2008, Buhrmester et. al 2011). In an ongoing, indirect labor dispute, some academics publish on managerial strategies and technologies to implement for the efficient improvement of AMT (Dow and Klemmer 2011), while others publish and circulate

requires more qualitative depth in the future beyond these crude survey empirics for further contextually embedded investigations of such questions of "Turker" as identity category, gendered labor and AMT, or changing temporal experiences.

TURKING BODIES IN THE WORLD

AMT exists along a unique intersection of the "ethnoscape" and the "technoscape," one that complicates Appadurai's representations of global flows. In his global imagination, Appadurai maps a present landscape of persons, the "ethnoscape" marked by the increased capacity for mobile human bodies to intricately navigate through kinship, labor, national, and filial networks to form emergent social relations through newly created interactions that are constituted by "the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move" (1996: 52). He similarly describes the dispersal of information channeling technologies across the globe, the "technoscape," as a rapidly intensifying phenomenon that enables the projection of a data-laden field across the world. AMT, however, offers a reworking of the ethnoscape by exploring the possibilities of the development of a labor market that utilizes a turbine not merely fueled by the smooth flow of *bodies*, but by the abstract data-form of alienated labor power, shorn from the earth to circulate along virtual vectors. By developing a centralized virtual hub for workers to sell their labor power remotely, AMT gives thousands of employers access to the labor power of hundreds of thousands of Turkers without having to build the infrastructure to house their physical presence. In this "disjuncture" the technoscape obscures and organizes the ethnoscape by sequences of code and shiny interfaces that promise a "global connectivity" such that "microwork employers can imagine themselves as technologists and innovators engaged in non-hierarchical peer production" instead of "managers of global data factories" (Irani 2013: 2).

This presentation of AMT's productive capabilities as highly global offers a complication of what Appadurai calls "production fetishism." Claims of a distinction, for Appadurai, between

"globally" and "locally" produced goods deceptively mask the dialectical relationships of production between all local spaces and agents to the global flows and all flows to local agents of actualization (1997: 58-9). Yet instead of employing a rhetoric of illusory locality, AMT is expressly "global" in scale and presents itself as detached from any particular place, with its homepage boasting of the "access to a global, on-demand, 24 x 7 workforce" it provides to Requesters. In this case the abstract manifestation of the fragmented assembly line, detached

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mutually-constituting roles in the global systems of value and subject production. The task for further analysis, in investigating the cross-border motion of AMT, becomes addressing the challenge of uncovering the sorts of cultural and political-economic forces that channel Indian and American workers into these hyper-precarious, hyper-temporary low-wage employments. How do the changing geographies of technological relay networks alter the machinations of production under capitalism and how does this affect the formation of subjectivities?

THE IRON DISCIPLINE OF THE CLOUD

While the technologies and interface of AMT's abstracted labor-commodity appear new, much of the core logic draws upon long histories of capitalism's management and discipline of labor productivity, demonstrating the arrhythmic, non-linear movement of capitalist development. Capitalism, it seems, does not make clean breaks with eras past, but rather is constantly recuperating and reiterating a variety of managerial tactics of labor extraction. AMT channels a global connectivity between Requesters and Turkers to maximize the efficiency of

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perform in accordance the norms expected of them by the employers; their livelihood depends upon it.

AMT, despite lacking a physically disciplinary space of enclosure, has used virtual techniques to surveil and manage labor. On AMT, worker hierarchies are measured, mapped and collected for Requesters through the form of an overall "quality rating" for the Turker. Whenever a Turker completes a task, the work is sent to the Requester, who, before paying the Turker, decides whether to accept or reject the work. If accepted, the Turker receives payment as promised and the Requester keeps the product of labor. If rejected, the Turker is *not* paid, a mark is added to their record of performance, and the Requester still keeps the product of labor. This system keeps the worker at the mercy of the Requester, whose unchecked juridical power to accept or reject the work they receive gives them the opportunity to unaccountably smite the rating of the Turker. For every rejection a Turker must tediously complete hundreds of accepted HITs to salvage and maintain their rating if they hope to be eligible to complete the higher paying, "quality controlled" tasks. Oftentimes, completed tasks are being coded in such high volumes by Requesters that the cold enunciation of rejection has left the realm of the human and is carried out by prefabricated algorithms.

FLEXIBILE DISCIPLINE

An analysis of Turking that reduces the phenomena to merely a high-tech re-instantiation of Taylorist scientific management seems to miss much of the complexity of the emergence of crowdsourced microtasking. Particularly interesting about the AMT module that defies this reductionism is the strong rhetoric of flexibility and self-determination that undergirds its representational strategies. Turking can thus be characterized as free labor ideology *par excellence,* in which each laborer theoretically has full autonomy over when they work, how they

work, and where they work (so long as it has internet) thanks to the diversifying abilities of AMT. Common mantras circulated by promoters of AMT highlight the chance to "be your own boss," the opportunity for mothers to earn some pocket change while their child swings on the monkey bars, and the freedom brought on by being able to do paid work in your pajamas (Ballard and Webster 2008: 137). All of these sentiments appear antithetical to the efficient Taylorist regimentation of microtasks and the production of a "mindless body" that is disciplined into an "unconscious habit of the worker" (Pun Ngai 2005: 83).

