



## Datafication of Borders and Migration

Co-convened by **Anna Triandafyllidou**, CERC Migration, Toronto Metropolitan University, **Koen Leurs**, Utrecht University, **Kaarina Nikunen**, Tampere University, **Younes Ahouga**, CERC Migration, Toronto Metropolitan University, and **Lucia Nalbandian**, CERC Migration, Toronto Metropolitan University and University of Toronto.

**Date:** May 25, 2023

**Time:** 9:30 AM – 4:00 PM EDT

**Location:** Hybrid (In person at CERC Migration office / online via Zoom)

Digital technologies and datafied systems are increasingly used to surveil, control and manage migration, shifting the balance in the humanitarianism-securitization nexus. New automated systems from facial recognition to language detection have profoundly intensified and changed migration and border policies. Data driven technologies have rendered borders ubiquitous, multi-layered and mundane: the outside border control has become increasingly mobile, now travelling with and tracking migrated bodies after border crossings.

Datafication is often framed as a phenomenon that concerns everyone: in a highly networked digital world, datafication cannot be escaped. However, datafication does not treat everyone in the same way. Critical data studies have highlighted that automated social sorting is often based on categorizations and assumptions that echo existing social biases and historical power structures, as well as pervasive and accumulative surveillance of the already marginalized. While at the same time, data driven technologies also provide systems that support new forms of resistance and activism for people who are seeking asylum or who are on the move

This workshop brings together scholars from different disciplines to introduce their research on digital technologies and datafication in migration and to discuss its ambivalent and contradictory role for migrants compared to refugees, as well as the unsettling consequences of the use of datafication in bordering and policymaking. This workshop is organized in collaboration with CERC Migration TMU; Intimacy in Data Driven Culture (IDA) project, Tampere University; the Co-Designing a Fair Digital Asylum Research Project; and the Digital Migration Special Inter Group, Utrecht University.

**PROGRAM**

- 9-9:30 AM EDT** Welcome reception
- 9:30-9:40 AM EDT** **Welcome remarks.** Anna Triandafyllidou, Koen Leurs and Kaarina Nikunen,
- 9:40 AM-12 PM EDT** **Datafication and borders**
- Chair: Younes Ahouga**, CERC Migration, Toronto Metropolitan University
- Deterrence and ignorance: agnotology at the border | **Rine Vieth**, Independent scholar
- Varieties of failure in the datafication of international borders | **Philippe M. Frowd**, University of Ottawa, and **Benjamin J. Muller**, King's University College at University of Western Ontario
- The datafication of anti-trafficking: border securitization, automation, and the politics of 'rescue' | **Rob Heynen**, York University
- Humanitarian experimentation with predictive technologies | **Alphoncina Lyamuya**, University of Southern California
- Voice biometrics and the value of the sounding voice at the border | **Daniel Leix Palumbo**, University of Groningen
- 12- 1 PM EDT** **Lunch Break**
- 1-2 PM EDT** **The history of datafication at the borders**
- Chair: Koen Leurs**, Utrecht University
- Industrializing migration management in Canada and its implications for automated decision making | **Nicholas Lee-Scott**, Independent scholar
- Smart Ellis Island? Tracing techniques of automated border governance | **Philipp Seufferling**, London School of Economics and Political Science
- 2:30-4:00 PM EDT** **Datafication and the agency of refugees and migrants**
- Chair: Kaarina Nikunen**, Tampere University
- Coded as criminal: gang databases, border technologies, and colonial subjectivity | **Michael Lechuga**, University of New Mexico, and **Sergio F. Juárez**, Loyola Marymount University
- Digital refugees? Displaced youth's lives in and against the digital border | **Myria Georgiou**, London School of Economics and Political Science
- Datafication and digital witnessing infrastructure | **Saskia Witteborn**, Chinese University of Hong Kong

