

Johnston's Profiles and Plotlines: Data Surveillance in Twenty-First Century Literature

Sandro Eich

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Book Review

Review of Johnston, Katherine. 2023. *Profiles and Plotlines: Data Surveillance in Twenty-First Century Literature*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press. 226 pp. US\$90.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9781609388935.

Sandro Eich

University of St Andrews, UK
sandro.eich@st-andrews.ac.uk

In *Profiles and Plotlines: Data Surveillance in Twenty-First Century Literature*, Katherine D. Johnston forcefully showcases the work that contemporary literary texts undertake to make sense of the increasing enmeshment of human experience and data collection in twenty-first-century society. As the first book-long study into the triangulated relationship between literary writing, data surveillance, and profiling culture, the book opens up a research trajectory that has a unique potential to concomitantly address the forms and functions of contemporary literary writing, and the wider cultural contexts of data society from which they emerge. The engagement with contemporary literary texts and cultural contexts—Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* (2014), William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* (2003), Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), and Mark McGurl’s critical work on the role Amazon plays in the literary marketplace—fills an important gap in the literature/surveillance discourse, a space that is usually inhabited by utopian and dystopian narratives. To that end, the choice of works analysed here presents a refreshing and timely approach to understanding data surveillance outside of the dialectic of the desirable and undesirable. More importantly, the contemporariness of these texts allows Johnston to base her analysis of profiling culture and data surveillance against the backdrop of the very real (not utopian, not dystopian) “new master narratives of neoliberalism and algorithmic governance” (25).

The book takes its analytical pillars, namely profiling and data surveillance, as active in nature, working out the subtleties in which the primary texts enact these themes rather than merely staging them through techniques such as world-building or characterisation. It is already in the project’s stated motivation—to better understand “how data functions rhetorically and materially” (6) in these texts—that Johnston bridges the gap between literary representation and a world outside of the text. In four-and-a-half case studies, the conclusion offering new and convincing arguments that enrich the preceding chapters, the book stages the conversation between different literary genres and the way these genres engage with data surveillance and profiling. Particularly, the individual chapters focus on a varied set of analytical approaches: the idea of “positionality” in Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the politics of oppositional looking and countersurveillance in Rankine’s *Citizen*, the critique of free labour and the construction of capital through consumer citizens in Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, the deconstruction of the self-help genre through the idea of profiling in Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, and lastly, the need to understand Amazon’s impact on literariness as intertwined with developments in big data and profile culture. Each

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individual chapter presents a set of analytic mechanisms that together can enrich our understanding of the role of readers as affected citizens.

While the primary audience of the book is literary and cultural critics, the erudite entanglement of textual analysis and critical theoretical approaches (drawn from different academic fields such as new media studies, surveillance studies, affect studies, critical race studies, and gender studies) allows for a wide-ranging engagement with different academic audiences and publics. What brings these diverse audiences together should be a shared interest in exploring how literary texts develop a language that allows us to critique and resist attempts of big datafication and profiling culture by different stakeholders. To make this clear, Johnston's reading of "data fictions" showcases how such a form of literary writing incorporates data, surveillance, and profiling as meaning-making entities. In the process, it draws out enlightening parallels between the functions of reading and writing, and the logic of data, for example when she analyses Mohin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*: "Like the 'co-creative project' of writing and reading, it [profiling] is full of creative narrations and interpretations affected by the hegemonic discourses and assumptions of the historical present" (130).

As there is a diverse set of stakeholders involved with profiling as an economic and digital practice in today's day and age—ranging from the corporate sector and state powers to underground hacking networks interested in exploiting personal data—Johnston helpfully collates these different groups and cultures under the umbrella of "the profile industry" (11). This concept helpfully bridges the tricky gap between "valid" interests (as driven by the national security sector) and "invalid" interests (such as the exploitation of the consumer citizen) in profiling. Particularly the boundary between national and corporate stakeholders is increasingly blurred, and we yet have to find creative ways of expressing this relationship outside of the dyad of capitalism and national security. Abstracting these interests into a larger "profiling industry" allows Johnston (and us) to consider the epistemological and cultural manifestations of such profiling activities without falling back onto mere critique of capitalism or the state.

From Johnston's writing style, it is clear that the language and imagery found in the primary works are what drives her analysis and conceptual approach. She stays remarkably close to direct textual analysis which, despite providing the reader with an exceptional sense of the primary works' value as literary works, might to others come across as expensing with conceptual and theoretical development in favour of textual analysis. At the same time, having shown the varied textually tangible values of what those texts can contribute to enshrining data surveillance and profile culture as themes intimately intertwined with cultural and narrative analysis (profiling, as a practice, relying intimately on the idea of narration), the book's final assessment of the disruptive qualities that literature can have (161) makes it clear that such a methodology of close reading enables us to look beyond abstraction and into the practical vocabulary of critiquing big data surveillance.

Through the lens of profile epistemologies, this book presents a unique perspective on the critical functions of literary writing in today's data-proliferated world for readers of *Surveillance & Society*. The book positions itself comfortably in a growing field of scholarship that looks at human experiences of the digital and its surveillance capacities through literary texts. Even though Johnston does not claim herself that the book engages in a wider philosophical discourse on living in a society organised by the logic of big data, the text's demonstration of how contemporary literature can help us identify "alternative possibilities for understanding what is legible, knowable, and sayable in the data age...." (4) renders itself a powerful vessel that might help us navigate critical discussions about neoliberal corporate culture, statecraft, and technologies of subjectivation.