

debates occurring in union circles today. Indeed, this is the crux of the argument: that equity is not just one dimension of the legacy of organized labour, but that it is the core, and that equity must be the central focus of union renewal efforts. In today's grim reality of austerity-driven governments and increasingly hostile and combative employers, it is difficult for labour activists—as well as researchers—to maintain a focus on the broader agenda; the immediate need to respond to the exigencies of front-line struggles often mean labour is reacting to a crisis, not enacting an agenda. Foley and Baker's work helps put this in context, and offers a vital aid to understanding the historical and ongoing centrality of the equity project to the renewal not just of organized labour, but of working life in general.

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## WHEN BIOMETRICS FAIL: GENDER, RACE AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF IDENTITY

Shoshana Amielle Magnet  
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REVIEWED BY VERONIKA  
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Building upon a well-established tradition of considering science and technology as constituted by culture, Shoshana Amielle Magnet problematizes the discourses behind

the expansion of biometrics—technologies that aim at verification and identification by means of using data obtained from measuring bodies through iris and retina scans, digital fingerprinting, and facial recognition. Marketed as perfect tools to reduce human error and eliminate subjective judgement, digital biometrics are being increasingly implemented in the areas of law enforcement, information access, and border security. Magnet, however, calls into question the industry's claims of impartiality of identification technologies by arguing that biometrics are based on outdated, essentialized notions of identity and disproportionately target minority populations.

The notion of biometric failure features centrally in the book, and Magnet unpacks its multiple meanings in the introductory chapters. In a literal sense, identification and verification technologies fail more often than the biometrics industry representatives would like to admit: there are mismatches and false rejections of known subjects as well as possibilities that high-tech devices can be hacked or fooled. On a larger level, biometrics fail to realize their core promises of objectivity, convenience, and reliability. Magnet adopts Donna Haraway's concept of *corporeal-fetishism* to explain how a relentless pursuit to uncover the "inner truth" of identity aims at transforming a body into a knowable, fixed object. The framework of corporeal fetishism allows Magnet to trace how bodies that do not conform to a projected image of a white, able-bodied, and gender-conforming male user are constructed as "inscrutable" and therefore, as having a low economic value in a big business of biometrics. To support her argument, Magnet cites numerous accounts of biometric failures on othered bodies. For example, face scanners sometimes fail to accurately identify people of

color; iris scanners are not designed to accommodate individuals with visual impairments; devices that speed up the flow of passengers in the airport will not work on people in wheelchairs or with certain medical conditions. Biometric systems not only privilege white able bodies, but also assume a strict male/female binary which erases the existence of gender-variant individuals.

After providing an overview of the development of biometric technologies, Magnet critically assesses the three major areas of their use: the prison industrial complex and the welfare system in the U.S., and the security system at the U.S.-Canada border. Operating in a neo-liberal context of moving from rehabilitation to punishment, prisons function as locations of surveillance, allowing biometrics companies to capitalize on the growing rates of incarceration; with no opportunity to opt out, prisoners become convenient test subjects for identification and verification technologies. After having been adopted by prisons, biometrics are making huge profits by expanding into the US welfare system. Magnet reveals how neoliberal political climate enables the biometrics industry to profit from policing poor people during times of continuous cutbacks of social services. Turning to the issue of transformation of the US-Canada border by biometric technologies, Magnet shows how Western anxieties around racialized bodies connect to the interests of biometric companies and the global capital. An overarching argument running through these discussions is that biometrics—underpinned by biases around categories of otherness—criminalize welfare recipients, immigrant and refugees populations, queer people, and people of color.

Of particular interest for Magnet are representations of biometrics in popular culture. Coining the term

*surveillant scopophilia* to illuminate practices of looking enabled by biometric technologies, she critically analyzes narrative elements of science fiction films where technology functions as a tool to control suspect and threatening bodies. Magnet asserts that such films naturalize surveillance technology, thus serving as a convincing argument for real-life uncritical adoption of biometrics by both consumers and policy makers.

Contrary to the advertisements that offer prospects of colour-blind and gender-neutral identification systems that circumvent human biases, biometrics are becoming a part of the problem when they intrude into the lives of vulnerable populations whose bodies are being measured, mapped, digitized, policed, classified, pushed into inadequately narrow categories of identity or erased altogether from the public discourse. Magnet's informative work clearly shows dangers inherent in deterministic visions of simple technological fixes to multifaceted social problems such as racial profiling, discrimination, crime, and poverty. In addition, her argument makes evident a disconcerting gap between advancements in feminist theory that posit gender and race as relational, situated and complex processes, and contemporary scientific practices that still rely on biological categories of identity.

Thoroughly researched and conceptually interesting, *When Biometrics Fail* will be a valuable addition to a wide range of undergraduate and graduate courses on public policy, human rights, social justice, and feminist studies of technology.

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## **FATNESS AND THE MATERNAL BODY: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF CORPOREALITY AND THE SHAPING OF SOCIAL POLICY**

Maya Unnithan-Kumar and Soraya Tremayne, Eds.  
New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011

### **REVIEWED BY LAUREN SHEPHERD**

*Fatness and the Maternal Body: Women's Experiences of Corporeality and the Shaping of Social Policy* is a collection of articles which demonstrate the significance of "fatness" through different cultures. It is the result of a series of workshops and seminars facilitated by the Fertility and Reproduction Studies Group (FRSG) at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology hosted by the University of Oxford in 2006. This collection focuses on cultural socialization and perspectives of "fatness," and their links to reproduction, health risk, obesity, and status. The articles explore data from the United Kingdom, Africa, and India, presenting the differing cultural standards placed on "fatness" of the female body (pre and post-natal), and the direct relationship to obesity, health, social and political status, and wealth. This compilation explores what it means to be "overweight" (socially, culturally, and medically). The editors take care to note that there is unfortunately no discussion of male "fatness", and its effects on reproductive health in this collection, it being a highly under-researched area.

The perspectives of "fatness" that are presented are culturally and socially linked to their country of origin. In the United Kingdom, for

example, the articles depict mothers who are clinically overweight or obese who prefer terminology such as "big boned", and relate their size to genetics. The associated social stigma discussed is that they do not recognize healthy nutrition, are from lower income housing, and will have unhealthy "fat" babies because of their poor dietary routines. The risks of diabetes and low birth weight babies are outlined in these articles also. The overarching medical assessment is that something must be initiated to stop the perpetuation of the obesity cycle. The problem raised is that there is no generic answer as to when an interruption of said cycle serves the patient/public best. As one of the study subjects from Chapter 2 asserts, overweight bodies, through pregnancy, are replaced by a "thriving, glowing and healthy body [which] was meant to eat, allowed to eat." The reader views this subject who recognizes that she shouldn't perhaps eat as much as she does, or as poorly, but is relishing pregnancy because food is no longer negative.

This perspective contrasts that of the African tribes studied for the workshop/seminar series. The subjects in these studies were generally of force-fed generations, albeit some subjects were the last of this lineage. In this cultural environment the size of the woman is not only seen as beautiful and desirable, but is also a measure of a family's wealth and status in the community. The ability to "fatten" one's daughter necessitates, in the cases presented, the acquisition of livestock as well as slaves/workers; a sizable woman necessarily cannot participate in much physical activity in the running of their homes. Despite this lack of physical activity, the woman is still a very prominent figure in the social nature of the community, as is her "fattening" at a young age, which facilitates her transition into womanhood.