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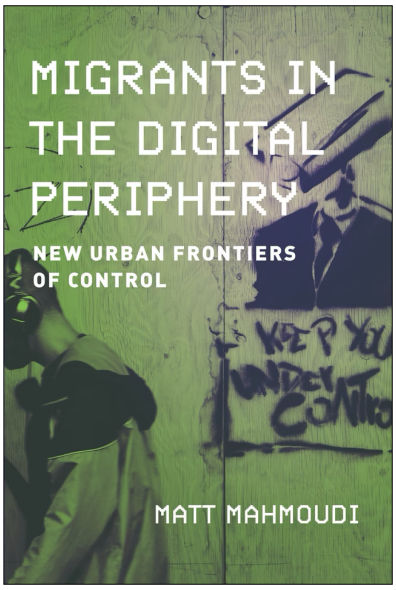
Matt Mahmoudi, **Migrants in the Digital Periphery: New Urban Frontiers of Control**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2025, 272 pp., $95.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Natalia Rabahi
Temple University



Every day, millions of people cross borders via land, air, or sea. Whether citizens, tourists, or immigrants, each person must have their passport and face scanned at the border for identification purposes. This practice, seen as mundane by some, is described by Matt Mahmoudi in ***Migrants in the Digital Periphery: New Urban Frontiers of Control*** as the beginning of the exclusion of migrants to the digital periphery. As Silicon Valley has increasingly provided facial recognition and data tracking software to governments, migrants live in the digital periphery, afraid to use apps that might help them navigate their new location, with the fear of being "snitched" on by them. Facial recognition and biometric identification are some of the ways migrants are red-flagged in a precarious immigration system. Thus, the movement of people across borders has become datafied even beyond the borders. In cities that have adopted technology in their day-to-day operations, such as digital ID cards, public Wi-Fi, and other digitalized city services, noncitizens fear they are under surveillance.

Over the last decade, tech-critical scholarship has examined the application of technology for surveillance and security purposes; however, Mahmoudi argues that scholarship has stopped short of critically analyzing the use of technology as a racialized tool to control and discriminate against racialized communities, instead focusing on framing it as a "bug" of a capitalist system or "technical errors" (p. 11). Through his ethnographic work, Mahmoudi proposes that the path the tech industry has taken in the control and exploitation of the mobility of racialized communities follows a rich history of systemic racialization as a feature of capitalism, not an error.

Through the case studies of two "immigrant-friendly" cities, New York City and Berlin, Mahmoudi provides a detailed account of how local governments have adopted technology under the guise of helping refugees and immigrants, while tech companies profit from their government contracts and datafication of migrant movement. Through ethnographic work in both cities, Mahmoudi argues that looking at digital tools such as facial recognition, artificial intelligence, and biometric technologies as the answer to the world's problems excludes migrant communities to digital ghettos, where refugee-ness is used by tech companies to attract funding and media attention. Thus, the new borders of the 21st century are algorithms.

The main argument of *Migrants in the Digital Periphery* is that through categorization and containment, tech companies benefit from the digital periphery through techno-development, techno-space, and techno-government. Techno-development stems from the idea that technological tools will improve the

lives of refugees while at the same time allowing tech companies to extract raw data for further improvement of their products (facial recognition, biometrics, etc.). This also leads tech companies to partner with humanitarian and crisis management agencies in migration governance, further strengthening the idea that to empower the oppressed, all we need is technology (p. 43).

The transformation of cities into techno-spaces, where everything is connected to the Internet, allows tech companies to become an essential part of city governments without acknowledging it, while also engaging in experiments of biometric recognition, such as "race, gender, and emotion recognition," further targeting minority communities (p. 44). New York City, for example, has allowed major tech companies into its advisory board, allowing them to gather citizens' data without their knowledge as they navigate through the city. This also puts at risk NYC's status as a sanctuary city, where persecuted communities have lived in anonymity for decades. Algorithms are used to "keep people in their places," where the poor and marginalized stay in the digital ghetto and the rich navigate seamlessly through the smart city.

Techno-government entangles technology with government bodies, allowing for a tighter border control and initiatives where migrants are precariously at the hands of corporate initiatives to collect and distribute data. Although technology has made it easier to track and help refugees, it has also helped governments persecute undocumented migrants.

