Mapping entry points to the question of racism and technologies of border control

Amin Parsa

(Sociology of Law - Lund University)

To the readers: Here is a much delayed and informal text for our online workshop meeting. It reads as a list of possible entry points rather than anything meaningful in and of itself. It is also quite thin without a comprehensive and detailed reading list and examples to support it. I am working on such a reading list and hopefully will share it when it is finished. For now, take this submission in its particular form as organisation of thoughts and ideas. Read it lightly and generously – especially when it comes to typos and language errors.

The violation and exploitation of bodies in the context of technological control of borders is not a new phenomenon. Nor the overwhelming racialised status of those bodies. Depending on what we consider as technology and how we conceptualise the Nation-State, one can argue that laws of border control in themselves are racial technologies. Here an example can be the well documented case of *Komagata Maru* and the ‘creative’ use of legal instruments by the Canadian government as a means of re-routing and rejecting the legitimate entry of Indian Sikhs to Vancouver.

But distancing from an expansive use of the term technology and temporarily taking the right of a sovereign over its borders with a grain of salt, then we can at least have two ways of organising an overview of the racialised ground upon which border technologies are developed and deployed.

First would be organizing these technologies according to the different sites, in which they are deployed:

* Technologies of border production (Passporting, visa system, barbed wiring etc.)
* Technologies of tracing, surveillance and apprehension of people on the move (Here Eurosur as the system of system used by Frontex is an example: the coming together of various surveillance, communication and intelligence technologies, with algorithmic decision making and an ambition for automation and pre-emption)
* Technologies of registering the moving population (Biometric and fingerprinting technologies, facial recognition technologies etc. These technologies are perhaps the most investigated ones. Not a surprise considering their applicability across all levels of border operations)
* Technologies of credibility assessment (automated lie detecting technologies based on biological and physiological reactions of an interviewee, age assessment medical technologies, accent and language analysis technologies)
* Technologies of decision making (these technologies are growing in different fields regarding sentencing and pre-trail decision making, but also in migration asylum cases, one pioneering State here is Canada – Sweden and Germany are coming up in this field too)
* Technologies of management of the regularized movement (Frequent traveller data registry, smart bordering and smart passports)

The next step is to study how these technologies are contributing to a racialised construction of mobility *a.k.a.* the border regime. But I want to scarp this organisation already. I do not prefer this organisation because it takes a particular conceptualisation of State, travel and movement as natural and its racialised underpinnings as an anomaly.

Another way of organising this subject of study is to focus on the racial organisation of these technologies in order to capture how bordering is a racial technology that deploys variety of technological ‘solutions’ or instruments to that end.

This organisation would look something like this, or at least I imagine it:

1. Border technologies emerge from racial histories - The presence of this historical ‘past’ continues in the type of knowledge and epistemologies produced for the technologies in their early emergences:

* Visual technologies such as photography has been built on racialised assumption of their users. A technological logic that remains operative and is reproduced in the digital technologies of visualisation.
* Biometric technologies and population registry as a means of management of movement developed and expanded in the colonial India and apartheid South Africa.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Similar history can be told for passporting, visa issuing, and barbed wiring – as a technology of encamping. Each of these technologies emerged or became widespread in use, as means of either management of the movement of the undesirable population (the poor, the racialized and the gendered: through forgoing a readable, archive-able and an unchangeable bond between body and document. Pedigrees of which, is in branding and mutilating bodies by the Western colonisers and enslavers) or by a way of animalised containment of the said undesirable population.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Generally, for the whole section, Simone Browne’s book: *Dark Matters: On Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke university Press 2015) is central resource.

