9

The Birth of Code/Body

Azadeh Akbari

They ask me how did you get here? Can't you see it on my body? The Lybian desert red with immigrant bodies, the Gulf of Aden bloated, the city of Rome with no jacket. . . . I spent days and nights in the stomach of the trucks; I did not come out the same. Sometimes it feels like someone else is wearing my body.[1] (Shire 2011, 25)

We are Black and the border guards hate us. Their computers hate us too.[2] (Molnar 2020, 12)

This book contends with various ways of being human in the digital era, and this chapter intends to describe what it means to have a human body in our time. Much has been written about the colonial, racializing and gendered continuities of perceiving, sorting and discriminating bodies in a digital world. However, nothing like the digital has transformed the materiality of the body in its very flesh and bone. It seems redundant to say that the body is the prerequisite to being human, yet this superfluous fact questions how bodies function in in-between worlds: they flow in this world's digital veins and yet rigidly represent decisive characteristics. They seem unreal, an amalgamation of data sometimes, while at other times fingerprints, iris scans and bone tests portray a cage, a trap, a body that betrays. This contrast is especially visible in uncertain spaces, where identity becomes crucial and only certain categories of humans can *pass*, such as borders and refugee camps. These spaces are not only obscuring the body while exposing it; they also exist in a complex mixture of national jurisdiction, international regulations and increasingly private "stakeholders" in immigration management. In addition to the severity of experiencing datafication of bodies in these spaces, the deliberate unruliness paves the way for these spaces to become *technological testing grounds* (Molnar 2020); for example, technologies developed for fleeing populations were used for contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The relationship between body, datafication and surveillance has been scrutinized from the early days of digital transformation. Today's most debated issues, such

[1] From the poem "Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Centre)" by Warsan Shire.
[2] Excerpt from group discussion at later-evacuated L'Autre Caserne community in Brussels.

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as algorithmic bias, were already warned about, and the ramifications of their discriminatory assumption for marginalized people were highlighted at the end of the 1980s (Gandy 1989). Similarly, the predictive character of aggregated data and the consequences of profiling were analysed (Marx 1989). From these early engagements, many instances of showing how routinely technologies are used to govern, datafy and surveil the body developed (see, e.g. Bennett et al. 2014). Additionally, surveillance scholars discussed how the "boundary between the body *itself* and information *about* that body" is increasingly transforming (Van der Ploeg 2012, 179). Building on this rich body of literature and personal experiences of immigration, exile and entrapment, this chapter revisits the body, being uncomfortable in/with/within it and yet being aware of its power to define if one is considered human enough to bear rights, feelings and existence. Similar to the chapter's movement between boundaries of the material and virtual, the text also oscillates between academic thinking, autobiographical accounts, pictures and poesy; denoting the discomfort of being in a Code/Body.[3] In this chapter, poetic language remedies the absence of the performative to help with the linguistic distress for finding the right words to describe embodied feelings.

9.1 FROM DATA DOUBLES TO EMBODIMENT

The scholarship on datafication, surveillance and digital transformation in the 2000s is infatuated with what can be called the demise of the material body. The speed of datafication and digital change lead to the idea that the surveillance society gives rise to *disappearing* bodies (Lyon 2001); the body is datafied and represented through data in a way that its materiality is obscured. Although such conceptualizations had been formerly discussed, especially by feminist and queer scholars, the liberatory nature of these feminist interpretations of cyborg bodies (Haraway 1985) and body assemblages were not transferred into these new understandings of datafied and surveilled body. In their influential essay on surveillant assemblages, Haggerty and Ericson compare the digital era with Rousseau's proclamation, "man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains" by claiming that nowadays "humans are born free, and are immediately electronically monitored" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 611). The subjectivating effect of surveillance, then, is instantly interlinked with basic rights and the meaning of being human. The body, they argue, is positioned within this surveillance assemblage: it is "broken down into a series of discrete signifying flows" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 612). Contrary

[3] The combination of Code/Body is first used by Suneel Jethani (2020) in their paper on self-tracking and mediating the body. The paper uses the similar notion of Code/Body or coded body to represent the hybrid or networked body. However, my chapter's theoretical perspective differentiates between Code/Body and coded body and furthers the concept of Code/Body beyond self-quantification. This text is inspired by my lecture-performance at PACT Zollverein Performing Arts Theatre in Essen, Germany in 2023.

