PAPER TITLE: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS IM/MOBILITY: PRE-LIMIRARY THOUGHTS ON UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF AI IN CANADA'S IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

Sophie Toupin
Concordia University

Technology, including artificial intelligence in im/migration service delivery and migration management have been widely deployed in EuroAmerica (Mongia, 2018; Walia, 2021). In the United States, under the Trump administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcements (ICE) deployed an algorithm that resulted in detaining migrants at the border of Mexico. More, recently, ICE struck a contract deal with Clearview AI for its use of facial recognition technology for migration management. In the United Kingdom, thousands of international students were wrongly accused by an algorithm of cheating on an English test and were deported. Immigration Refugee Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has, in the past few years, secretly piloted an in-house built AI system for triaging im/migrant applications from China, India and the Philippines (Molnar & Gill, 2018). Recently it expanded its use of AI for triaging applications to more countries stating the need to modernize, optimize and expedite immigration affairs. The 2 million immigration applications backlog in part caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has been used as a justification to accelerate the push for the adoption of AI in im/migration affairs.

In this conference paper, I use the unfolding case study of Canada's immigration system to investigate the sociotechnical issue of AI as im/mobility. The past few months have revealed the existence of an in-house IRCC built computer system called Chinook, which was allegedly interfacing with an AI system that allowed flagging certain keywords or catch phrases in immigration applications. This quickly provoked a heated debate in Canada and led to Canadian parliamentary hearings held by the House of Commons' Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration to investigate in February 2022 the high refusal rate of temporary residence applications for francophone and anglophone Africans. What was initially an IRCC in-house AI system has, however, now been contracted to the private sector for a complete makeover. It is the Dublin-based Accenture Inc. that was chosen to replace the current AI system which is based on data already collected by IRCC with the aim to widely pushing for AI.

Building on AoIR 2022's theme, I take a decolonial approach to the study of AI and im/migration issues. I follow the claim made by decolonial scholars (El-Nany, 2020) that it is necessary to go back in history in order to better understand current power relations, systemic racism and patriarchy, the ongoing dispossession and forced immobility of racialized populations located in the global South. Current experiments with AI driven systems in Canada and other western countries must be situated in the historical context of (settler) colonialism and racism. In the book Indian Migration and Empire, Radhika Viyas Mongia (2018) argues that the history of slavery, indentured and 'free' South Asian labourers coupled with the consolidation of the nation-state are closely tied to the emergence of the technology of the passport to manage immigration in former British dominions and colonies. Passports were instituted to regulate the movement of "free" subjects following the abolition of slavery by the British empire. Free subjects included those indentured labourers and colonial subjects who wanted to look for a better life elsewhere. The British empire closely monitored and controlled the movement of South Asian indentured labour to other British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean but controlled less the migration of those who did not participate in large-scale empire-led organized indentured systems. This is how Mongia (2018) argues that the technology of the passport came to be used in Canada to prevent the migration of unwanted racialized South Asian subjects.

This conference paper frames the use of AI in immigration affairs, including how it scopes the internet and social media, in continuity with the emergence of the technology of the passport to control the movement of population including their forced immobility. Current conceptual frameworks understand the development and imposition of corporate digital technologies in the global South as a form of colonialism (Kwet 2019; Madianou 2019), ponder on the possibility of decolonizing AI (Adams, 2021; Mohamed, Png, & Isaac, 2020), and/or frame AI through the lens of biopolitics of border security technology (Akhmetova & Harris, 2021). To frame AI as im/mobility I build on Harsha Walia's (2021) book Border and Rule where she suggests that what we are witnessing today is not a migration crisis, it is rather a crisis of immobility.

Taking the case study of Canada, I show how AI technologies are being tested first and often secretly on individuals from the global South. These populations become testing grounds to experiment with AI systems and decide who is worthy of im/mobility. The government discourse that articulates AI around speed, efficiency and streamlining, obscure the continuity of a large-scale state organized project to force certain subjects into immobility. While there are local and national specificities to the adoption of AI systems in migration management, I argue that what we are witnessing is a western blueprint for the future of AI and immigration affairs deciding who is forced into immobility and who can be mobile. I end with a reflection on the necessity for a transnational civil society contestation to reverse the effect of AI as immobility.

Methodologically, this conference paper is informed by access to information requests made to the government of Canada to shed light on the use of AI systems within the IRCC. In addition, this paper relies on desk research including an analysis of newspaper articles, blog posts and podcasts by and with immigration lawyers, and parliamentary hearings.

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