

## ***The Subject Project: Human Visibility, Vulnerability, and Diversity amidst Proxy Discrimination in the Data Age***

### **Abstract**

Using a combination of approaches from critical theory, data science, and data ethics, my upcoming monograph *The Subject Project: Human Visibility, Vulnerability, and Diversity in the Data Age* investigates 1) how human subjects view themselves and are conscious of being viewed by data systems and 2) how to mitigate the impact that this has, particularly on vulnerable populations. *The Subject Project* maintains that specific conditions of visibility and invisibility make each of us (but some much more so than others) vulnerable to being compelled to see what we hold to be special about ourselves projected with unsettling accuracy into the future by impersonal algorithms which have major social and political consequences.

*The Subject Project* thus builds on perspectives from critical theory like those of Michel Foucault regarding the emergence in the industrial age of self-monitoring, self-policing, self-disciplining, self-conscious subjects being formed by the gaze of others in society's "virtual panopticon." Now, with the advent of the data age, the human subject has also become a project, i.e., a projection. However, much like subjection leads to disparate impact on particularly visible and vulnerable subjects, diverse populations are projected as data in ways that lead to real harm. How so?

Consider how machines learn correlations in multi-dimensional datasets and flatten them into simpler human readable projections in domains like finance, medicine, and law enforcement. Even if a noxious category (e.g., race and/or sexual orientation) is removed from databases, there are often proxies in public sources sufficient to make predictions of an extensionally defined population who just happen to be...all of the same minority category. Data proxies can, and already are, being used, to guide actions and policies harmful to minority groups and further entrenching disadvantage. This is like updating America's "Jim Crow" laws with digital "Jim Code."

Accordingly, I call for policies prohibiting digital segregation using proxy categories. Just because artificial intelligence can evade established laws by projecting and predicting typically protected demographic and financial information without making use of forbidden data, hard-won anti-discrimination protections *must not* be diminished *ever*.