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to the Foucauldian way of monitoring, the body needs to be fragmented to be observed. Fragments can be combined or re-combined into "data-doubles": ones that "transcend human corporeality and reduce flesh to pure information" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 613).

The scholarly debates on bodies in the following two decades were centred around the transformation of the body "via practices of socio-technical intermediation" (French and Smith 2016, 9). The body and its datafication, visualization, mediation and multiplication have become increasingly important. Research about sorting, profiling and reification of marginal identities (or race/gender/class/etc.), inclusion and exclusion proliferates and successfully demonstrates how bias, racism, oppression and discrimination are injected into digital lives. The data double revealed the concurrent processes of the body's objectification – to transform its characteristics to data – and its subjectivation due to the socio-technical processes of datafication. As Zuboff assertively writes in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, "the body is simply a set of coordinates in time and space where sensation and action are translated as data" (Zuboff 2019, 203). In this reading of the body, behavioural surplus is the engine of surveillance capitalism and the body is only *another* source of data. However, recent technological advancements, especially in using bodily features for identification, have started to expand and reconfigure such accounts. More recent studies underline the body's centrality, for example, in big data surveillance and manipulation of the "surveilled subject's embodied practices" (Ball et al. 2016) or critically examine how biometric technologies transform the relationships between the body and privacy (Epstein 2016). It is argued that data body is not only a change in how bodies are represented but there exists an ontological change: the materiality of the body "and our subjective forms of embodiment that are caught in this historical process of change" are transforming (Van der Ploeg 2012, 179). This chapter contributes to these later discussions, where the body is not only central as the source of data but has its own agency as an actant in data assemblages.

9.2 THE BIRTH OF CODE/BODY

Following the global digital transformation, discussions on issues of privacy, data protection, algorithmic harm and similar have entered the academic discourse and public debate. The recent years have seen an increase in reporting about the Big Tech companies as emerging new actors in the international governance realm. However, only those events that entail geopolitical or socio-economic relations to the Western countries are deemed relevant. For example, the news of Chinese payment methods through facial recognition technology rapidly reached the Western media (Agence France-Presse 2019) but much less attention was paid to the internal politics of digitalization in the Global South or the new e-governance measures of international governance institutions. This reluctance is intensified

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when digital technologies target communities that are marginalized, stateless or economically disadvantaged. UNHCR's use of iris scanning for refugee cash assistance illustrates a case of extreme datafication of the body against people in dire need of assistance with hardly any voice to consent to or refuse the imposed technologies. Ninety per cent of refugees in Jordan are registered through EyeCloud, "a secure and encrypted network connection that can be used to authenticate refugees against biometric data stored in the UNHCR database" (UNHCR 2019). Iris scanning is then used for payment in the camp's supermarket to calculate and pay the wages for working inside the camp and it replaces any monetary transaction. The EyeCloud demonstrates how current datafication practices do not only stop at using the datafied body for identification and representation but actively integrate the body as a part of data machinery. This instrumentalized body simultaneously carries the gaze of surveillance and guards itself against itself. The consequences are painful: more than a decade ago, *The Guardian* newspaper reported that asylum seekers burn their fingertips on electric stoves or with acid to avoid the Dublin regulations and to avoid being returned to their point of arrival, usually in Greece or Italy (Grant and Domokos 2011). The betraying body, however, regenerates fingertips after 2 weeks. Similarly, in cases where the age assessment of a claimed minor proves inconclusive, the person could be referred for a bone density test of the wrist by x-ray in Malta (Asylum Information Database 2023) or a "dental x-ray of the third molar in the lower jaw and MRI of the lower growth plate of the femur bone" in Sweden (Rättsmedicinalverket 2022). In these cases, the immigration authorities believe the body's truthfulness and the accuracy of medical sciences against mendacious and deceitful asylum seekers. Table 9.1 shows the extent of data categories gathered on visa, immigration or asylum applicants travelling to Europe. The body increasingly becomes a vehicle for *knowing* the real person behind the application.

