Book Review

Gates, Kelly A. 2011. *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance*. New York: New York University Press
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On being invited to review *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance*, by University of California's Kelly Gates, I carefully considered the prospect since I initially thought that a person better aware of the intricacies of the functioning of surveillance systems in the United States would be best placed to pen a critical commentary. On the other hand, what citizen actually *does* know about the fine details of how these monitoring systems function? The issues Gates explores in her five-chapter text provide sobering insights on possible answers to this question. The book invites reflection on the extent to which what we say, do, and, indeed, what we look like — the analytic focus of this book — all come into the realm of governmental regulation.

Gates has produced an analysis and social critique of the connections between technology, politics, government, and industry in the contemporary United States, with emphasis on the post-September 11, 2001 context. Gates explicates the evolution, design, and empirical applications of facial recognition technology as a tool comprised of myriad social practices aimed at monitoring, identifying, regulating and controlling the citizenry. The book is framed by the two-part argument that (a) talks back to the normative claim that there is a universal way of seeing and understanding the human face, and that, (b) the development of automated face recognition technologies is the inevitable next step in the evolution of computer science research and development.

To support her central argument, Gates draws on her own analysis of people's interactions with various social media texts. She also engages with a range of theoretical resources, including the works of media theorist David Golumbia, literary critic Katherine Hayles, sociologist of science Bruno Latour, sociologist of communications Vincent Mosco, and philosopher Michel Foucault. *Our Biometric Future* contributes to the field of communication studies, and there are further linkages with social media, science and technology, cultural policy, practice and critique, and surveillance studies. Readers interested in considering how social processes, political imperatives, and inequities are embedded and reproduced within technical systems, and how technological research and development interact to shape policy-making and political processes, will gain understandings from reading *Our Biometric Future*.

The first three chapters are organized around descriptions of the various uses that institutional actors within government, private industry, and research institutions make of facial recognition technology in the United States. These include banking, finance, credit card, motor vehicle, prisons, welfare offices, and border and immigration control systems. Gates examines how automated facial recognition technologies were historically conceptualized and designed to serve institutional priorities in the United States in the

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1980s when neoliberal decision-making was gaining traction. Biometric identification was promoted as supporting and enabling the need for more intense scrutiny, identification, and surveillance networks across geographical and organizational sites; a need that Gates shows was fabricated in the interests of particular groups.

Chapter two of *Our Biometric Future* is the closest thing to fieldwork findings that Gates offers her readers. Herein we learn some colorful details about video surveillance of the streets of Ybor City, Florida (a system that ultimately failed due to numerous unresolved problems). The objects of scrutiny here are the pedestrians circulating in the streets of this urban center as they conduct their daily lives. Through the use of direct quotations we come into contact with the experiences of a range of actors involved with video surveillance including police and citizens of Ybor City. This case study provides compelling evidence to show how “new surveillance technologies represent sites of struggle over the extent and limits of police power and over appropriate forms of governance” (p. 66).

The preoccupation (or, rather, obsession) with facial recognition technology in the post-September 11, 2001 context of the United States is examined in chapter three. Here, Gates challenges, unpicks, and refutes the claim advanced by industry, government, and research constituencies that such technologies are technically neutral. She points out how and why such groups would have citizens of the United States believe otherwise. To build this argument, Gates weaves a narrative through an investigation into features of the “cultural logic” and “practical politics” that frame facial identification technology and derived practices (p. 101).

Writing with a dose of irony and good humor, in chapter four Gates looks at the various ways citizens use facial recognition technology in their use of social media in everyday interactions with their home computers and personal devices. It is here that the internet-using reader beyond the borders of the United States can likely make a personal connection with the text. She/he is presented with the opportunity to pause and consider her/his *own* uses, and thus largely unwitting participation in, the ideological work of technology systems diffused by companies such as Google, MyFaceID, and MyHeritage, among others. One such form of work consists of habituating citizens in “playful and seemingly innocuous forms of experimentation of new web software,” which introduces facial recognition systems into people’s lives and institutionalizes them through people’s acceptance (p. 146). Gates shows how industry invents or “makes up” the people who will use facial recognition technologies through people’s *own* labor (p. 161). As she puts it: “Social networking and photo sharing sites are ideal laboratories for recruiting an army of well-trained ‘technicians’ to engage in the tedious mental labor of photo tagging” (p. 144).

The development of automated facial *expression* analysis, which Gates explicitly distinguishes from facial recognition technology, is the focus of the book’s fifth chapter. The former is defined as “the effort to program computers to recognize facial expressions as they form on and move across our faces” (p. 152). Technical details of how facial expression analysis is coded by programmers, and the social consequences of this technology, are explored through Gates’ consideration of ethical and philosophical problems posed by the technological foray into human heads through the portal of the face. Not least among these problems are the transformations that invariably occur — and the assumptions and claims made — about how we can see and know people.

Our Biometric Future is not without its structural problems. The choice to rely so heavily on endnotes is unfortunate for readers who do not take the considerable time necessary to inspect pages 201 to 240 where notations are provided. This writing convention likely deprives readers of valuable points Gates takes care to develop — putting this well researched and thought-provoking book outside the grasp of a general readership. Following the same logic, the choice to nominalize many verbs that are key to understanding Gates’ analysis obscures human agency in the same way she critiques technology of doing. Some critical ethnographic fieldwork to extend Gates’ arguments, and, valuably, to strengthen the empirical basis for her claims, would be a very interesting next step in Gates’ research in this area.