## ABSTRACTS

### Panel 1 – Datafication and borders

#### **Deterrence and ignorance: agnotology at the border | Rine Vieth, Independent scholar**

In the face of shifts towards migration datafication, there is a simultaneous, purposeful gap in data-collection: a deliberate unknowing that intensifies precarity. Drawing upon agnotology, the study of deliberate ignorance (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008), this presentation will argue that attending to the gaps in digital data-collection helps researchers better understand the contours of the asylum system. This approach brings critical analyses of states' gathering digital data (Metcalfe and Dencik 2019) alongside past attempts to unsettle categories of data (Davis 2012; Merry 2016) and inquiries into the growing practice of seeking to quantify more and more (Ponzanesi and Leurs 2022; Shore and Wright 2015; Tazzioli 2020). What role does deliberate ignorance play in border management? How might we theorize the opposite of "seeing like a state" (Scott 1998)? What happens with the calculated gaps in the nets of digital border surveillance? Through a consideration of UK Home Office documentation, government watchdog reports, and research from doctoral work, the presentation argues that attention towards what data is collected—and what data is not—is vital in understanding contemporary border governance, particularly policies of deterrence. Further, attention to what is not quantified offers some insight into future policy interventions in a time of increasing migration datafication.

#### **Varieties of failure in the datafication of international borders | Philippe M. Frowd, University of Ottawa, and Benjamin J. Muller, King's University College at University of Western Ontario**

This presentation will focus on the construction and deployment of border and migration technologies, asking: What does failure look like in technical systems at/around the border? How is failure instructive about the forms of politics called forward in contemporary border security, but also generative of new forms of critique? It will build on existing work on the failures of technologies such as biometrics to understand the drive to categorize and automate as illustrative of an obstinate devotion to technology rather than a signal of its technical abilities. Four short case studies will be used to make this argument. The first takes Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) Program as a complex sociotechnical system in which failures of COVID data reporting are but one example of failure, alongside the increased precarity of temporary workers. The second focuses on the automation of visa processing at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), which seeks to reduce waiting times and application backlogs. The third case concerns the US Office for Biometrics and Identity Management, which has persisted despite its inability to demonstrate efficacy (for instance in programs such as US-VISIT). The final case is the ArriveCAN application introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was met by resistance from stakeholders such as border officers, airports and airlines.

#### **The datafication of anti-trafficking: border securitization, automation, and the politics of 'rescue' | Rob Heynen, York University**

Exploring key instances of data-driven anti-trafficking border work, this presentation examines the emergence of an anti-trafficking surveillant assemblage built around a politics of 'rescue' that frequently harms precisely those people and communities identified to be in need of saving. Anti-trafficking plays an increasingly significant role both in providing ideological justification for the hardening and securitizing of borders, and as the site of research and development for the use of data-based and automated or machine learning ('AI') bordering systems. Tools include everything from social media surveillance to the use of Natural Language Processing or biometric face recognition, with anti-trafficking tools and practices also simultaneously targeting migrant and domestic workers. These interventions target sex workers in particular. Anti-trafficking technological development mobilizes a range of actors, including state agencies, academic researchers, corporations, and NGOs, with developments in the US especially influential. Following the lead of migrant- and sex worker-led critical data activism, this presentation investigates how data-based systems encode a range of inequities, reinforce capitalist and neo-colonial border practices, and facilitate increasingly militarized and police-driven border security regimes. Key

examples include the DARPA-led Memex, Tech Against Trafficking initiatives, or the Counter-trafficking Data Collaborative. Of special interest is how anti-trafficking enlists a wide range of workers and citizens as participants in the data-driven anti-trafficking assemblage.

**Humanitarian experimentation with predictive technologies | Alphoncina Lyamuya, University of Southern California**

Citing objectivity in data-driven models, bureaucratic institutions are increasingly incorporating systems of quantifications in border control processes and humanitarian management to ostensibly address challenging operational problems in the forced displacement context. This presentation examines experimentation with novel technologies and analytical techniques as the rationality for settling humanitarian emergencies and managing border movements. Focusing on the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Innovation Service’s experimentations with predictive analytics to model and forecast refugee arrivals at the borders – from the Somalia-Ethiopia border to the Venezuela-Brazil border – this research interrogates the turn to computational systems in a humanitarian organization with a mandate to protect and find relief for the forcibly displaced people. The following distinct, yet complementary questions will be explored: How does the UNHCR’s use of automated systems of quantification reshape human mobility and access to legal asylum procedures? Does the agency’s choice of sites of experimentation illuminate the broader power structure at and across borders? Drawing on critical data studies, science and technology studies, and postcolonial studies, the presentation will suggest that the turn to predictive technologies and machine learning techniques help to streamline some processes in humanitarian operations while also sustaining efforts by wealthy or relatively stable nations to curtail the inflow of ‘unwanted’ people by restructuring the border into a more complex and selective entity.