The body acts as a trap. It transcends the current argumentations about profiling, sorting or bias based on personal data. What we witness is not just the datafication of the body but its function as ID card, debit card or labour hours registration sheet. If the cash machines, IDs and punched cards were technologies of yesterday, today these features are transferred to the body. The body *becomes* the payment system, the surveillance machine, the border. It is integrated into the datafied society's infrastructure. It is platformized humanity. It is an integral material part of the bordering. On the Eastern European borders, heartbeat detectors, thermal-vision cameras and drones are used to unlawfully return the asylum seekers who manage to pass the border (Popoviciu 2021). The border is not a line on the map; it is everywhere (Balibar 2012, 78). The border is simultaneously a body on the move and a vehicle to keep out a body that does not belong. Consequently, the body/border can efficiently prevent flight since it entraps. When the Taliban got hold of biometric data banks that Western governments, the UN and the World Bank left behind in 2021, many activists and experts who collaborated with the coalition went

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TABLE 9.1 *Data categories stored in European immigration data banks.*[4]

Personal data stored in the different EU immigration data banks						
Data Type	SIS	VIS	EURODAC	EES	ETIAS	ECRIS-TCN
Alphanumeric Data						
"general" information (name, age, gender, nationality)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Occupation		x			x	
Education					x	
Reason for travel		x				
Information about funds for living expenses		x				
Address, phone number, email-address, IP-address					x	
Information about past or present felonies	x				x	x
Information about recent stay in a war or conflict region					x	
Biometric Data						
Fingerprints	x	x	x	x		x
Facial image	x	x	x	x		x
Genetic data	x					

into hiding because any border passage would put them in immediate danger of identification (Human Rights Watch 2022). They went into indefinite house arrest within the skeleton of their own bodies. This notion of corporeal entrapment or embodied surveillance resonates with the new conceptualization of how we understand *space* in the era of datafication. *Coded space* is defined as "spaces where software makes a difference to the transduction of spatiality, but the relationship between code and space is not mutually constituted" (Kitchin and Dodge 2011, 18). The digitalization of border security at airports or the use of digital technologies in the classroom are examples of coded space. In all these instances, when technology fails, there are still ways to finish the intended task: if the machine at a fully-automated high-tech airport does not recognize you, there is always an officer who can legitimize the authenticity of your ID. However, in the *code/space* the existence of space is dependent on the code and vice versa. If you are attending an online presentation and the technology fails, that would end your interaction. The code/space highlights the dyadic relationship between the two and their co-constructive nature (Kitchin and Dodge 2011). The dyadic relationship also explains the sense of

[4] Table 9.1 was produced in 2022 in collaboration with Christopher Husemann, PhD student in political geography, University of Münster, and was later updated by the author.

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corporeal entrapment. The datafied or *coded body* still exists, moves and functions. It has a mutual relationship with the data it produces but is not entirely constituted through it. We have our virtual profiles in social media platforms or wear smart watches but, as soon as we leave such spaces, we resign from being part of their universe. The *Code/Body*, however, is born in co-construction with the code and ceases existence if the code fails.

