Benjamin Ruha (2019) Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code. Medford: Polity Press. 172 pages. eISBN: 9781509526437

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The myth of technological neutrality—the idea that technology and tech creators are neutral actors free of implicit ethical dimensions and values—has received increasing pushback in recent years. As technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous and troubling tech incidents grow in number (like Google Photo labeling Black people as gorillas), more people are questioning the exalted status of technology in society. However, these incidents are still frequently perceived as 'one-offs' rather than symptoms of an underlying malaise.

This blinkered analysis is precisely what Ruha Benjamin critiques in her 2019 *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. The book lays bare the ways in which modern technology creates, supports, and amplifies racism and white supremacy. Offering a wide-ranging examination of how racism in its many forms is manifested in modern technology, the work journeys through predictive policing systems, AI-judged beauty contests, genetic and biometric testing, robot labour, pop culture, virtual reality, and other modern inventions.

The book opens by establishing a broad foundation for understanding technology, race, and what happens when they collide, effectively setting up Benjamin's later chapters by cracking open default assumptions about technology and specifically challenging the idea of technological neutrality. Benjamin productively broadens the definition of 'code' away from narrow considerations of computer instructions to understanding the way names and race are themselves code and are coded with important information. We are then asked to think of race itself as a technology; a *techne*, a way of doing things and structuring society. With this eye to the intertwined nature of race and technology, she defines her central idea of the 'New Jim Code' as "*the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era*" (p. 3, italics original). Building on Michelle Alexander's 2012 book *The New Jim Crow*, which highlights how the façade of modern 'colourblindness' masks and justifies the disproportionate incarceration of Black people, Benjamin compares historical and contemporary technologies to show how racism via technology has changed forms rather than disappeared.

Each of the 5 chapters examines a specific aspect of the New Jim Code: Engineered Inequality, Default Discrimination, Coded Exposure, Technological Benevolence, and Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice. They read largely independently of each other; the book's argument is less a sequential development of ideas than an exploration of theme. Benjamin herself frames the book as a "field guide" (p. 4) and acknowledges that "in writing this book I have admittedly been more interested in connections rather

than in comparisons" (p. 109). Her monograph is structured as a flow of short case studies, each of which is concisely examined and revealed as a specific instance of technological racism. Food for analysis is gratifyingly wide-ranging: résumé screening software, Kodak's 'Shirley Cards', search engine results, popular TV and film, personalized advertising, the science fiction genre, facial recognition algorithms; there is seemingly nothing that escapes her holistic focus.

The book reads smoothly, but may be too challenging to readers without a modest understanding of social sciences or critical theory. The writing style has an elegant and natural flow and distills complex ideas into wonderfully quotable and pithy phrases—Benjamin quips that "institutional racism in this country is an ongoing unnatural disaster" (p. 56) and notes how tech firms ask us to "*pay no attention to the man behind the screen*" (p. 6, italics original). Her compositional style of arguing through repeated example, rather than through large case study or via purely theoretical analysis, is highly effective and each new example is neatly tied into the flow of ideas. Over the course of the book, *Race After Technology* spins this web of examples over the reader's own understanding of technology and leaves the reader with a new lens to view the world around them.

The book's great strength is its holistic framing of how technology supports and is supported by racism. Benjamin clearly and repeatedly demonstrates how human racism—implicit and explicit—manifests itself in the design of technology. She convincingly lays out how the selective *use* of technology is a factor in reinforcing racism—most prominently, arguing that investing in supposed 'genetic' causes of better learning, without examining environmental ones, amounts to a modern eugenics. Throughout the book, Benjamin pulls back this layer of racial innocence and so-called 'evidence-based' or 'neutral' approaches that are used to market the deeply racist technologies underneath. Fundamentally, *Race After Technology* asks us to understand how historical racism and technology inform their modern versions, and shows us that this understanding is vital if we want to escape its current and future manifestations. This is a critical intervention, given how "[d]etachment in the face

of this history ensures its ongoing codification" (p. 40).

Benjamin's approach does have its limitations. It is largely America-focused; while there are examinations of international issues like the Chinese social credit system, the majority of the examples are American. Similarly, while Benjamin does not avoid intersectional approaches when examining how technology affects racialized people, most of the book's analysis is on American Black people as a group. Perhaps the clearest of its limitations is that readers enticed by the subtitle (*Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*) may be disappointed at the lack of concrete suggestions on how to achieve said abolition. Benjamin provides examples of successfully anti-racist technologies, highlights the work of several organizations challenging racism in technology, broadly advocates for incorporating anti-oppressive values, and suggests technology audits, but stops short of general recommendations. Yet this reluctance to advocate immediately actionable 'fixes' comes from the book's demonstration that the New Jim Code is a shapeshifter and real and lasting solutions will need to be crafted to the form it takes at any moment.

The book is a beautiful synthesis of real-world examples and disparate ideas, but consequently advances few truly new concepts aside from the idea of the New Jim Code. Instead of a revolutionary new theory, its major contribution may be in exposing these ideas to a broader audience and as a catalyst for deeper examinations of the technologies and situations that Benjamin touches on. Scholars studying the intersection of technology and society, and those in technical fields looking for an outside critical understanding of their own work, will find it an important jumping-off point or a valuable resource to deepen their knowledge on understanding racism within their fields. The book is more urgent and relevant than ever, given social reckonings with Black understandings of systemic racism following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Benjamin's work also helps expand the growing public understanding of technology's harmful effects, beyond well-established concerns about social media, tech culture and hardware manufacturing.

Valuable to a broad array of audiences including the general public, the book is an important addition to the small but growing niche of well-researched yet accessible books on technological discrimination including Virginia Eubanks' *Automating Inequality*, Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression*, and Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction*. Overall, *Race After Technology* is an extremely well-crafted and timely work on how society produces and perpetuates racist technology. Despite its recent publication, this book is set to be a foundational work and modern classic in multiple fields.