**Voice biometrics and the value of the sounding voice at the border | Daniel Leix Palumbo, University of Groningen**

This presentation examines how German border authorities use voice biometrics to analyze the accents of undocumented asylum seekers to determine their country of origin and eligibility for asylum. In doing so, the presentation provides a renewed look at the political value of voice by focusing on its actual sounding form, moving beyond abstractions of narrative and discourse. The qualities of voice go beyond what can be spotted in words: The extralinguistic elements of communication foreground embodied and socio-political dimensions. Such dimensions have become amenable to identity-making processes by voice biometrics, requiring a critical account of the datafication of asylum seekers’ sounding voices. Voice biometrics operate by a reductionist notion of the sounding voice as a fixed and decontextualized object, colonizing this space of self-narration to construct the speaking subject. This, in turn, operationalizes bordering power that endangers migrant populations by relying on normative assumptions that do not recognize the ever evolving and performative qualities of the sounding voice, while not acknowledging the value of migrants’ account about their identity. By assuming the sounding voice as a marker of geographic origin, voice biometrics reaffirm bordering power by undermining migrants’ experience and classifying them as data in newly demarcated boundaries of otherness.

**Panel 2 – The history of datafication at the borders**

**Industrializing migration management in Canada and its implications for automated decision making | Nicholas Lee-Scott, Independent scholar**

The qualitative study that will be presented addresses the historical evolution of Canadian visa officers’ experiences processing and making decisions on economic immigration applications from the 1970s to the present. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with five retired Canadian visa officers, and were analyzed alongside academic literature addressing subjects of discretion, street-level bureaucracy, advanced technology, and migration management. From the 1970s to present, processing and issuing decisions on

economic immigration applications has become increasingly structured, delegated and impersonalized. Migration is increasingly managed using an industrial approach, which in turn incentivizes the use of automation. This industrial logic, rather than the use of automation, is transforming the relationship between IRCC, its staff and clients. While the use of artificial intelligence and automation within government raises novel challenges for stakeholders to work through, the core question of how digitally-enabled public-serving institutions ought to interact with their clients deserves further consideration. Given that the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's multi-year digital transformation is underway, termed "Digital Platform Modernization," this is an opportune period for stakeholders from the state, academia, and the private and non-profit sectors to convene, collaborate and advocate on what a digitally-enabled immigration regime should look and feel like.

### **Smart Ellis Island? Tracing techniques of automated border governance | Philipp Seufferling, London School of Economics and Political Science**

The digitalization and automation of migration governance under the buzzword "smart borders" is only the most recent instantiation of media technologies enabling state bordering. This presentation traces a history of techniques of decision-making at the border, in the case of the Ellis Island immigration station, New York City (1892–1954). Drawing on an excavation of media technologies employed at Ellis Island, this presentation demonstrates how state bordering has long been enabled by different media, engulfed with imaginaries of neutral, scientific, fair, and efficient decision-making between desired and undesired migrants – promises still central to today's "smart border" projects. Specifically, the use of "proxies" (Mulvin, 2021; Chun, 2021) for decision-making, e.g. biometric or biographic data, collected as authentic and neutral stand-ins for the migrant, can be traced back historically. By analyzing how proxies were selected, stored, and processed, by the authorities, this case study demonstrates how anxieties about public health, logics of eugenics, and ideas about scientific management formed the context for how proxies were entrusted and legitimized for binary decision-making at the border. This history demonstrates a trajectory of automated techniques of decision-making to pre-digital media technologies, revealing genealogies of proxification that still underlie contemporary border regimes and automated media technologies at large.

### **Panel 3 – Datafication and the agency of refugees and migrants**

#### **Coded as criminal: gang databases, border technologies, and colonial subjectivity | Michael Lechuga, University of New Mexico and Sergio F. Juárez, Loyola Marymount University**

Gang databases in the United States (re)produce settler colonial logics by manufacturing and trafficking biometric data sets that lock Black, Indigenous, and Mestizx peoples into criminal subjections. Since the 1980s, tools like gang databases have been implemented by law enforcement agencies to code non-White, urban communities and their movements and behaviours as actions associated with gang-membership, a subjection that is linked to assumptions of criminality. We draw from studies on rhetorical visibility, surveillance studies, and settler colonial studies to assess how non-white communities are dangerously subjugated and subsequently controlled by federal and local law enforcement agents via technologies of visibility. Drawing on a review of the legal and policy discourses around gang databases in the US over the last three decades, this presentation provides an analysis of how the implementation of the technology that once aided local police in making "gang members" in urban spaces is now used by federal law enforcement agencies, like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), to make asylum seekers into "gang members" in border spaces and at ports of entry. Finally, the presentation concludes with a discussion of how the practice of datafication manifests as a "strategic whiteness," a facet of contemporary settler colonial frontier ideological and psychological thought.