The Code/Body is an extension of code/space argumentation to the Foucauldian corporeal space, constantly subject to governmentality. Consequently, the surveillant assemblage introduced by Haggerty and Ericson (2000) is not only about the production of data double. Their use of the Deleuzian conceptualization of the "body without organs" as an abstraction of the material body does not reflect the co-construction of the virtual and the material. Code/Body, on the other hand, offers a way to understand how the materiality of the body remains integral to our understanding of the body's datafication while transcending the virtual–material dichotomy. The Code/Body carries manifold wounds: the bodily pain of being wounded – burnt fingertips, lungs full of water, starved behind border walls – and the hidden wounds of datafied exclusion. Although algorithms try to hide their bias, Code/Body reveals that race has a colour, ethnicity has an accent and gender could be "scientifically" examined. Underlining such material features of the body and their role in defining the Code/Body emphasizes "the co-constitution of humans and non-humans" (Müller 2015, 27) and brings our attention to how things are held together and how datafied societies function. Extending the assemblage point of view, Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides a better empirical ground to understand the politics of the networks. It moves the focus more on outward associations and less on the intrinsic characteristics of a thing or its abstraction. The Code/Body highlights the co-constitution of these outward–inward associations and the body's agency in changing the flows and associations within the assemblage. From this perspective, things have an open and contested character (Mol 1999, 75), and the body is performative, meaning that its position within an assemblage can redefine its reality. Consequently, if one thing could be shaped by a variety of practices and networked connections, it can be configured in multiple and ambivalent ways. Lawful immigrants from internationally undesirable countries experience this multiple configuration throughout their border experiences. Visas to countries that have been visited before are rejected; border officers ask irrelevant questions to make the entry unpleasant or surprisingly act extra friendly. Automated passport check stations flicker a red light for double control but, on the next visit, go green. The assemblage changes and the integrated body in it changes accordingly. The Code/Body is, then, the ultimate device to realize and fulfil this fluidity. As a result, it is highly political how assemblages take shape, what actants dominate the flows, and which of the multiple realities of a thing are given preference. The *ontological politics* (Mol 1999, 74) of Code/Body define the conditions of the possibility of being a human. Depending on their position in an assemblage, a person's body could be

