As moderns, our task and our obligation is to be attentive to ways around knowledge that claims to be universal when it is contingent, unified when it is at best partial, and autonomous and sovereign when it is dependent and immature.

— Rabinow, French Enlightenment: Truth and Life

“This had to be a fraud! Or could you imagine a family with over 100 members?” the quality assurance officer Amit Chatterjee asked rhetorically. What has happened? The computer at the central data-processing unit of the Unique Identity Authority of India (UIDAI) showed an error. The automatic filter of the new biometric registration system highlighted more than 100 individuals as problematic because they had all been authorized by one single Head of
Family (HoF), indicating that this person had proof of being directly related to each individual.

During an interview, he recounted in an animated fashion the story about how their initial astonishment concerning the extent of the fraud had turned into curiosity and, rather than cancelling the enrollments straight away, the team decided to travel to the region and find out what had happened. When they reached the distant border region in Mizoram, in the northeast of India, they found to their surprise the “biggest family in the world,” totaling 184 members.¹ “Can you imagine a man with 39 wives?” Amit repeated dramatically and continued to marvel at how enrollment for India’s new biometric database has brought the team in touch with even the most remote people of India.

Today many countries are experimenting with biometric identification systems that use smart cards or central databases. With over 1.2 billion enrollments to date, India’s aadhaar (Unique Identity, UID) is not only larger than any other similar project but is a “frontier case” that will influence developments in other countries, such as Indonesia or Papua New Guinea (Jacobsen 2012; Zelazny 2012; Gelb and Clark 2013b). According to the World Bank, it is also pioneering because it promises to achieve maximum interoperability by linking a national ID program to multiple sectoral interventions, such as welfare projects, security operations, or commercial applications (World Bank 2015). And indeed, the notion of interoperability captures well the ambition of the architects of UID, who launched the project in 2009 to provide a streamlined means of identifying India’s entire population and linking millions to national digital networks of information. The system is meant to biometrically enroll all residents of India and give every person a unique twelve-digit identification number (aadhaar number) that is connected to a record containing their personal biometric data—fingerprints, iris scan data, and photograph—and to a skeleton set of social data—name, address, and gender. It can be used for online verification of identity at any time and any place. Proponents of UID are confident that the new technology will solve India’s identification crisis by supplying reliable information to public and private service providers about who is who, thus making all transactions transparent and secure. Currently the aadhaar number is required for identification in most official contexts, such as applying for a passport, receiving welfare payments, or getting a bank loan. It can be used for instant activation of a SIM card, purchasing a train ticket, or conducting internet transactions (Bhatia and Bhabha 2017).

India’s biometric project is participating in a global shift toward states
using new digital technology in the management of population flows. The contemporary world capitalist system not only depends on the rapid flow of people and goods, but also produces heightened concerns over the unwanted movements of illegal migrants, terrorists, or smugglers, persons who may present a threat to national security and prosperity (Fuller 2003). Biometric technology provides automatized surveillance at crucial checkpoints in order to protect spaces of privileged sociality against unwanted entrants—in short, it is a means to separate “bad” flows from “good” flows (Aas 2006; Amoore 2006; Lebovic 2015; Amicelle and Jacobsen 2016). While surveillance studies scholars analyze the increased usage of networked biometric technologies in managing risks and contingencies (Amoore 2006; Muller 2011; Jacobsen 2013; Lidén, Boy, and Jacobsen 2016), development studies literature emphasizes the role and societal effect of biometric technology for creating more efficient and fraud-free welfare states (Rao 2013; Donovan 2015; Singh and Jackson 2017). The introduction of security logic into welfare contests follows on from neoliberal suspicion about wasteful states and worries over inefficient targeting, corruption, and leakage. By tracking goods and people, governments seek to undercut false reporting or “double dipping”—the illegal diversion of limited resources that impoverish states and contribute to distributional injustice. Regardless of whether biometric surveillance systems face inward or outward—that is to say, to include the undocumented or to exclude unwanted foreigners (Breckenridge 2014)—they fulfill a key purpose of making transactions traceable by employing a binary distinction. On the one side, there is the production of the documented person, the wanted traveler, or the needy citizen, which is mirrored on the other side by its opposite: the imposter, the fraud, or the criminal.