1. Border technologies operate on racial assumptions or reproduce and maintain such categories:

* Language and accent analysis technologies are used in order to determine the origin of an asylum applicants by comparing their accent and depth of their vocabulary against data bases of pre-recorded speeches. The obvious problems are the generalization of belonging and origin (e.g. all Syrian’s must speak and sound the same way), and the deterministic idea that one’s way of talking can conclusively reveal one’s origin (and not just being a feature of one’s specific level of education or wealth). However, research has also shown that the said trusted data bases of speech are often outdated and corrupt. These data bases are often originally gathered for a different purpose by linguists and later are repurposed for migratory functions, e.g. A study of pattern of changes in the spoken Arabic of the second-generations living in the USA, gathered by a university would be repurposed for examination of origin of an asylum seeker in 2020, say in Germany.[[3]](#footnote-3)
* Biases of technologies in negatively categorizing racialized population: This appears to be well-established in literature. It appears to be a feature in various decision-making technologies used for law and order purposes; from predictive policing to court room sentencing, and pre-trial detention decisions.
* Age assessment technologies: Similar to the other examples, technologies and medical knowledge produced in this field has racialised biases. The standard body upon which the dental, knee and bone x-rays are juxtaposed to determine the biological age of asylum seekers is White European body. What these technologies can do is to determine, with a low level of certainty, the biological age and not biographical age: excluding different factors, other than basic biology, that affects growth.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* Lie detecting technologies also falls in a similar category. Can be linked to the history and operation of other visual and facial recognition technologies.

1. Beyond their operation and history technologies are producing racial hierarchies in their outcomes. In their world-making ability, technologies of border are racist:

Border regime, in exposing the racialised travelling bodies to digital technologies devalue their life and physical integrity and categorise them as violable.

Much of the technologies of border control are operating through devaluation of the lives and bodies of the racialised travelling bodies. These technologies reduce human bodies into evidence – sites of data extraction, surveillance and tracing – to be used against the subject herself. The circle of devaluation and violence over bodies of the racialised people are completed when self-harm becomes a permeant and developing feature of border transgression. Be it by limiting the possibility of movement to the risks of the sea, be it by directing the movement towards rough terrain and geography, be it the harm that people on the move inflict on themselves in order to prevent their body to be used as evidence against them (think of *harraga here*), all of these are the world-making feature of the above mentioned technologies that tend to create an order of value for lives and bodies.

There are variety of examples to be shared about the link between turning bodies into migratory evidence and the subsequent violence and devaluation of life.

Each technology of border control produced its own means of circumvention: Self-mutilation or burning fingertips with fire, acid or razors to reduce their machine-readability, hiding amongst cargo in cold fridges to reduce thermal detectability, hiding inside cars under scorching sun to reduce heartbeat rate in order to hide from heartbeat detector technologies, injecting oneself with virus such as HIV in order to increase chance of admission[[5]](#footnote-5), etc. All are violence that technologies of border control impose on the racialised traveling population by treating their bodies, not in their integrity, but as a set of loosely gathered and interlinked pieces of evidence readable to machine.

Quite literally then as Anzaldúa has put it, borderland is *‘es una herida where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.’[[6]](#footnote-6)*

1. In their production and development current technological practices are based on a racial order of the world; labour and exploitation in one side, benefits and prosperity on the other side. It must not be forgotten or undermined that much of what is framed as advanced digital technologies, artificial intelligence, machine learning, automated decision making is produced in a process of labour and land exploitation.

So to say border technologies are racial in their context (preserving a particular conception of the Nation-State, a.k.a. migration laws and policies, to begin with), but also in their origin and history (fingerprinting, biometric, photography and digital visual technologies), in their actual production and development (labour exploitation and land extraction), in their assumptions and the actual operation (age assessment, language and accent analysis etc.), in their outcome and their world-making function (reducing bodies to disintegrated bunch of evidence, maintaining the racial hierarchies of movement and labour.

25th May 2020

Malmö

1. See: Keith Breckenridge, *Biometric State: The global politics of identification and surveillance in South Africa* *1850 to the Present* (Cambridge university Press 2014) and Chandak Sengoopta, *Imprint of the Raj: How fingerprinting was born in Colonial India* (Pan Macmillan 2013).  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See: Mahmoud Keshavarz, *The Design Politics of the Passport: Materiality, immobility, and dissent* (Bloomsbury Visual 208)*,* andReviel Netz, *Barbed Wire: An ecology of modernity* (Wesleyan University Press 2004). In this example technology is used both meanings of the word. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Pedro Oliveira, ‘On the Endless Infrastructural Reach of a Phoneme’ Transmediale/Art & digitalculture, Issue #3, 2019. I also suspect similar findings can be explored in rather well-known works of Lawrence Abu Hamdan on politics of listening. This example was not literal but drawn from Oliveira’s work. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gregor Noll, ‘Junk Science? Four arguments against the radiological age assessment of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum’, *International Journal of Refugee Law,* 28:2 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This source is limited to the last example: Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the politics of humanitarianism in France* (University of California Press 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera: The new mestiza* (Aunt Lute books, Fourth edition 2012) p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)