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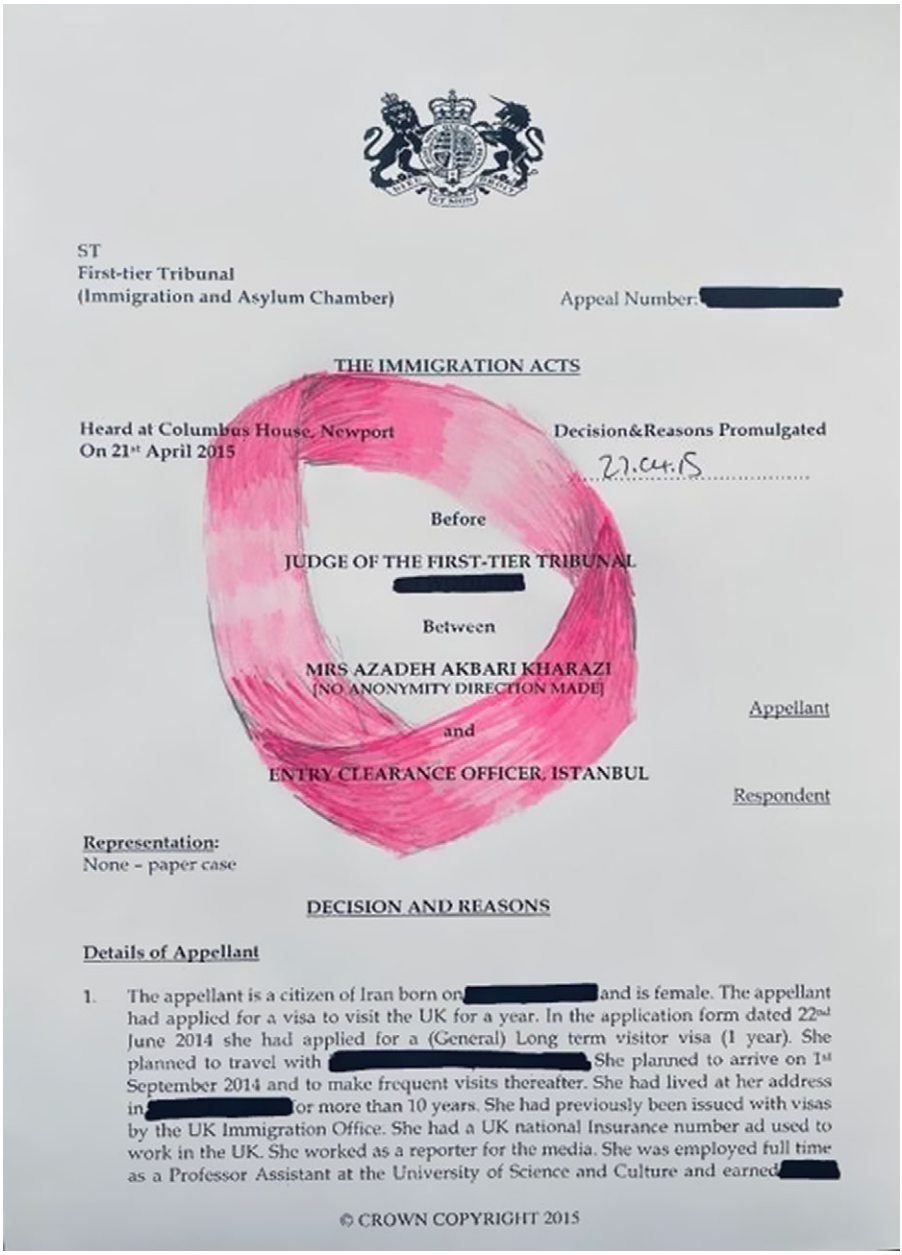
reconfigured very differently. Heartbeats mean one thing on a smartwatch at a spinning class and another when sitting behind a lie detector machine at a border detention centre. Such politics of being are not only about positionality and "where we are" but also include temporality and "when we are." I was held twice at the UK border detention centre despite having a valid visa. On both occasions, a sympathetic border officer took upon himself the time-consuming task of removing me from the "bad list." It feels like a wonder that, within 40 minutes, a detained suspicious person, banished to a corner of the airport under the watchful eyes of a guard, turns into a legal traveller. Like a thing, the body can be understood as "a temporary moment in an endless process of assembling materials, a partial stabilisation and a fragile accomplishment that is always inexorably becoming something else, somewhere else" (Gregson et al. 2010, 853). Code/Body, again, facilitates this temporary and mutable process of re-configuration. The more the body is datafied, the more physical it becomes.

9.3 A MOEBIUS BODY

The Code/Body blurs not only the virtual–material binaries but also nuances the politics of sorting by questioning the discourse of inclusion–exclusion through digital technologies, platforms and algorithms. Code/Body extends concepts such as the mediated body or the quantified self to propose an existential situation where the *self* stops to exist outside the code. This newly contended notion of self is the prerequisite of citizenship in the smart cities – the utopian dream of an urban life, which all societies are ambitiously moving towards. In future smart cities, we will not only witness behaviour nudging or the gamification of obedience (Botsman 2017); cities will be transformed into experimental labs, where the urban citizen is produced through measuring (Mattern 2016). On top of gathering data through sensors, following the movements and urban flows, and closely watching the bodies, the body becomes an instrument of belonging. To be in, it needs to be outed. The body needs to be thoroughly datafied to become integrated into the smart infrastructure of the city. Living in the Code/Body is a constant ride on a Moebius ring: the inside and outside depend on how one defines their situation or how their situation is defined for them. The Code/Body could belong to an urban assemblage at a specific time and lose all its association by a slight change in the code in the next second. In Figure 9.1, I have drawn a Moebius ring on the verdict of my complaint against UK immigration's refusal of my tourist visa.