The attractive clarity of the binary logic of biometric classifications is disturbed every time technicians or users encounter an error. An error appears as a red warning on the screen when fingerprints are unreadable or recorded data appears as incoherent. The story from Mizoram is a case in point that was resolved positively, unlike many other cases of data errors that have led to rejections of aadhaar registration because applicants wishing to enroll have washed fingers, damaged irises, or unlikely names. The “failure to enroll” has its complement in the “false reject” of verification, another categorical error that does not register in the yes/no logic of automated surveillance. The technically rendered reading of body parts is unable to account for the calluses on the hands of a hardworking farmer wishing to access his or her biometric
bank account, or to recognize poverty through the visual inspection of the worn, unbiometrifiable body of a beggar—more to the point, there is no room for the passionate stories of living people. From our ethnographic study of enrollment, we highlight how an individual status as “error” or “success” is, for the people concerned, a (new) form of social positioning that intersects or overwrites who they think they are or can be.

On the one hand, as the Indian project becomes interoperable and omnipresent, an identification error can deny and exclude individuals and families from entitlements and sociality. On the other hand, the new universal ID creates positive affirmations that can justify the undocumented immigrant or attach an address to the homeless laborer. In both cases of the “accept” or “reject,” people’s stories of living with biometrics demonstrate a contingent and unstable character of identity that may not adhere to the idealized truth of automated surveillance.

In this chapter, we read the ethnography of enrollment and early usage against the technical view of aadhaar as an efficient, reliable, neutral, and dispassionate means of sorting. We look at the acts of (biometric) registration and verification as practices that are founded on the idea of separating the truth from its error or fraud, in order to minimize the occurrences of the latter. In biometric governance, images of fingerprints and irises are “transported” to create certainty in relation to an individual’s status, which in turn produces specific nexuses between bodies, persons, and identities that determine people’s status vis-à-vis authorities, governments, or service providers. Yet, such “veridiction” of a bodily status takes place not in a valueless space of technological veracity, but rather in a dense social space saturated with visual information and narrative accounts. During biometric registration, and later at checkpoints of verification, the body and the appearance of the individual are continuously being regarded, problematized, and questioned, leading to a maze of visual, social, and technical information that may not cumulate in a coherent conclusion. As operators and users consider different types of evidence and prioritize information, they produce powerful narratives of identity.

The anecdote from Mizoram illustrates how accounting for citizens and giving out unique numbers intertwines judgments of integrity with narratives of identity. The filter of the quality management software picked up the decontextualized enrollment information because it contradicted standard expectations concerning family size, raising suspicion about fabrication
and fraud. It could be discounted only when inspectors saw with their own eyes a man who lives with thirty-nine wives. They saw the narrowness of the “margin of error” in the face of the breadth of human sociality. The error demanded additional investigation that led to a final adjudication, fixing a particular truth and revealing the regime of truth production. The aadhaar enrollment system subsequently “knew” this man not only as a unique body, or a male of a certain age, but as a networked person holding the status for being the father and grandfather of over a hundred children and the husband of thirty-nine women. Moreover, in the process of sorting, the man became “abnormal” according to the programed norm of the system.

It is precisely through the negotiated margins of the established “error” that the biometric system produces truth. The system creates a norm against which errors can be measured. Errors are not just technical faults but also a means of producing expert truths about bodies and populations, which further give way to technical intervention and governmental planning. Therefore, rather than the error being an unintended consequence of the biometric system, we argue that the making of “errors” is a constitutive part of the established system of truth making. To evidence this, we begin with the narration of three cases of enrollments that exemplify how biometric technology repositions people in ways that contradict fundamental aspects of their identity. The troubling inconstancies of these biometric encounters provide an entry point for reflections on the social contexts where biometric technology operates and on the truth effects it produces. By truth effect, we mean a powerful statement of what will count as “truth.” When truth in the form of biometric reading collides with other accounts or evidence of identity, it places people in a space of tension between error and truth. The negotiation of judgments resulting from biometric reading illuminates troubling exclusions and confirms prior findings that technology and its deployment in social situations produce specific forms of discrimination often along well-established lines of marginalization (Thomas 2014). Moreover, and more fundamentally, we argue that identity and fraud are interlaced categories and, accordingly, destabilize—and ultimately make incongruous—binary identification systems that seek to install a stable form of verification of personal identity by linking data to bodily markers using a yes/no logic.
On Technical Failure