**Digital refugees? Displaced youth's lives in and against the digital border | Myria Georgiou, London School of Economics and Political Science**

This presentation examines teenage refugees' engagement with digital technologies in the context of precarity, temporariness and racism in European cities. Specifically, the presentation will discuss how young refugees, especially those who are living under extremely unstable conditions, use digital technologies to ground themselves in symbolic and territorial urban spaces of hostility, exclusion but also solidarity. For most, digital media constantly remind them of the conditionality of their settlement and recognition in Europe – of the power of the digital border. For many, digital media become translators of the rules of engagement – reminders of the requirements of the digital border. And for some, they become technologies of self-making and resistance – evidence of the fragility of the digital border. Drawing on a multimethod qualitative study conducted in London and Athens with 63 young refugees of different background, the study that is presented illustrates how many of them use communication technologies to manage transnational lives, often in contexts of perpetual change, heightened vulnerability and continuous uncertainty for the future. Findings in the context of the interviews and asset mapping workshops conducted within the EC-funded *ySkills* project reveal that young refugees precariously balance digital risks and opportunities as they rebuild lives away from their original homeland but under conditions of perpetual surveillance. The presentation will more specifically show how digital technologies frame their lives in three ways: regulating connections locally, nationally and transnationally; mediating experiences before, during and after their uprooting; and managing literacies, these being digital, political and educational. Analyzing the significance of connectivity in young refugees' lives, the research reveals the radical yet bounded possibilities that these technologies present in supporting and limiting displaced youth's wellbeing and hopes of rebuilding lives of opportunity and dignity.

**Datafication and digital witnessing infrastructure | Saskia Witteborn, Chinese University of Hong Kong**

The presentation presents the concept of digital witnessing infrastructure in relation to forced migration and human rights activism. Witness accounts are a genre in discourses on migration, with digital technologies enabling the production, circulation, and consumption of accounts about persecution and flight in addition to and apart from accounts provided in institutional settings. The presentation introduces the concept of digital witnessing infrastructure to discuss the continuing datafication of evidence of human rights violations. It shifts the focus from the datafication of borders to the datafication of violence – a type of datafication which can help those seeking asylum and safety to have their claims acknowledged and to pave the way for out-migration from the respective country of origin. Starting with a conceptual reflection on digital witnessing infrastructure, the presentation will identify its actors, such as forced migrants and their social networks, digital platforms, activists, donor organizations and the crowd. By the example of two witnessing projects, the presentation illustrates how digital witnessing infrastructure comes into being and enables connectivity between social mediascapes and transnational activism. Overall, the presentation makes a case for the link between datafication, legal claims-making, and migration.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Rine Vieth** recently completed their PhD in Anthropology at McGill University. Their doctoral project focused on how the UK's First-Tier Asylum and Immigration Tribunals assess cases of belief, particularly cases of conversion to Christianity. They are currently embarking on research projects around how state asylum-assessment data circulates transnationally; how states utilize evidence in assessing claims of belief or sexuality.

**Philippe M. Frowd** is Associate Professor in the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa. His research draws on critical security studies and focuses on emerging transnational forms of governance of security in the Sahel region of West Africa. His research has primarily focused on irregular migration and border control in the region, with particular attention to biometric technologies. He is currently working on a project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), titled 'Securing the Border with Data' focused on the datafication of border management in Canada.

**Benjamin J. Muller** is Associate Professor in Migration and Border Studies at King's University College at the University of Western Ontario. His interests, teaching and publications sit at the intersection of three interdisciplinary fields: borders and borderlands studies, critical security studies, and surveillance studies. He grapples with the intersection of borders, borderlands, security, identity and postcolonial studies, sovereign power and exceptionalism, as well as topics concerning biometric technology, surveillance, AI, the politics of risk, migration and mobility, and broader themes and literatures in international political sociology. He is currently working on a SSHRC-funded project titled 'Securing the Border with Data' focused on the datafication of border management in Canada.