I had lived in London for 4 years and, after giving up my residency and returning to Iran, my tourist visa application was rejected. I was confused: I used to belong, work, live and actively participate in British society. Why was I suddenly out? Curiously, the judge had suggested since I can use technologies such as Skype to contact my friends in the UK, my human rights are not deemed to be violated. The code kept my body outside through its affordances to bring us closer. The movement

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ST
First-tier Tribunal
(Immigration and Asylum Chamber)

Appeal Number: [redacted]

THE IMMIGRATION ACTS

Heard at Columbus House, Newport
On 21st April 2015

Decision&Reasons Promulgated
27.04.15

Before

JUDGE OF THE FIRST-TIER TRIBUNAL
[redacted]

Between

MRS AZADEH AKBARI KHARAZI
[NO ANONYMITY DIRECTION MADE]

Appellant

and

ENTRY CLEARANCE OFFICER, ISTANBUL

Respondent

Representation:
None - paper case

DECISION AND REASONS

Details of Appellant

1. The appellant is a citizen of Iran born on [redacted] and is female. The appellant had applied for a visa to visit the UK for a year. In the application form dated 22nd June 2014 she had applied for a (General) Long term visitor visa (1 year). She planned to travel with [redacted] She planned to arrive on 1st September 2014 and to make frequent visits thereafter. She had lived at her address in [redacted] for more than 10 years. She had previously been issued with visas by the UK Immigration Office. She had a UK national Insurance number ad used to work in the UK. She worked as a reporter for the media. She was employed full time as a Professor Assistant at the University of Science and Culture and earned [redacted]

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FIGURE 9.1 Mobius strip on Immigration Courts' verdict © Azadeh Akbari, 2023

between inside and outside makes bodily functions fuzzy; as if one can die while breathing and live forever, even after the heart stops. The following quote from a Somali refugee (now residing in Europe) initially shocks the reader: Did they drown?

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Immediately after this thought, it seems his body has been revived from a mass of drowned refugees.

> I was caught by the Lybian coastguard three times – first time from Qarabully; second time, Zawyia; third time, Zuwarna. And my fourth time, we drowned. And the fifth time, I made it to safety. (Hayden 2022, 5)

Another female Kurdish Iranian protestor during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement – a movement of Iranian women against compulsory Islamic dress code and discriminatory laws – reflects on how her body experiences the images she had previously seen on (social) media. She writes about how the physical and digital blend into each other and, despite the fear of pain instigated by watching social media videos, the real batons or pellets do not cause the expected physical pain.

> I once received loud cheers when I escaped a scene of confrontation with security forces and ran into the crowd. … The next morning when I was looking over my bruises in the mirror, the details of the confrontation suddenly passed before my eyes. … I had not simply been beaten; I had also resisted and threw a few punches and kicks. My body had unconsciously performed those things I had seen other protestors do. I remembered the astonished faces of the guards trying to subdue me. My memory had just now, after a time interval, reached my body. (L 2022)

The body's agency leaks into the consciousness only after it has performed a task. In moments of upheaval, where the oppressed body stands up to its oppressors, it tries to distort its entrapment. Despite being surveilled, controlled and censored the body lives the unpermitted imaginary: it kicks the security forces, it runs and hides, it shows skin. It revolts against the sensory limitations imposed on it. In Figure 9.2, Woman, Life, Freedom protestors have covered a subway CCTV camera with female menstrual pads. Their female bodies withstand the gaze that controls, hides, oppresses and objectifies them. Next to the camera is a hashtag with an activist's name: this time, virtual campaigns fuse into the material reality of the city. The Code/Body which is meant to be a part of the surveillant machinery through CCTV camera and facial recognition technologies, blinds the omnipresent eye with its most female bodily function: menstruation.