The Dell computer screen is filled with the glaring brown-and-white image of an enlarged iris. The eye blinks, making large black stripes in slow movements on the screen before the image freezes as the eye is captured and quickly stored on the hard disk of the computer. The digitalization of her iris scan, together with fingerprints and facial image, ceremoniously marks the birth of Ananya’s digital double. In a few weeks, she will receive a slip of paper that attests to the delivery of her data double, a name given by the Unique Identity Authority of India counting twelve numerical digits. Ananya gets up from the chair (a white plastic chair that had seen better days), adjusts her purple sari, and steps aside for the next one in line, her husband, Polas. He is not so lucky. The facial image is easily captured, but when he places his fingers on the biometric capture box, the computer refuses to agree with the status of his fingerprints. “Error.” The letters appear repeatedly on the computer screen. After the third rejection, the young female operator in jeans and T-shirt looks at him. “Sorry, you cannot be registered.” Whereas Ananya, his wife, is from East Bengal (today Bangladesh), it just happens to be that Polas himself is Indian. It is thus ironic that she now holds the digital key to potential entitlements by the Indian government, while he is being refused. The aadhaar number that he was attempting to register for would provide him with a proof of identity and address, and he is hoping that it will be an easier means to gain access to rights and entitlements for persons below the poverty line. Polas is a hardworking painter who works ten hours a day for an average wage of three thousand rupees a month (approximately fifty U.S. dollars), painting temple walls with low-quality paint. He works hard, mixing the liquid with his own hands, and oftentimes plucking old paint off temple walls with his bare fingers. No wonder his fingerprints are unreadable.

Technical errors are part of the enrollment process of India’s national biometric system. Against the norm of the biometrically readable subject, concerns over the unbiometrifiability of bodies had surfaced before in the heated debates about the feasibility of aadhaar. In a report, Dr. R. Ramakumar, an expert witness before the Lok Sabha Finance Committee, stated that “it has been proven again and again that in the Indian environment the failure to enroll with fingerprints is as high as 15% due to the prevalence of a huge population dependent on manual labour” (Standing Committee 2011, 11). Others argue that the number is negligible (Nilekani and Shah 2015). The answer to the question of how many people might be excluded on account of poor
biomaterial remains safely in the dark, since the aadhaar system only counts positively those who are registered and has no category to acknowledge the existence of people who have been rejected. Citizens resist this form of technical neglect by insisting on registration or seeking imaginative solutions. For example, Polas keeps himself busy making calls to his friend who knows a person willing to use creative solutions to enroll people into the aadhaar scheme in exchange for an under-the-table compensation of a hundred rupees by doing night shifts in the basement of one of the older temples in the town. At night, he enters a room filled with half-moldy paper and waits nervously for the computer to come up. Then, in a matter of a few minutes, his eyes are scanned, his picture is taken, and a clause is added regarding his exception that states that it is unmanageable to register more than a single thumbprint. With the enrollment slip in his hand, Polas is hopeful that he will receive his aadhaar card. He is not yet disillusioned as are others who tried enrolling many times to no avail, such as, for example Pratap.

Pratap lives in Hauz Khas in South Delhi with his son and daughter-in-law and their kids. He likes helping them out, but on a specific day in March 2016 he declines to pick up the kids from school because he urgently needs an aadhaar number and has high hopes that the recently opened enrollment center at the new branch of the Citizens’ Bank will finally provide him with this new identity. It is his third attempt. The first time he went to a mass enrollment camp. He followed the prescribed routine and waited for his card. After six months, when the card had not arrived, he consulted, like Polas, a private broker who promised to help him in return for a hundred rupees. An online inquiry showed that Pratap’s card had been rejected due to a “technical fault.” The precise reason remains unclear. The broker took Pratap to another enrollment station, said all will be fine now, and vanished. “It was a rip-off!” Pratap thinks now. In his hand, he holds the enrollment slip of the second attempt that too yielded no positive result. Looking at it, it becomes obvious that the reading showed very low accuracy for several fingers. Might this be the reason for his rejection? Confronted with the question, Pratap shrugs his shoulder and continues his personal story. At this point, he takes off his sunglasses and exposes a missing eye, explaining that he lost it in a battle in Cargill. “I am a wounded soldier and have fought for the nation,” he says proudly and without any sentimentality. Next, he takes out his army card and continues, “Here! See! This is the proof! I used to show this everywhere and it was always accepted. Now, no one wants to even see it. They are only interested in the aadhaar card.”
Pratap moves forward in line and begins reenrollment. The computer operator records the disability and crosses out one eye in the form. The iris scan of the second eye goes smoothly. However, the fingers pose problems. The machine alerts the operator to a low accuracy rate of 17 to 20 percent for most fingers, and though he repeats the procedure seven times, he can never pass the minimum threshold of 60 percent. Despite the error, Pratap receives a new enrollment slip. Now he has to wait again and hope. It is unclear whether the quality check will eliminate his data once again. Without an aadhaar number, Pratap feels an acute sense of marginalization. The social pressure to produce it at the pension office, the passport office, or the hospital is strong, and not meeting it has effectively devalued his status as a veteran. He is furious and seriously aggrieved that he is no longer seen as what he is: a war survivor and hero who had given his life to the nation. Instead, now he is reduced to being a person without a number.

