

The Slot Remains Intact: Facial Recognition Technology, Somatocentric Infrastructure, and the Colonial Continuities of Canadian Immigration Governance

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Abstract

The present paper interrogates how AI-powered facial recognition technology (FRT) in Canada operationalizes a centuries-old somatocentric logic, or the epistemic privileging of biological and phenotypic traits at the very foundation of social hierarchies, as a contemporary form of algorithmic coloniality. Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of the 'savage slot,' the paper argues that FRT can be understood not as a replacement but as a continuation and automation of the structurally inferior racialised position that the Canadian state has historically produced and filled with Indigenous and migrant peoples alike. This novel position is theorised as the 'algorithmic slot' in which the 'fraudulent refugee,' 'criminal suspect,' or high-risk visa applicant is not discovered, but structurally produced by the state apparatus itself. Through a three part analysis, the paper traces the genealogy of somatocentric governance and control in Canada, showcasing that the current bias in biometric systems is the continuation of centuries of racial eugenics and exclusion. The second part of the study engages in critical discourse analysis of contemporary state documents to unravel the mechanisms through which present institutional language legitimizes and insulates algorithmic harm from accountability. Lastly, the study engages with the case study of two Somali refugees, Asha Ali Barre and Alia Musa Hosh, whose status was wrongfully revoked by the state on the basis of photo comparison using FRT. Their case is then used as the basis for imagining governance otherwise by drawing on the wisdom of African, Black Atlantic, and Indigenous decolonial frameworks.

Keywords: algorithmic coloniality, somatocentricity, facial recognition technology, the savage slot, auto-essentialization