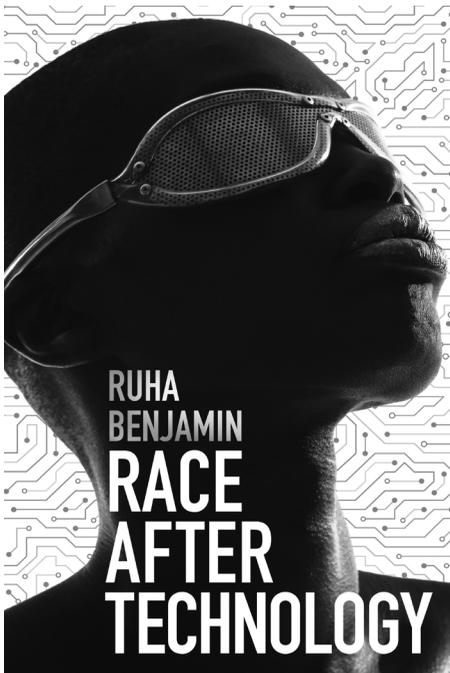


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## Review of Ruha Benjamin's *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*



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Ruha Benjamin introduces *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* as an in-depth investigation into the cycles of inequity encoded within technology. Merging her background in sociology, critical race studies, and science and technology studies, she coins “race critical code studies” to produce a compelling argument about the subtler forms of racism that permeate our technologies without detection. Punning on Michelle Alexander’s influential book, the author defines the New Jim Code as “the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce ex-

isting inequities, but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era.”<sup>1</sup> Benjamin argues that this code comprises tech fixes that “often hide, speed up, and even deepen discrimination, while appearing to be neutral or benevolent when compared to racism of a previous era.”<sup>2</sup> In discussing the production of the New Jim Code, Benjamin details four ways in which this code can be identified: *engineered inequity*, *default discrimination*, *coded exposure*, and *technological benevolence*, dedicating a chapter to each aforementioned area.

In line with a recent theme within science and technology studies that explores biases within the Black box of coded inequity, Benjamin cracks the Black box wide open by calling attention to what she coins as the “*anti-Black box*” that connects ‘race-neutral’ technologies that encode inequity to ‘race-neutral’ social codes that surround and govern us daily.<sup>3</sup> Rather than solely exposing and decoding these ‘race-neutral’ designs, Benjamin invokes scholars who call race its own technology constructing a deeper argument around the inextricable links between emerging technologies and systemic racism.<sup>4</sup> The book explores four central questions around the New Jim Code, drawing on an array of divergent scholarship to support its claim that technologies can reinforce social hierarchies and white supremacy.

Chapter One, “Engineered Inequity: Are Robots Racist?” examines how technological inequities strengthen social hierarchies. Benjamin explains that the answer to the question “Are robots racist?” depends on exactly *how* we define racism as she asserts that “we must separate intentionality” from our understanding of racism and realize that even well-intentioned designs can

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reproduce inequality.<sup>5</sup> From her examination of the first international beauty contest judged by AI (in which the robots preferred lighter contestants over darker contestants), to her analysis of an episode from the popular Netflix show *Black Mirror* that shows a stratified society in which social media is the marker of social credit, Benjamin demonstrates that robots are “designed in a world drenched in racism” making it difficult for “them to stay dry.”<sup>6</sup>

Chapter Two, entitled “Default Discrimination: Is the Glitch Systemic?” contends that while technological glitches might appear as accidental breaks in the system, they often indicate the way a technology operates at its most basic level<sup>7</sup>. Benjamin opens with an example of a glitch in the Google Maps app, detailing when a user noticed that the GPS app translated the “X” in a street named after well-known activist Malcolm X, as the Roman numeral “Ten.” While most would mark this inaccuracy as a tech mistake, Benjamin argues that glitches like this represent much more than just that. She further asserts that faulty predictive policing methods such as recidivism risk assessments that fail to accurately predict a convict’s chances of reoffending, represent other examples of racist glitches that signal the presence of discriminatory design.

The third chapter, “Coded Exposure: Is Visibility a Trap?” investigates the politics of exposure and argues that processes of codifying racism into technology remain difficult to detect and often concealed by claims of diversity. The chapter presents how claims of diversity that pose as evidence of social progress instead mask discriminatory designs. Comparing segregated water fountains to present infrared soap dispensers that are unable to detect dark skin, Benjamin illustrates how *coded exposure* utilizes rhetoric of inclusivity and equality that often falls short in attaining its goal. The author specifically investigates how Black bodies in particular are hypervisible to certain technologies (i.e., facial recognition surveillance apps) but invisible to others (i.e., underexposed Polaroid photos), to uncover how *coded exposure* functions as a replica of our social systems of exclusion.

Chapter Four, “Technological Benevolence: Do Fixes Fix Us?” explores the paradox of technologies that are constructed to directly address discriminatory designs, but instead reinforce them. Benjamin states that “technical fixes operate in a world of euphemisms, where nothing is as it seems,” calling direct attention to technological efforts at decarceration that simply redesign incarceration.<sup>8</sup> She specifically references electronic monitoring (EM) as a method that has been utilized to reduce incarceration but instead represents what she calls “pseudo-freedom” to illustrate how tech fixes often fall short due to the system in which they attempt to operate.

The concluding chapter of the book, “Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice,” takes these discriminatory designs and presents what Benjamin calls “abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code.” The chapter provides examples of abolitionist technologies with “emancipatory ethos” such as the app *Appolition* that raises money to bail individuals out of jail.<sup>9</sup> However, Benjamin warns against designating *all* technologies that aim to reduce incarceration as abolitionist tools. For instance, she points out that rapper Jay-Z’s investments into *Promise*, a decarceration focused app, also reinvests in incarceration by using EM to track individuals via the app. Overall, Benjamin urges us to envision an abolitionist pathway that does not just consider the ends, but also the means in which that end is accomplished.

A slight limitation of the book is its construction of an abolitionist toolkit that contains a meager number of tangible tools as examples. However, this limitation presents a starting point for further research to expound upon Benjamin’s original blueprint. One of the most astounding aspects of the book is the depth of its research, including a wide range of work from scholars across multiple fields, personal anecdotes, and even close analyses of speculative fiction media. Benjamin’s work culminates into an engaging read that serves as an invaluable addition to media studies and science and technology studies. This book is also well suited for abolitionist activists or anyone interested in the intersections of race and technology.

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## Notes

1 See Michelle Alexander and Cornel West, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012) and Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019).

2 See Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019).

3 See Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

4 See Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2014).

5 Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 61.

6 Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 62.

7 Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 82.

8 Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 138.

9 Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 163.