The Structural Violence of Ungovernable Bodies

In recent years, a burgeoning body of literature has developed sophisticated and fine-grained understandings of the role of citizen-state relations for processes of identity making (van der Ploeg 1999; Hull 2012; Gelb and Clark 2013a, 2013b). State agencies see citizens and engage the population by adopting classifications that distinguish them between insiders and outsiders, citizens and imposters, or deserving and undeserving poor (Scott 1998; Sharma and Gupta 2006). These classifications are put into effect during the operationalization of policies, which structure the experiences of citizens with state representatives and determine their social status and access to resources (Gupta 2012). In a recursive process, citizens accept, reject, or appropriate such categories into personalized narratives, thereby creating social positioning and a sense of self (Corbridge et al. 2005; Hunter and Sugiyama 2014; Markó 2016). This mutually enforced dynamic of identifying and being identified is powerfully illustrated by the earlier narrations.

The housewife Ananya experiences the empowering effect of ownership of an aadhaar number. It relieves her of a tension that had always impacted her life, the fear of being discovered and then dismissed as an illegal migrant. An official proof of existence can act as a protective shield, especially for vulnerable populations for whom it becomes a highly prized commodity loaded with affective value. The homeless citizen shares this fate with the illegalized
immigrant. Life on the streets is harsh, and it is aggravated by the hostility of the security personnel guarding gentrified cities (Rao 2013). The vagabond is easily identified and equated with the beggar or the criminal and thus attracts the disciplining intervention of the police force. “If you show them your aadhaar card, they know ‘this is an official man’ and they leave you alone,” explains Bapu, a rickshaw driver from Bihar, concerning the utility of an aadhaar card. He comes to Delhi every year for a few months after the end of harvest season to earn extra income for the household and the farm. In turn, the veteran, who was refused an aadhaar card, experiences a disruption to his sense of personhood. He identifies as a soldier of merit and is lucky to have a document that proves his status and entitles him to a range of state services, among them a pension and free health care. The introduction of the new identity system threatens to interrupt his ability to connect officially to this status and his rights because his body remains illegible in a system that requires vital finger ridges and pure irises. His grievance is of a particular note and different from the alienation experienced by Polas. Pratap strongly feels that he has given his body to the nation and that his ailments are a direct outcome of his sacrifice. The same state that took his health and strength is now demanding a virgin body that should be available for biometric capture. In turn, Polas experiences his sense of marginalization in contrast to his wife, who despite being an immigrant could easily get the new identity document, while he as her supporter could not and thus had his identity as an effective Head of Family questioned in view of the fact that he could no longer be the main applicant on official documents that would benefit him or his family.

At one level, then, these stories illustrate the discriminatory effect of the inclusion/exclusion dyad typically observed in studies on biometric technology; on another level, they reveal the inefficiencies or even absurdities of the binary logic of governance founded on bodily measures. A burgeoning body of literature substantiates the exclusionary effect of biometric governance, ranging from security situations to projects for social inclusion. The finding that technology itself discriminates is complemented by the study of the political economy in which some groups are more likely to be targets of biometric surveillance than others (Kruger, Magnet, and Van Loon 2008). B. Ajana (2012) provides a compelling example by showing how the Iris Recognition Immigration System at airports is “widening the gap” between welcome travelers and unwanted immigrants in the UK border zone, aggravating already substantial inequalities. Those who have access to a biometric passport, who have volunteered their biometric data, and who have established their status as trusted
persons and desirable subjects can move without friction through electronic portals, thus bypassing lengthy immigration queues. This preselection filters the attention of officers and narrows it down to “difficult” cases, enhancing airport efficiency and the grip on persons declared to be illegal. In this volume, Daniel M. Goldstein and Carolina Alonso-Bejarano show how biometric surveillance is exercised on specific racialized subjects whose migration status is put to the test. Shoshana Amielle Magnet (2011) analyzes programming and argues that biometric sorting is discriminatory because it builds on established social classification. Bodies are preselected according to stereotypical attributes of race and gender to reduce the size of the data set against which the uniqueness of any particular body is established (see also Pugliese 2010).

