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# Always Question the Hype


Ruha Benjamin
*Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019. 285 pp. $64.95.
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"We are living in the future we always dreamed of. . . . AI is empowering us to change the world we see. . . . So here's the question: What will you do with it?" These words from the musician and actor, Common, voiced in a 2018 Microsoft advertisement beckon the listener to embrace the "possibility, adaptability, and capability" of algorithmic technology and to ignore its dangers. The image of Common, an African American man, as the personification of this message serves to reassure the viewer that the future of which he speaks will be a racially inclusive one.

Ruha Benjamin explodes the myths in the Microsoft advertisement (2019:21–22), and so much more, in her *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code.* Her goal in this book is an ambitious one, to map the way that "tech fixes often hide, speed up, and even deepen discrimination while appearing to be neutral or benevolent when compared to the racism of a previous era" (2019:11). Fortunately for all of us interested in the connections between race and technology, Benjamin achieves this goal. The central metaphor of the book, "the new Jim Code," is a riff on Michelle Alexander's (2010) groundbreaking *The New Jim Crow*, and as Benjamin explains, this is to meant to honor and extend that work by demonstrating the ways that *code*, the umbrella term for machine learning, AI, algorithms and the Internet of Things, works as systematically as legal codes do to legitimize and reinforce antiblackness.

In accessible prose, Benjamin tackles theoretically dense subjects in chapters one through four on "Engineered Inequity," "Default Discrimination," "Coded Exposure," and "Technological Benevolence." In these, she lays out how racism works when it is encoded into algorithms designed to make our lives "better, faster, fairer." For example, in chapter four, "Technological Benevolence," Benjamin takes up the issue of employment discrimination, which is widely documented by sociologists and is an area that companies, like HireVue, want to address. As Benjamin describes it, HireVue wants to "reduce unconscious bias and promote diversity in the workplace" by using a machine learning program that analyzes video-recorded interviews with applicants (2019:100). Yet, the push for "data-driven talent decisions" is fraught when it comes to the nuances of race and gender, as when Amazon stopped using an algorithm in its hiring because it favored men 5:1 over women. And, as Benjamin observes, "given tech industry demographics, the training data were likely much more imbalanced by race than by gender" (2019:101–102). The idea of "training data," that is, the data that are entered into computer algorithms for the machine to learn, is central to how this kind of discrimination works. When there is a pattern of discrimination in the social world, it shapes the kind of data available there is to use. In the case of Amazon, the training data consisted of the previous 10 years of job applications the company had received. If those applications are skewed in a particular way (white men), then the algorithm built to assess future applications will use that training data as the standard. As Benjamin writes at the end of Chapter 1, following a discussion of racist robots,

> Ultimately the danger of the New Jim Code positioning is that existing social biases are reinforced—yes. But new methods of social control are produced as well. . . . It means that whenever we hear the promises of tech being extolled, our antennae should pop up to question all that hype of "better, faster, fairer," might be hiding and make us ignore. And, when bias and inequity come to light, "lack of intention" to harm is not a viable alibi. (Pp. 52–53)

In short, Benjamin urges us to always critically examine the hype surrounding tech.

In Chapter 5, her last and most hopeful chapter, "Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice," Benjamin takes up the idea of "abolitionist tools." Here again,

this is a provocation drawn from the work of Michelle Alexander (2010) and others, such as Mariame Kaba, who call for a police and prison abolition movement (Kaba, 2020). Benjamin writes specifically about the Appolition project, designed and launched by Oakland-based entrepreneur and engineer, Dr. Kortney Ziegler. The Appolition app is meant to convert spare change into bail money for people trapped in the cash-based incarceration system. It is an ingenious and liberatory design. Benjamin uses this example to invite readers to reimagine what "design thinking" could do if it were rooted in an ethics of decolonization.

If there is any critique of Benjamin's book, it is that there is a bit of a disconnect between the first four chapters of incisive, even devastating critique and the aspirational last chapter. My question is how to go about scaffolding the insight and awareness needed to create abolitionist tools when so many who work in tech are mired in the domain assumptions of computer science training that ignores race and a social world that reproduces it? This, however, is a minor criticism in what is a stellar achievement that should be read by anyone interested in race and technology and by undergraduate and graduate students alike. *Race after Technology* will be particularly useful for those who teach Digital Sociology, Race & Ethnicity, or Science and Technology Studies courses.

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# Racism in the Machine

Ruha Benjamin
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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