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Racism in the Machine

Ruha Benjamin
Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019. 285 pp. $64.95. ISBN 1509526390

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In a 2011 article in *Psychology Today*, Satoshi Kanazawa, an evolutionary biologist and professor at the London School of Economics, posed the question, "Why are black women less physically attractive than other women?" Using measures from the Add Health survey, a longitudinal data set that asks, among other things, for interviewers to rate the physical attractiveness of respondents and for respondents to rate themselves, Kanazawa writes, "black women are objectively less physically attractive…[but] consider themselves to be far more physically attractive than others." Accepting these findings with a straight face, Kanazawa concludes that the black women's below-average attractiveness must be due to their higher testosterone levels and consequently, their masculine features. Petitions, protests, and a series of articles challenging the science and ethics of the research followed (see Douglas and Williams Miller 2018). The reasons were obvious. Beauty standards are not objective. Black women have long been subject to racial animus and scorn, and this wasn't Kanazawa's first offense—he made similar claims about the genetic link between beauty and intelligence, about IQ differences between racial groups, and the "true empirical generalizations" of "many stereotypes" (Miller and Kanazawa 2007).

Psychology Today removed the article. It was, after all, an example of how interventions considered "new" and "objective" can advance old racist agendas. Five years later, robots would adjudicate a beauty contest. "What could go wrong?," Ruha Benjamin asks in *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. The outcome was painful but predictable. Thirty-eight of the 44 winners, picked from among 6,000 contestants, were white. Just one had "dark skin." This was no glitch. Soap dispensers have trouble reading black hands. Facial recognition software has trouble recognizing black faces, and the black faces that register are misrecognized as criminal. There is a "race correction" built into medical devices, shaping medical diagnoses and treatment. "Are robots racist?," Benjamin asks. "Of course," she writes.

If we take the long and sophisticated literature on the production of races, the practices of racialization, and the institutional nature of racism seriously, we would conclude with Benjamin that racism is built into the (artificial intelligence) system—that racism is part and parcel of the code. If we believed that technology exists within a social context, we would accept that the advent of "social credit profiles," which use big data to score what designers designate as prosocial behavior; the use of genetic testing by the UK Border Agency to determine the legality of Somali and Kenyan migrants; and the failure of scientists and the public they survey to recognize black beauty are of a piece. This is one of the book's major contributions. Benjamin's provocation to engage what she calls "race critical code studies" draws a throughline between the "technological benevolence" of electronic monitoring, which states use to tether people released from American jails and prisons to the virtual prisons of their homes, and the criminal justice reform efforts of public figures like Jay Z, who raise money through fundraising apps to cover people's bail while selling data on their movement to state governments.

Race after Technology represents the marriage of science and technology studies and critical race scholarship, offering a theoretical meditation on how technological innovations catalyze new expressions of racism. The book takes us from China to Zimbabwe and from within the machinery of

predictive policing to the porous digital borders of Twitter and Facebook, where tech giants writing guidelines for data sharing are akin to unelected policy makers—they shape the privacy rights of a full third of the globe. Even "human centered design"—a digital fix for bias and discrimination—exists within and reflects a racialized society. But beyond theorizing racial abuse as a technological outcome, Benjamin (2019:91) pushes us to reimagine how we theorize race. "If we consider race . . . a technology . . . as a means to sort, organize, and design a social structure," Benjamin writes, "we can understand, more clearly, the architecture of power." Each of the book's five chapters interrogates this architecture, taking us across sites and scales of intervention. We learn how technological designs more deeply embed racial inequity and how "glitches" reveal "form[s] of exclusion and subordination built into [the tech industry's] priorities and solutions." We are shown how tech users are differentially exposed to risk and how the "racial fixes" employed by tech companies to address the problems they cause advance racial inequity.

The book ends with a discussion of "abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code"—the new form of technological racism that drives the book's analysis. Benjamin sees promise in abolitionists' "emancipatory approach to technology," writing that it "brings to life . . . liberating and joyful ways of living in and organizing our world." This is a fitting conclusion, but after reading the book, I couldn't help but wonder whether bail fund apps or the creative work that ignites the kind of radical imagination required to designate bankers and hedge fund managers as the real purveyors of risk might see us to a brighter future. That was before the public learned of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in short succession, and before the abolitionist critique took hold of the public's imagination in the wake of an uprising. The book couldn't be more timely. I'm still curious about the role old technologies play in addressing the new Jim code and how new racial formations *undermine* and displace, rather than replicate, the older, perhaps differently racist versions. Some of these questions are beyond the book's scope, but this is the mark of an important work. It provokes new questions as it answers old ones.

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