These accounts contradict optimistic narratives that biometric technology, in its new iteration as a universally applied system for electronic sorting, is natural and objective, and emerging in a fully emancipated manner that leaves behind the derogative assumptions about colonial subjects as deviant and deceitful that motivated the colonial sciences of anthropometry and dactyloscopy (Sekula 1986; Cole 2001; Maguire 2009). Instead, biometric technology continues to produce the deviant body, even if it is no longer based on a priori negative classification of people through the lenses of race ideology or the criminal justice system. Discrimination in the case of the aadhaar system results from the underlying assumption that biometric technology is universally applicable equally to all human beings and will function regardless of class, status, education, or any other social characteristics. The aadhaar system does not target specific groups for inclusion or exclusion. It does not confirm citizenship like a passport, the right to vote like a voter ID, or the status of a welfare beneficiary as the ration card, the latter being widely used in India by poor people as an identity document. In this sense of delinking the processes of identification from the making of specific identity claims, it differs from most other identity projects in the world and produces the much-praised potential for interoperability. By simply recording the uniqueness of a person, aadhaar establishes what Nandan Nilekani calls a “thin” identity.

A few months after his appointment as chairman, Nandan met K. V. Kamath, then the chairman of ICICI bank, to deliver a presentation about Aadhaar and its uses. At the end of the talk an amazed Kamath declared that the entire scheme boasted of a “diabolical simplicity.” Part of the reason for this simplicity was purely practical—if you have to collect 1.2 billion data sets that will be compared against each other every time a
resident uses their Aadhaar number it’s best to collect the least possible amount of information. Pragmatism also dictates that the path to success is easier if you provide a “thin” solution—one that does not infringe on turf that other government agencies lay claim to. Aadhaar provides a single, clearly defined piece of information—a person’s identity—and nothing more. (Nilekani and Shah 2015, 10)

This technical view of aadhaar as simply proving “uniqueness” through biometric identifiers, and as such saying nothing about a person’s identity, discounts the fact that in an environment of near universality of aadhaar, owning an aadhaar number in itself becomes a status that can be negatively contrasted to not having one, or being classified as an “error.” The discrimination of those not given an aadhaar number is amplified in a context of interoperability, whereby denial at one access point can lead to chains of exclusion. The aadhaar identity is linked to an individual’s personal information, and through this, “the UIDAI will be creating a transaction identity for each resident that is both verified and reliable” (UIDAI 2010, 33) because it is transported into a networked system of information exchange. As a powerful truth-telling practice, biometric-based verification thereby renders those bodies/identities that are not readable by the biometric machine into unverifiable and unreliable identities and therefore outside the realm of legitimized knowledge, thereby making them categorically suspicious (Maguire 2009, 13; see also Hristova 2014). These errors of exclusion and inclusion speak to the topic of discrimination. However, they also point to the blind spot of biometric governance that undermines the goal of perfected population management and universal interoperability of services.

The epistemological position underlying the universalizing aadhaar project assumes a specific biometric norm that regards the human body as adhering to this norm of possessing stable markers available for biometric inspection at any time and any place. Such a presumption sets humans up for failure since it ignores that “normality equals activity and flexibility” (Rabinow 1998, 196). In his comparative discussion of Michel Foucault and Georges Canguilhem, Rabinow elaborates the dialectical relation between norm and error. Scientific modernity is invested in the formulation of “the normal” as a stable truth that may guide the interpretation of life and direct the activity of normalizing the deviant through medical interventions or the reform activities of institutions such as the school, the clinic, or the prison. The notion of the normal and the activity of normalizing deny the dynamic power of life that
is forever changing and adapting, or, in other words, the artifice of the norm turns life into an error (see also Maguire and Fussy 2016).