**Rob Heynen** is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication & Media Studies at York University. His current work is broadly in the field of surveillance studies, engaging with race, gender, capitalism, and borders, and specifically is leading a research project on biometrics and is part of two collaborative critical anti-trafficking projects. He is the co-editor of two books on surveillance, *Making Surveillance States: Transnational Histories* (University of Toronto Press, 2019) and *Expanding the Gaze: Gender and the Politics of Surveillance* (University of Toronto Press, 2016).

**Alphoncina Lyamuya** is a PhD student in Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California. Her research interests lie at the intersection of emerging media technologies, transnational governance, and inequality. Specifically, she is interested in the use of algorithmic decision-making systems and other digital infrastructures by governments and humanitarian agencies in border control and humanitarian management. Alphoncina holds an MA in Public Policy & Administration with a graduate certificate in Data Analytics and Computational Social Science, and a BA in Legal Studies with a minor in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

**Daniel Leix Palumbo** is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen. His current NWO-funded PhD project (2022-2027), entitled "From Spoken Audio to Digital Identities: How AI impacts the interpretation of information communicated by the sound of voice", researches the use of voice biometric technology for decision-making in European asylum procedures. More specifically, it explores the datafication of the sound of voice as an emerging practice to construct identities and control borders. In addition, he is a sound designer interested in developing multimodal research outputs.

**Nicholas Lee-Scott** is a graduate of Toronto Metropolitan University's MA in Immigration and Settlement Studies and currently works as a policy analyst at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). He is participating in the workshop as an independent researcher and not as a representative of IRCC. His research focuses on Canadian migration management and how technological innovations and organizational priorities have impacted the relationship between decision-makers and clients. He is interested in exploring ways to renew the relationship between public institutions and clients to account for the state's increasing reliance on bulk processing, automated decision-making and digital-first service delivery.

**Philipp Seufferling** is an LSE Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), United Kingdom. His research interests cover the intersections of media

technologies and media practices with migration and borders, specifically from historical perspectives. For his PhD thesis, he studied media practices in refugee camps in Germany after 1945. Currently, Philipp is working on histories of border governance and critical perspectives on border digitalization and automation.

**Michael Lechuga** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico. He researches and teaches Rhetoric, Migration, Settler Colonial Studies, and Cultural Studies. He explores the ways migrants and migrant communities are subjected in the US by austere migration control structures and attitudes. His most recent book, *Visions of Invasion*, focuses on the role that technology plays in border security mechanisms and the ways alienhood is mapped onto migrant bodies. In addition, Michael is interested in Xicanx Studies, Anti-Colonial Futurism, Surveillance Studies, Affect Studies and Film.

**Sergio F. Juarez** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Loyola Marymount University. His scholarship has centered on understanding the social construction of difference (i.e. race, sexuality, gender, class, ability, and more) through communication critical paradigm theories of Chicanx, Black, and Queer feminist scholarship. His research interests are currently centered on education contexts, influencing his goals that include the development of new institutional structures by leveraging technology to construct anticolonial inclusive educational practices and structures.

**Myria Georgiou** is Professor in Media and Communications at the LSE. She researches and teaches on migration and urbanization in the context of intensified mediation. Adopting comparative and interdisciplinary approaches, she studies communication practices and media representations that profoundly, but unevenly, shape meanings and experiences of citizenship and identity. She is the (co-)author and (co-)editor of six books including *Diaspora, Identity and the Media* (Hampton 2006), *Media and the City* (2013) and *The Digital Border* (2022, with L. Chouliaraki).

**Saskia Witteborn** is Associate Professor in the School of Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She specializes in critical technology studies and migration and researches the geopolitics of identity, migrants' digital technology practices, the datafication of migration, and the link between mobilities and immersive realities. Saskia was a visiting scholar at Free University of Berlin, Humboldt University, and Télécom Paris. She is currently a Visiting Senior Fellow at the LSE. She is author of *Unruly Speech: Displacement and the Politics of Transgression* (Stanford, 2023), co-editor of *The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration* (Sage, 2020), and co-author of *Together* (Oxford, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2005).