

2-12-2021

## Book Review: Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code

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### Recommended Citation

Lumsden, Eleanor, "Book Review: Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code" (2021).  
*Publications*. 881.

<https://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/pubs/881>

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# African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajs20>

## Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code

Ruha Benjamin, Cambridge: Polity; 2019 (available in Hardcover, Paperback, and eBook): 286 pages (Kindle edition); \$16.00, ISBN: 978-1-509-52643-7.

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To cite this article: Eleanor Lumsden (2021): Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code, African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development, DOI: [10.1080/20421338.2020.1862950](https://doi.org/10.1080/20421338.2020.1862950)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20421338.2020.1862950>



Published online: 12 Feb 2021.



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## Book Review

Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Cambridge: Polity; 2019 (available in Hardcover, Paperback, and eBook): 286 pages (Kindle edition); \$16.00, ISBN: 978-1-509-52643-7.

Dr. Ruha Benjamin is an associate professor in the Department of African American Studies at Princeton University. She received her PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley. Her work spans the intersection of science, technology and culture. Her book, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, is a stirring indictment of the modern tech industrial complex. Much like the military industrial complex warned of by US President Eisenhower in his farewell address, and the triangular trade of sugar, slaves, alcohol and guns, an informal yet powerful trade exists between national governments, tech industry leaders and tech companies like Apple, Amazon, and Facebook. The military industrial complex refers to the relationship between the government, business, and the military, and a 'trade' in weapons and military technologies. Similar to the triangle trade, the forced transit of roughly 12 million West Africans as slaves to the Caribbean and the Americas, including Brazil, this new confederacy delivers economic profit with a human cost.

The title of Dr. Benjamin's book is a play on legal scholar Michelle Alexander's seminal tome, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. As in that work, she shines a light on seemingly neutral and race-blind institutions and processes – here, algorithms – that nonetheless may have discriminatory and even predatory outcomes. In the preface of *Race After Technology*, the author explains how her childhood experience of living off Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles, California included 'a keen sense of being watched ... all of us caught up in a carceral web, in which other people's safety and freedom are predicated on our containment' (2019, x; Kindle edition). From that starting point, she explores the ways in which many of us are now being monitored and measured by 'big data' – and perhaps being unwittingly subjected to systemic bias as well.

Beyond the preface, introduction, and references, the book contains five chapters: (1) Engineered Inequity: Are Robots Racist? (2) Default Discrimination: Is the Glitch Systemic? (3) Coded Exposure: Is Visibility a Trap? (4) Technological Benevolence: Do Fixes Fix Us? (5) Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice. The book also contains several helpful 'Figures' that provide historical context or contemporary illustrations of specific points in the text. Finally, there is a helpful appendix at the end that includes links to tech and social justice organizations and initiatives, fairness, accountability and

transparency initiatives, and 'statements' like the Digital Citizens' Bill of Rights.

In fact, the world is said to be in the grip of a Digital Revolution – a new age of progress ushered in by the twin engines of science and Silicon Valley. This era, as the story goes, is indeed ushering in a brave new world. In this world, the assembly line of tech innovation, much like Henry Ford's revolutionary system that introduced the Model T, is now bringing practical and affordable products and services.

Artificial Intelligence and machine learning fuelled developments, including autonomous cars, robots, and drones, are said to be changing the world. Much like the Industrial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century, the Digital Revolution may render the problems of earlier ages obsolete and improve overall well-being and quality of life. Racism, inequality, and other societal ills powered by human frailty could shortly become relics of the past as tech systems neutralize and improve the human condition. Indeed, the promise of tech innovation is the possible solution to such ills, because 'Big Data does not discriminate.'

This premise is exactly what the author is challenging in *Race After Technology* – namely the notion that technology and those that design it are somehow race-neutral – that 'we' can trust the puppeteers behind the curtain to 'do the right thing.' In five gripping chapters, she exposes this fallacy and outlines the contours of new infringements which impact privacy, surveillance, and security for the most vulnerable among us.

Far from being a technophobe, Dr. Benjamin acknowledges the benefits of technology – as well as the pitfalls. She uses the language of modern pop culture, including references to television series or films, like *Black Mirror* and *The Matrix*, to engage her audience. Regardless of whether they are enamoured or bored by tech, readers will be engrossed by her numerous examples. She also moves beyond a purely national focus on the US to engage an international audience with case studies from Europe, China and beyond. She is also unafraid to take on the design world. Frankly, no one is spared from her searing gaze:

The problem is how it [design thinking] envelops ideas and practices that have been around for a while, across a number of fields, while throwing in vague and unsubstantiated claims about the efficacy of design thinking for other fundamental institutions (2019, 176).

How many others have thought the same, but kept quiet in order to not appear to be Luddites? Courage, indeed.

If there were any slight criticism to be made, I would say that the introductory chapter, spanning some 48 pages, makes for a slow opening to an otherwise fascinating book. Eventually, the work picks up pace to reveal itself

to be a page-turner – a minefield of research, criticism, and sardonic humour that nonetheless exposes important truths.

This book will appeal to readers who are skeptical of the touted benefits of technology – technosceptics, if you will – as well as readers who love all things tech. This is a must-read for both groups, as well as all those who wish to be informed of the newest applications that go well beyond robots and self-driving cars. This book is a great lens with which to ‘see’ how the newest language of innovation may be blinding us to deeper and hidden ills. Like the promise of rum, slaves, and sugar, this new trade in technology is not a panacea for societal problems that may need slow fixes. As Dr. Benjamin articulates all too

well, national governments must not abdicate their responsibility for addressing the challenges wrought by new tech. Accountability and transparency are the only way forward.

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