So what happens when the normalizing activity of scientifically measuring an apparently stable truth runs up against the multiple mutation of life? It is acknowledged in the calculation of the error margins and is addressed through the continuous work of reclassifying and adapting the categories that may create new frameworks that will, however, continue to clash with endless variations of dynamic life (Bowker and Star 1999; Singh and Jackson 2017). The work of structuring is a site of political and social struggle precisely because it imposes clear boundaries between phenomena. In our case, the lauded simplicity of the aadhaar’s biometric measure makes for an especially rigid system since the binary yes/no classification leaves no space for negotiating the error—technical and social—at the margins. Accordingly, Ananya becomes legitimized as a resident despite the lack of official recognition of her status, while Polas and Pratap are now part of an unknowable shadow population outside the gaze of a biometrically enabled state. They exist in what Murray calls the “negative space archive” of biometric governance:

Common to any introductory drawing class is the negative space drawing exercise. Such a drawing, of a chair, for example, develops not through a focus on the chair, but on the space around and inside the chair (between the legs and the slits in the back). The most well-known version of a negative space drawing depicts either two faces in profile looking at each other or a vase, depending on how one looks at it. Although “negative” space is described in relation to “positive” space (positive space is the shape of the chair as opposed to the shape of the space around the chair), a look at this type of drawing, at these types of spaces, makes clear that making meaning of such a drawing depends on both spaces existing at once. (Murray 2007, 350)

The illegible body of the negative space archive is troubling for a number of reasons. It turns people into “monsters” or aberrations from the norm (Murray 2007), and it creates an ungovernable population along lines that are unpredictable or apparently unmotivated. The error shares a space with fraud, since a person refusing to show his aadhaar number or able to prove her identity biometrically could be an error or a fraud. He or she might be hiding her real identity or not have one. The system accepts and rejects in a manner that remains incomprehensible to citizens and operators alike, and depending on the result determines whether people can enter into relations with state agen-
cies or private industry, buy a service, pay taxes, or receive welfare benefits. While the aadhaar number in most contexts may not be sufficient for claiming a right or conducting a transaction, the lack of it produces a new status as an outsider. The magnitude of the concern clearly emerges when one adds to the issue of unbiometrifiable people the irregularities of the verification processes.

The errors of enrollment are complemented by the exclusions occurring during verification. People routinely using fingerprinting devices find them wanting in situations when they sweat, use cream or oil, or apply henna for decoration (Rao 2017). In winter, stiffness hinders a swift reading of finger ridges, and after-harvest calluses prevent verification; cooking also inflicts burns that often require days to heal. The exclusion is temporary for some and permanent for others. As published regularly in newspapers and discussed in a growing body of scholarship (Murray 2007; Masiero 2016; Singh and Jackson 2017), there is ample evidence of the regularly high exclusion errors caused especially by fingerprinting. The erratic acceptance or rejection of people has massive consequences for governance. Only by ignoring the volatility of this process and its inefficiencies can organizations maintain the semblance of “good governance.” Amma’s story is a case in point.

Amma is a widow who lives in Southwest Delhi, where the ration office trials biometrically enabled distribution of rations to people living below the poverty line. She is well known in the neighborhood and an acquaintance of the ration shop owner, who had sold to her subsidized grains for more than twenty years. She is the proud owner of an aadhaar number, and though she also signed up for the new biometrically enabled system of ration distribution, she has discovered that the fingerprint reader at the ration shop cannot recognize her finger. She comes every month and fails every month. The procedure is shameful for the shopkeeper, who tries to deflect responsibility for Amma’s plight by invoking the need for family solidarity: “I keep telling her to bring a younger relative, but she does not listen.” This statement refers to the rule that biometric authentication of any member of family listed on the ration card would be sufficient to verify the entitlement. The elderly woman has two adult sons. Yet, she laments that both have abandoned her. Neighbors report that she is indeed one of the most destitute widows in the locality. The tension between the different ways of knowing the elderly woman cannot be solved. Locally she is considered destitute on two accounts: first, she has no income, and second, there is no male family member to look after her. Being a single elderly widow in India is a curse. Yet, at the ration shop, the pity of
neighbors cannot save her. Here she is reduced to an unreadable body who cannot effectively claim her right to food.

