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Molnar's The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Book Review

Review of Molnar, Petra. 2024. *The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. New York: The New Press.

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Petra Molnar's *The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (2024) examines the ways technologies are used in the name of border security, enacting a politics of exclusion and fear, data colonialism, and an increase in harms—lethal, physical, and bureaucratic. The book also engages with the practices of resistance to border surveillance, especially from a legal perspective. It builds on the conversations of surveillance and immigration studies by recounting the ways border and immigration technologies add to a global story of power and violence.

A young black man from the Caribbean sought immigration in Canada after being shot at from a car—and his immigration case hinged on the details he was able to remember, or not, from one of the most traumatic days of his life. Petra Molnar, an immigration lawyer who represented him, recalls her client was unable to remember some of those details, such as if the car had been grey or white. They ultimately lost the case, but she argues that the outcome would have been even more cruel in the context of migration technologies. If the Canadian authority had had access to iBorderCTRL, a controversial AI lie detection technology deployed in the European Union, the software would have relied perhaps entirely on the white vs. grey question, dismissing her client as a liar earlier in the conversation than a human would.

Horizon 2020, the European Union's largest R&D program, funds projects like iBorderCTRL as novel technological interventions in the quest to protect Europe in the context of migration. Molnar is positioned to analyze this and other border surveillance technologies both in the legal abstract and in their everyday harms for the people she knows by name. Her expertise spans her work as an attorney and volunteer, as well as her legal and anthropological scholarship. When discussing iBorderCTRL, she raises questions of legality and governance. She also asks, "What happens to people who interact with these systems? What would dealing with an AI lie detector feel like?" (104).

The book analyzes border and migration technologies across different countries and regions from the standpoint of legal studies and ethnography. The themes that thread each ethnographic site together are borders, refugee camps, and biometric deployments. Borders in particular are understood as sites that "transform migration into a site of potential criminality that must be surveilled and managed to root out the ever-present specter of migration" (23). Molnar's ethnographic fieldwork brings insights from the borders between the United States and Mexico, Europe and North Africa, and Israel and Palestine. There, she

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analyzes the technological artifacts, the policy backgrounds from which they emerge, and the ways they impact the lives of her interlocutors.

Conceptually, the book also builds on surveillance studies' discussions on globalization and the enterprise of surveillance. It analyzes the ways the Global North's safety discourse and technologies are deployed in the Global Majority world, and the ways the global economy enables the development of increasingly harmful technologies. For instance, she points to espionage diplomacy as a business model (coined by Yossi Melman 2022), as well as to the allocation of funds to "anti smuggling" initiatives very broadly understood. She builds on the surveillance study literature on the privatization and outsourcing of surveillance services, arguing that they have led to a decrease in accountability (162).

Moreover, the book analyzes the ideology that supports the view of Greece as Europe's shield. Molnar points to an us vs. them ideology in a world where border surveillance technologies lead to the existence of both Global Entry and biometrically enabled refugee incarceration camps. "We tolerate the contradictions inherent in the differentiation of rights," Molnar argues, "precisely because the normalization of increased surveillance and data collection has become ingrained in everyday actions and experiences. Making mobile populations the ultimate Other justifies unregulated technological experimentation under the guise of efficiency and security" (173).

In the book, borders are understood not just as spaces of violence but also as spaces of resistance. Borders become spaces for counterveillance, where eyes and observers protect those who cross them, in solidarity. For Molnar, resistance begins with the recognition of our connectedness. She proposes three avenues for resistance to unjust border technologies: legal strategies, private sector divestment, and technological design that considers the many uses and stakeholders of migration technology. This is especially important in a world where smugglers use the same communications platforms as their migrant victims.

Molnar's book addresses surveillance studies discussions on borders and particularly contributes to existing work on North American borders: Canada-United States (Andreas and Biersteker 2003; Côté-Boucher 2008) and United States-Mexico (Andreas 2000; Fojas 2021; Newell, Gomez, and Guajardo 2017). Her case for border surveillance as a process of exclusion brings new empirical data to scholarship on immigration policing in the EU (Bigo and Guild 2005). As the book extends a framework of exclusion to border technologies, it spans many, if not most, of today's means of global border control: walls, visas, algorithms, drones, towers, beacons, robodogs, risk profiling, software such as CBPOne, sound cannons, motion sensing analysis cameras, double security fences, voice printing and other biometrics, and phone searches. Her analysis of how technology sharpens the politics of exclusion captures the state of the field in the world's most resourced borders, rendering this book productive for both scholars and practitioners in the fields of digital rights, migration, and surveillance.

Like other texts on the study of border technologies, Molnar's project analyzes governmental technologies with little access to the makers and implementers of said technologies. It was only after the time of publication of this book, for instance, that the United States government finally released thousands of pages' worth of technical documents on CBPOne. Another challenge that is raised with this study is one tied to the constraints of multi-site ethnography: the examination of border technology across different locations might lose the contextual depth and nuances seen over longer periods at single sites.

As Molnar tells the stories of the migrants who are central to these developments, she reflects on the ethics of storytelling and migration imagery. Her work provides an example for researchers seeking to engage in trauma informed work, sharing the difficult stories that will remain with the reader once the book is closed, while never losing sight of migrants' joy and agency. As technologies of border control continue to evolve, stories like those of Little Nasr will stick with us, as will Molnar's care for her research interlocutors. This book is an example of scholarship with a political commitment that honors the author's expertise, as well

as her own lived experience as a migrant. It is fitting that her book is dedicated to “all those who migrate by choice or force, in hopes of a more joyful world.”

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