Book Review

Magnet, Shoshana Amielle. 2011. *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race and the Technology of Identity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

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The promises of digital biometric technologies, such as facial recognition or iris scanners, are manifold. Industry and governments promise to find a person's 'true identity' on the basis of bodily traits. They promise, moreover, to provide security, and to smoothen logistic processes without human error and cultural bias about race, gender, class or disability. Such promises raise red flags for many Surveillance Studies scholars. Scholars from various disciplines have argued that biometrics have far-reaching consequences for privacy, bodily integrity, and equal treatment (Van der Ploeg 2012; Norris and Armstrong 1999; Amoores and Hall 2009). In addition, these technologies are often used on vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, and therefore intensify the categorization and control that these groups are subject to (Ball and Haggerty 2005; Lyon 2003).

Shoshana Amielle Magnet engages with this debate, taking feminist science studies as her main source of inspiration. In *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity* she passionately argues that biometrics revives outdated biological notions about race and gender. This argument is developed on the basis of archival materials about the use of biometrics by the (privatizing) United States government. The empirical part of the book starts out with a critical review of the science behind biometric technologies. Next, Magnet presents case studies about the use of biometric scanners by prisons, welfare agencies, and the U.S.-Canada border authorities. In her final empirical chapter she examines representations of biometrics in the U.S. media. Magnet contributes significantly to the literature by explicitly placing biometrics in a tradition of identification practices that claim to produce truth by reducing bodies to code, using essentialist notions of gender and race. But her most relevant contribution to Surveillance Studies, I want to suggest here, is her analysis of failing technologies.

Structural failure is at the core of Magnet's analysis of the consequences of biometrics for inclusiveness and equality. This is a refreshing take on the topic, and it instructs Surveillance Studies scholars to pay more attention to failure, empirically as well as conceptually. Although there are notable exceptions (see for example, Dubbeld 2005), authors often implicitly assume that technologies function in accordance with their producers' promises (examples are, but are not limited to, Lyon 2003; Amoores 2008). As a consequence, failing technologies are exceptions in the surveillance literature.

The first insight on failure that Magnet offers is that biometric failure is 'both endemic and an epidemic' (7). Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of 'corporeal fetishism', Magnet argues that bodies are produced in biometric discourse as 'autonomous things-in-themselves' (4): flattened maps that can be applied in a variety of practices. Because of their supposed truth value, biometric data have become

valuable commodities. Magnet contends that biometrics technologies are destined to fail, however, since bodies are lively, situated, and enacted in networks of relationships.

Magnet continues to argue that while biometric technologies cannot effectively identify any body, they are especially bad at identifying ‘othered bodies’; that is, bodies that do not fit the profile of a white male without disabilities. The reason is that scientists rely on simplified and cultured categories that are taken to represent ‘objective phenotypes’ of race and gender. The result is a range of biometric scanners that cannot identify bodies-in-context. For instance, Magnet shows how facial recognition scientists differentiate between male and female faces on the basis of markers such as hair (women have long hair), facial expression (women smile more often), and dress (a necktie or a décolleté). Those persons that the technology cannot identify are marked as ‘sex outliers’ in this line of research. What is more, researchers deny the existence of any other gender categories by contending that the sex outliers will be eliminated with the perfection of the technology. With regard to race, Magnet contends that facial recognition scientists privilege whiteness, as the white body is used as the default category. Research efforts therefore focus on the identification of racialized faces. For instance, Chinese facial recognition scientists have used the notion of a ‘Mongolian race’ to characterize the average Chinese citizen. To define the features of this racial category, they have revived anthropometric methods.

The second insight into failure I highlight here is that it needs to be reconceptualized beyond mechanical error. Any notion of failure should therefore be attentive to the inequalities produced in the discourses that biometrics are part of. Discourses produce realities that are racialized and exclusive, Magnet argues. She claims this, among others, for the case of the U.S.-Canada border (Chapter 4). Since September 11th, 2011, the U.S. national imaginary of Canadians as ‘white, middle-class, non-threatening visitors from the North’ changed (92). Canada was re-imagined as a safe-haven for terrorists, owing to its relatively liberal immigration policies. The border was reconstituted as a place for visualizing threat with the help of biometric technologies. This was a process in which the border was racialized, so contends Magnet, as white Canadian bodies were replaced with ‘brown-skinned threats’ (107).

Although the insight into failure that this chapter offers is valuable, it succeeds to a lesser extent in locating racialization in practices outside of the laboratory, and in identifying how biometrics affect these practices. This in spite of Magnet’s aim to ‘show how limited these technologies remain, through a close analysis of what happens when technologies are applied to everyday human space’ (154). Whereas this is indeed demonstrated for people with mental health disabilities applying for welfare (Chapter 3), the case study about racialization at the border remains ambiguous.

Firstly, Magnet never clarifies how biometrics relates to the racialization of the border. At one point in the chapter, she argues that a racialized discourse paved the ground for the introduction of biometric technologies (124). Biometrics is furthermore argued to legitimize exclusionary practices because it provides an argument for scientific objectivity (122). Elsewhere, Magnet argues that ‘in racializing Canadians and Mexicanizing the border, the industry represents the border as offering up new threats in need of identification’ (125), thereby implying that the biometric industry has introduced notions of race to the discourse. However, and this is my second point, the empirical material in this chapter does not support the latter claim. Magnet presents discourses in newspapers, popular culture, and immigration policies that she does not relate to the activities of the biometric industry. Moreover, in my reading, we only learn of three specific instances in which racial categories of ‘brownness’ and ‘whiteness’ were invoked, of which two are from the same newspaper.

Magnet concludes that ‘biometric technologies bring to life assumptions about bodily identity’ (126), among others with regard to race. My point is not that biometric practices do not involve cultured notions about biological race (that they do is demonstrated in Chapter 1 about biometric science). Also, racialization can be difficult to locate because it is ambiguous and usually not made explicit. Any

argument about racialization in practice should nevertheless attempt to clarify the nature of these processes, and avoid obscuring terminology such as ‘bring to life’.

When Biometrics Fail nevertheless offers a valuable contribution to a field that has not yet fully acknowledged the relevance of discussing ‘failure’. Magnet also convincingly shows how biometric technologies draw on cultured notions of race, gender, class, and disability. She therefore presents an intelligent and no-nonsense study that challenges the myth of biometric success.

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