Similar to silencing some bodily features, some bodies are marked as intangible, unrepresentable and unfathomable. Despite being embedded within different streams of data and code, our collective imagination still does not register the precarity of some bodies. At the time that artificial intelligence claims to further the limits of our creative powers by creating historical scenes or impossible fantasies, I inserted the poem by Warsan Shire at the beginning of this chapter in three popular AI-based text-to-image generation platforms. The results in Figure 9.3 show irrelevant pictures of mostly men depicting some keywords of the poem. The messiness of the poetry – and the poet's feelings – does not translate into clear cut images. The machine fails to grasp even the theme of the poem. The wounded Code/Body remains hidden. The skin bears the pain of these wounds without

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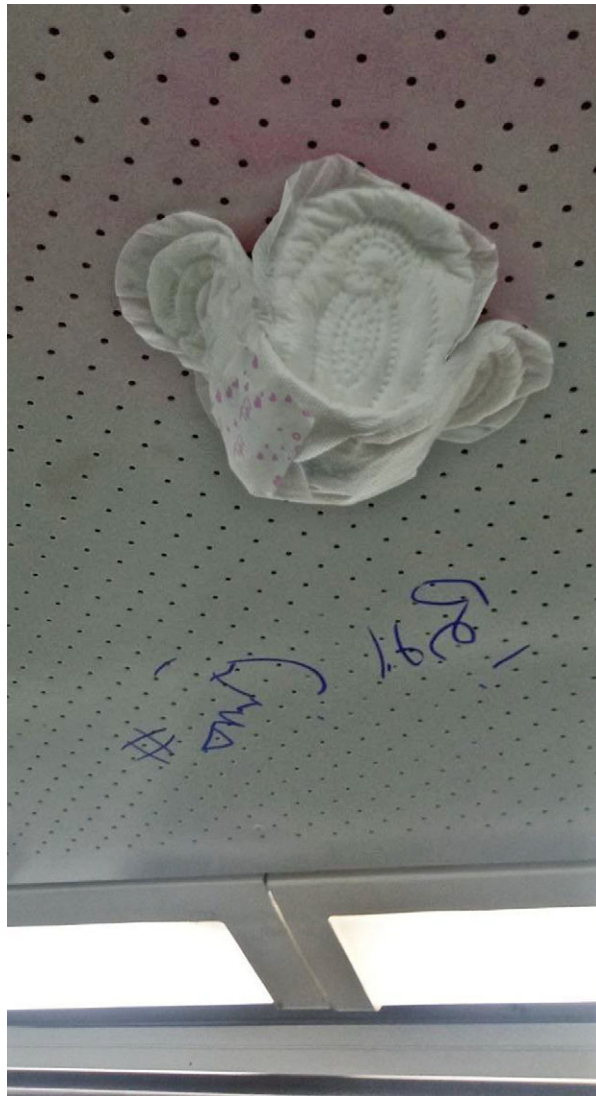


FIGURE 9.2 Blocking CCTV cameras in Public transportation with menstruation pads (Akbari 2023, 24).

bleeding and without any algorithm capturing its suffering. The person is caught in a body that can be datafied, but its emotions cannot be perceived.

This chapter does not aim to investigate the political, economic or social reasons or structures that construct the Code/Body. The biopolitical and necropolitical, the Foucauldian corporeal space and its governmentality have been the subject of many scholarly debates. How surveillance and datafication affect these spaces is also not a new matter of discussion. However, it seems persistently new how uncomfortable

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FIGURE 9.3 AI-generated pictures created by Azadeh Akbari based on the poem "Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Centre)" by Warsan Shire, using three popular AI-based platforms

the body feels for some people. The more some lives are exposed to precarity of intense datafication, some bodies are forced to give away their unscrupulous owner. Surveilling and constant measuring of the Code/Body assures that these lives remain precarious. Some bodies, it seems, could be easily deleted, like a line of *dead code*.

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Tell the sea after the news of my death
that I wasn't that thirsty to fill my lungs with his water,
that I am only an extremely exhausted man
who suffered all his life long from poverty
who worked all day long
to pursue a dignified life for his children
I wanted to flee like all poor people
I went to you, sea
to pull me out of the darkness
to take me to a brighter trajectory
You misunderstood me, sea
I told you that I wasn't thirsty

Mahmoud Bakir, a young father from Gaza, wrote this poem in February 2021 before drowning on his way to reach Europe.

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