Mahmoudi argues that while New York City was built on the idea of "all are welcome," its digital infrastructures contradict its status as a sanctuary city, for how can one find refuge from persecution if the state is constantly monitoring and intercepting their quest for help with threats of detention and deportation? Mahmoudi positions New York City as a "digital antisanctuary," where the categorization and containment of migrant communities on the move, with the help of Silicon Valley tech giants, augments "anti-immigrant marginalization, violence, and precarity" (p. 77). As an example, the author cites how New York's Family Court data is surveilled by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) to detain and deport undocumented families, and the use of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) information to deport individuals who were once eligible for legal status under the Obama administration. To prevent such risks, undocumented migrants and refugees choose to stay invisible within their diaspora communities. Conversely, digitally mediated services offered by the Mayor's Office for Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) are rarely beneficial to immigrant communities, as the services are highly linked to infrastructures of surveillance, which are "weaponized by immigration enforcement" (p. 89). Thus, information panics and urban instrumentalization lead to the categorization of NYC as a digital antisanctuary.

Between 2015 and 2016, at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, digital initiatives aimed at helping refugees were emerging weekly in Berlin. While such initiatives stemmed from the idea of integrating the newcomers, they slowed down once the media's attention to the issue and the EU–Turkey agreement was signed. Instead, the current initiatives are either backed by the municipal government or a part of tech corporations' social responsibility strategies. The commodification and datafication of immigrants in Berlin, according to Mahmoudi, leads to digital refugee-ness, a concept that exists to further tech companies' and governmental bodies' interests at the expense of refugees. Mahmoudi points out that Berlin's digital response to the refugee crisis is a form of "digital ghettoization," where the idea of refugees using technology to integrate in society is used "to attract funding and claim political solidarity" (pp. 110–111).

Refugee tech essentializes the refugee experience because it is created by those who wish to keep control over refugee movement through physical and socioeconomic space rather than by refugees themselves. Through his meetings with refugee tech enthusiasts and investors, refugees-turned-volunteers, newcomers, and operatives at refugee tech companies, Mahmoudi provides an overview of the many diverse opinions surrounding refugee-oriented initiatives. While tech enthusiasts and investors see the premise as a groundbreaking way to gather funding, refugees and newcomers feel alienated by technology that excludes and labels them as vulnerable victims in need of "benevolent funders" (p. 125). According to Mahmoudi, refugee-tech initiatives believe that refugees are not tech-savvy and do not use the same applications as people from the West. It is "techno-fetishism" to believe that technology can solve the world's problems when personal connections are what refugees are looking for in a new place.

Where technology does help, Mahmoudi points out, is when refugees are involved. From using Facebook and WhatsApp groups to volunteering to register newcomers, refugees have created their own networks of communication without the extensive funding and media attention received by tech entrepreneurs. Even without trying, refugees are more successful in resolving community needs by connecting with one another *through* technology that already exists. Information is spread *by* the diaspora, *for* the diaspora (p. 133), highlighting that the capitalist need to make money off of refugees does not work if refugees do not use such platforms. Although not his main focus, Mahmoudi would have benefited from spending time with diasporas and understanding their use of technology to navigate techno-cities.

Mahmoudi calls for a reorientation of scholarship to include the digital periphery as an analytical tool to understand the containment and categorization of marginalized migrants under racial capitalism. The author points out his distancing from Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism theory, where digital users provide "raw data" to capitalism through their digital behavior, that is, websites they access and their overall online behavior. Instead, Mahmoudi argues that surrogate data, which is based "on conjecture *about* abstract racialized categorization of identity, forged out of white imaginaries about the other" (p. 155; emphasis in original), and obtained through surveillance, is the driving force of racial capitalism.

Interestingly, Mahmoudi posits that the current moment is not only about technology but about technologies using race as a tool to exploit racialized bodies and spaces. Through a neo-Luddite approach and following abolitionist thought, we must question how technologies that promise great advancement are also technologies that utilize racial capitalism to uphold the digital periphery. The author concludes by proposing three key issues we must pay attention to: the criminalization of antisurveillance activism, the marginalization of racialized communities through "innocuous" technology (p. 177), and the mapping of the digital periphery across cities.

Overall, *Migrants in the Digital Periphery* provides a critical analysis of the world of technology, migration, and borders, making it a crucial piece of work for scholars in critical migration studies and science and technology studies.

Reference

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Public Affairs.