Amma’s experience of rejection by her sons is exacerbated by the negligence of an uncaring state, deepening her marginalization so much so that it causes discomfort also to her neighbors and the shopkeeper. The stubborn monthly appearance of her visibly neglected, poor, and frail body deflates claims of objectivity attributed to biometric governance. In the official statistics presented on the home page of the Delhi National Food Security, this error hides behind a smoke screen of absent figures. The column intended to list the number of failed biometric verifications has been disregarded, with the explicitly stated purpose to make nontransparent the difference between people who did not wish to and those who could not collect their monthly food ration (Rao 2017). This comforting opacity between people who choose to ignore a service and those who are ignored by the service melts away when shopkeepers, business correspondents, or IT personnel come face-to-face with people and their claims, alternative stories, and paper evidence. In this situation, governments are unable to trace by which logic services are given or refused, and corporations can simply not sell biometrically enabled products to certain customers. Errors from the perspective of the service providers are a perverse inefficiency that translates into a loss of income, governmental opacity, or distributive injustice.

Our focus on life histories demonstrates the way the biometric system produces a sociological margin of error among those who live a particularly harsh life. When the idealized technonorm of the stable and legible body runs up against live bodies—which age, get hurt, or sweat—governance becomes uncertain. While maintenance of biomaterial as well as cleaning and preparing the body can enhance the success of biometric readings, it cannot bring about readings that tally with all the expectations. Life produces an excess of moments, conditions, and instances that cause a breakdown of the body-machine link. The body is or is not what it has become through the life lived by a person. This failure of bodies to comply with a specific technology complicates the effect of biometric technology, and it damages the idealized dream of biometric sorting as a purely technical and thus objective process. The notion of biometric identification as free from human manipulation was, as a matter of course, always going to be a fiction. All processes of sorting are based on classifications. Handing them over to new technical routines might hide the underlying distinctions, but they do not remove discrimination. By highlighting the classificatory work of the “error,” we have illustrated the
consequences of ignoring the negative space hidden in the archive of India’s aadhaar project. Truth emerges through a process of discriminating people who fail in view of algorithmically rendered norms, thereby creating exclusions and blind spots. These mark the background before which some people can be legitimized. The “error” therefore is not the fault of the system or an unpredictable blunder; instead, it serves the purpose of bringing to the light the truth of which bodies pass and which do not.

Conclusion

Eight years after the introduction of aadhaar and the distribution of more than 1 billion aadhaar numbers, the significance of the system cannot be overstated. Officially, aadhaar is a voluntary system, but, in practice, it is difficult especially for the vulnerable to navigate complex bureaucratic systems without this biometric proof of identity. Today, aadhaar is mandatory for welfare schemes, such as access to subsidized rations or propane gas cylinders. The Modi government is ready to make it a required part of the tax return application and even children now need an aadhaar card to get a birth certificate or register at school. The rationale is that building a secure database will serve as a deterrent to fraud and exclude fake identities from any access to state services. The “biometric imaginary” (Donovan 2015, 817) configures biometric surveillance as a necessary, suitable, and effective way of streamlining governance by making transactions transparent (Sarkar 2014). However, rather than solving the identification crises, the deployment of biometric devices produces new worrying ambiguities and thus an alternative disorder.

Here we have been concerned with the production of the universalized norm of biometric identity and the errors that a specific practice of biometric verification produces. The application of biometric technology requires a particular kind of normalized body that may be at odds with the bodies of living people, which constantly adjust, change, or get mutilated over the course of harsh and complicated lives. The rejection of some bodies during the mandated technological rendering creates temporary or permanent exclusions and belies the notion that the national biometric system will treat everyone equally. The life of the unreadable and unverifiable body is, indeed, a life that, albeit filled with experiences that are real, represents nothing in the biometric system. It gets cast aside as flawed and potentially suspicious, while simultaneously acting as a mirror of truth to the biometric system,
since unreason is the foundation for reason. The binary sorting of bodies into true and false produces a new foundational truth, where the lives lived in the erroneous margin are judged not only by the nontruth of error—the technical exclusion—but also by the judgment of unruly, unregistrable lives. The unruly life that is judged an error is also filled with images and visualities of the life of unreadable bodies—that is to say, a widow, or man having too large of a family—thus being caught in games of truth and error. By declaring that these erratic results stand in for an objective truth, those who pass, or do not pass, have been brought to the light of governmental reason.

Notes

1 Subsequently the family received substantial amount of public attention. See, for example, Daily Mail Reporter (2011).
2 See, for example, Malhotra (2017); Viswanath (2017); or Venkatanarayanan (2017).

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