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Review of 'When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race and the Technology of Identity' By Shoshana Amielle Magnet

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REVIEW

"With this new search technology, bodies are imagined as stable entities that can reliably give us definitive proof of identity, creating processes of social stratification in which 'material and technological infrastructures divide populations by' gender, race, class and other axes of identity. Yet biometric mismatches due to mechanical failures and the technology's inability to work objectively dispute such stability". (p.150)

The expansion of scientific inventions has not only engulfed humankind but has also succeeded in creating new identities. The tapping of human morphological characteristics and encoding them for high security has actually made animate beings insecure in many respects. In contemporary times, we crave for a digitized world often without considering the repercussions, and the aftermath of too much indulgence in technology creates fractures in the identity of the human species.

When Biometrics Fail succeeds in informing the audience about what underlies this evolving technology and its role in assigning identities to human beings. The author, Shoshana Amielle Magnet, has delicately dealt with the issue of science encroaching upon the territory of human rights and classifying people on the basis of race, gender and ethnicity.

The book is founded upon the premise that biometric technology should be renamed identification technology and that it facilitates the perpetuation of inequality. She starts with the failures of biometric technology by focusing on the loss of money involved when systems fail. She points out the fact that biometric technologies are based upon obsolete and flawed assumptions about the biological nature of identities which reproduce existing forms of inequality. She develops her explanation by exploring how 'Soft Biometrics' divides people (who undergo biometric scanners) into categories based on race and gender. Thus the repercussions of representing complex human beings in binary codes include the marginalization of transgendered bodies and mechanized racial profiling. Magnet begins her discussions on biometrics by defining the technology and its merger with culture and human behavior. She suggests that identifying bodies on the basis of race, gender etc. fosters discrimination and often fails to harmonize people of different nations (or even among people sharing the same nationality).

Magnet provides examples in the first chapter that illustrate the failures of biometric technologies in correctly and flawlessly indentifying human bodies into predefined categories. On many occasions, biometrics have failed to correctly encode people according to parameters such as age, physical status etc. The underlying proposition to incorporate everyone in a single one-size-fits-all paradigm was a primary reason for its failure. Thus, the premise that human bodies can be simply compacted into a single and uniform code was faulty.

Subsequent chapters describe the genesis and development of biometrics (the likes of finger printing, iris scanning etc.). The second chapter throws light on how the biometric technology industry generated huge profits by getting involved with the Prison Industrial Complex. In order to recover the enormous amounts of money required for installing such technologies, the biometric industry zeroed in on the prison system, which essentially was presumed the safest haven as it was Government funded. She argues (of course on humanitarian grounds) that the prison was treated as a laboratory where the biometric technologies could be used innumerable times without even asking for the consent of the prisoner, as the latter would be too apprehensive to refuse. The bodies of the prisoners, hence, proved to be just 'valuable commodities' that would provide a testimony to the positive results yielded by the biometric technologies. Magnet expresses concern that instead of gaining a deeper understanding of the prisoners as human beings, biometric technologies have simply reduced them into binary codes to benefit the guards who keep a vigil on them in the prisons.

The third chapter focuses on the profit motives of the biometric industry and describes its drift from law enforcement to the welfare club as purely motivated by monetary concerns. Magnet explains this by noting that in order to expand the profitability of the industry, biometric technologies found a new target; welfare recipients. She sees the underlying benefit of biometrics' entry into welfare as a well-planned motive as it helps in gaining the state as the client. On the other hand, many instances are cited in the chapter that point out the failure of biometric technologies to save the state by eliminating fraud but which instead cut benefits to those in need . Furthermore, she adds that welfare cutbacks did not only serve the purpose of corporate interests but were also related to systematic forms of discrimination related to gender, race, class and disability. Such technologies can fail to take into account of disabilities and the many mental and physical challenges that can result in a failed biometric outcome. She concludes the chapter by showing concern for the utter wastage of scarce resources of the state in funding these highly expensive biometric technologies. By

investing heavily in biometric technology, the state has deprived poorer citizens of the basic minimum needs for survival.

Magnet describes emerging threats to international relations and how biometrics is a significant tool in keeping vigilance against the 'border encroachers'. Citing an example of the post 9/11 milieu in the United States of America, the author explains the use of biometric technology to identify Canadian nationals at border crossings. Suddenly, this once unguarded and unmilitarized border became a terror zone, and a friendly neighborhood changed into an area that people felt apprehensive of.

The fifth chapter of the book focuses on the biometric technologies that disassemble the body into various parts and assigns each with a unique bar code. The current technology does not perceive the human body in a holistic manner. Rather, it forms a collage of different parts each having a separate identity. Magnet also coins an important term *Surveillant Scopophilia* (Scopophilia: pleasure of looking). She explains the term by saying that the new forms of pleasure of looking produced by the biometric technologies, are attached both to the brutal dismembering of the bodies and to pleasure in having anxieties about security resolved by biometric surveillance. The suspect bodies are not only reduced to their component parts but they also lighten the security related anxieties. With reference to Surveillant Scopophilia she suggests that biometric technologies help in guaranteeing security i.e. the scientific images provided by the biometric scanners prove to be reliable enough to identify the threatening bodies (people).

The same chapter also explores how bodies, due to biometric technologies, have become 'see-through' containers. The technology tries to dig out information that can identify the person, including for example Muslim women under the veil. Magnet provides the example of an Afghan girl named Sharbat Gula, whose photograph became internationally famous just because she had blue eyes (which was unusual for Afghans) exactly like Western Europeans. "It's not an identifiable look. It's a sort of a mix. She looks kind of Western and she looks kind of Afghan" (p.141). Her photograph provided a clear illustration of this difference. Biometric technology was considered the best possible tool to invade the space behind her veil and shed light on the spaces of 'pre-modern darkness'.

Gula was not only brought to the laboratory for biometric iris scanning, but in a way was also compelled to unveil and see the light of scientific knowledge. Magnet concludes the chapter by reinforcing that while they claim objectivity in identifying bodies, biometric technologies fail to work in race and gender-neutral ways and that 'supposed neutrality' of the biometric recognition is a myth. As in Gula's case, the experts believed that she could only be re-identified after a gap of 16 years because of her blue-eyes that the iris scanner could detect, which would not have been the possible if she would have had 'oriental' eyes. Her statements, indeed, provide an insight into the infiltration of technology into the cultural membrane and how the former imposes itself onto the latter.

Magnet concludes her book on Biometrics, by highlighting the failure of biometrics not just to be only technological but also social. She states that there are multiple failures associated with biometrics but the significant ones are "unbiometrifiability, misapplication of statistical techniques and misunderstanding of cultural trends" (p.153). As a part of her policy level recommendation, she suggests that the state, instead of investing heavily on biometrics, should prioritize on inclusiveness, equality and alleviation of poverty and misery.