AMT wraps itself within two distinct but related stories of flexibility, the first for the Requesters, and the second for the Turkers. Digital crowdsourcing is providing the employers across industries unprecedented access to a flexible workforce, hired for moments, perhaps even seconds, to complete hyper-specific tasks in rapid response to consumer demand. Kalleberg (2000), who has diligently charted the changing trajectory of worker-employer relationships over time, notes that along with the shift away from manufacturing in the US towards a dominance of service, finance, and real estate industries comes a tendency to employ temporary workers and private contractors. She observes, "Contracting saved costs especially when used for activities done by an organization's non-core workforce. They reasoned that there is little reason to pay high wages to workers who are easily monitored and replaced, or who perform work….that is peripheral to an organization's main activity" (2000: 351). In an explicit confirmation of this calculation, during a recent interview, CEO Lukas Biewald of CrowdFlower, a rival crowdsourcing company inspired by the success of AMT, articulated concisely the acceleration of this exact principle allowed by crowdwork: "Before the Internet, it would be really difficult to find someone, sit them down for ten minutes and get them to work for you, and then fire them after those ten minutes. But with technology, you can actually find them, pay them the tiny amount of money, and then get rid of them when you don't need them anymore" (Marvit 2014).

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The promise of a centralized and scalable workforce, whose constitution as such ensures cheap production costs by keeping wages low through an overabundance of laborers, offers Requesters the alluring potential of competitive participation in the global market.

Like the under- and un-employed Turkers mentioned above, flexible waged hours are offered to workers struggling with precarious employment brought on by the fluctuations of a rapid and increasingly fluid international market. The necessity for work at nearly any wage becomes a reality for many laborers. As Bourdieu notes, this changes the workers' ability or even desire to organize and resist the high levels of exploitation, as "work becomes a rare commodity, desirable at any price, which puts employees at the mercy of employers, who exploit and abuse the power this gives them" (Bourdieu 1999: 84). This sentiment is often confirmed in the ways that Turkers discuss the possibility of regulation of the pay rates on AMT as being opposed to their interests, worrying that regulatory interventions run the risk of causing the Requesters to flee the market, taking the wages with them (Martin, et. al 2014: 9). It is this relegation to the "non-core workforce" of the contracted laborer that gives Turkers little leverage to change their present conditions. The diversity of reasons why people Turk, the geographically separated work "place," and the anonymity of the Turkers leaves little room for the development of strong senses of solidarity among workers, making collective action nearly impossible and even undesirable. All of these details ensure the docility of a workforce without the need of the

unemployment. Perhaps what must remain *inf*

The "flexible" labor market of AMT is so deeply imbued with the consumptive language of choice that it may require a reworking of Appadurai's notion of the "fetishism of the consumer" (1996: 59) to parse through. Appadurai sketches out a particular symptom of late capitalism in which the consumer is re-sold the image of consumption through a rhetoric of choice that valorizes the ability to consume as agency. The consumer *as such* consumes consumption, obscuring any positive notion of agency through production. AMT's rhetoric of self-determining *production,* however, seemingly avoids the fetishism as articulated by Appadurai while still employing a choice rhetoric. The worker power promised by AMT is quickly revealed to be hollow, however, for the Turkers do not own the fruits of the labor, they do not even know for whom they are working or even what they are working on beyond the microtasks they are given. Just as "the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser" (Appadurai 1996: 59), the Turker as private contractor is nudged to believe that they are a producing, self-determining actor when at best they are choosing between equally menial tasks, whose process of completion are predetermined, and whose skilled savvy in creation is concealed.[v] In this rethinking, one consumes the image of oneself producing as a "free agent," gen-45.2 (a)sre of

infrastructure whose lightning data transfer belie their own existence. Similarly, rhetoric that overly touts the "globalness" of "flows" of capital is misleading and instead should be carefully modified to represent forms of travel as perhaps more accurately moving between discrete competing and collaborating relay points that entrench themselves with use. A

they are left little respite from the coercive ideologies of financial self-reliance. One is always a mere click away from clocking back into the factory. Mechanical Turk and its crowdsourcing siblings are crucial objects of study if we are to understand the morphing dynamics of what work means today within the spatio-temporal axes of globalizing capitalism.

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[i] Some tasks are being advertised on AMT so that a pattern of input from the turkers can be coded into an algorithm for a computer to use in the future. In this way many of the turkers are working towards their own obsolescence.

[ii] "The Site is arranged, sponsored, and managed by Amazon Mechanical Turk in the state of Washington, USA. The laws of the state of Washington govern this Agreement and all of its terms and conditions, without giving effect to any principles of conflicts of laws" (Amazon Participation Agreement, 2012)

[iii] A rumor has recently been brought to my attention that Reed's psychology department uses AMT for collecting cost-effective survey data.

[iv] "Thus there is the possibility some respondents may have given purposefully false answers.