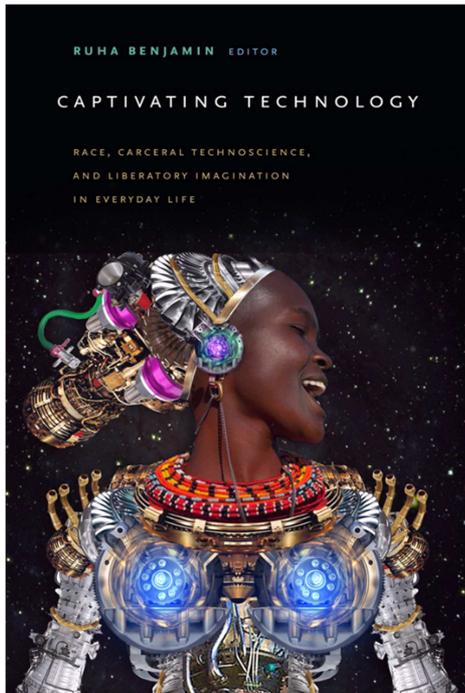




Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life

Ruha Benjamin

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Review by Valentina Romanzi*

Sometimes it is in the often-overlooked detail that one encounters evidence of quality. In Ruha Benjamin's latest work *Captivating Technology. Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life* it is possible to find clear signs of that from the very cover. A woman of colour is looking away from the observer, her mouth open. She seems to be singing, or perhaps just shouting. Her body and hair are adorned by what at first glance seem traditional African jewels, colourful and solemn. They are, instead, gears and circuits, turning her body into that of an android. The cover art is titled *Turbine*, a 2016 digital collage by afrofuturist artist Manzel Bowman. The stunning contrast between the feeling of freedom and power transmitted by the woman's expression and the static, inhuman look of the android body creates a fascinating visual experience that aptly introduces the reader to the topics treated in the essays of this volume.

A second detail which was, to me, a clear indicator of the precision and awareness with which *Captivating Technology* was written, lies right above the cover art, and it is the title itself: the gerund form of the verb 'to captivate' adds several layers of meaning to the short phrase. Indeed, it can be understood as 'technology which captivates, seduces' or as 'the process of captivating technology, of plying it to our ends.' Moreover, it evokes images of 'making technology captive,' of incarcerating it, or vice versa, of technology making

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someone/something else captive. All these possible meanings are explored in the diverse essays Ruha Benjamin has selected for this volume.

A third, and last, noteworthy detail can be found on the very first page of the introduction, which begins with two epigraphs, one by Toni Morrison and one by Michel Foucault. The words of one of the most prominent African-American authors of our century and of, possibly, the most famous theorist of power and its carceral quality watch over the opening pages of a book whose subtitle is *Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*. While the cover is a wonderful match for the subject of the book and the title a powerful summary, these two quotes are its quintessence.

The volume explores the apparently simple question of the neutrality of technology, investigating discriminating practices in its development, use and misuse, focusing in particular on its racial biases across a number of notably diverse fields of society. Taken as a whole, *Captivating Technology* can be described as a bird's-eye view on the hidden bias of technology, which, although inherently neutral in theory, is twisted by the social context into perpetuating the same discriminatory, carceral practices we read about in our history books. Ruha Benjamin calls this combination of “coded bias and imagined objectivity [...] the *New Jim Code*,” (2019, 3) a powerful expression that evokes the infamous Jim Crow laws of the 19th and 20th century and mimics Michelle Alexander's influential study *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010).

The volume is divided into three sections that explore the carceral aspects of technology from the more ‘traditional’ loci of discrimination (“From Plantation to Prison”), through less explicit forms of carceral technoscience (“From Facebook to Fast Fashion”), to justice-oriented approaches to science and technology (“From Abolitionists to Afrofuturists”) (12).

The essays in Part One tackle the narrative of containment of discriminated minorities. The first one discusses the reproduction of plantation practices in free areas of the American South to conduct medical experiments on a controlled sample of individuals (25-49) and is followed by a study on the misuse of a narrative of disease in medical facilities that too often were prisons in every aspect but the name (50-66) and one on the use of food to control or punish convicts in American prisons and the practice of fasting as resistance (67-84). Part One ends with an essay on the role of drones in monitoring ‘sensitive’ (or, rather, targeted) neighbourhoods and their deployment as a form of pre-emptive policing that can be traced back to the colonial project of nation-building (85-106), and one on the role of predictive policing (the use of technology to foresee where and when a crime will be committed) in perpetuating racism (107-129).

Part Two reflects on the impact of surveillance on our daily lives. This section begins with an essay on racial surveillance in the digital economy (based on the concept of *multi-surveillance*, understood as ‘diffused’ surveillance carried out by more than one actor), which is practiced against workers belonging to minorities (133-169). It is followed by an analysis of the use of *digital characters*, compiled through data harvested on social media to determine the credit score of a person interested in a loan (170-187) and the case study of Sweetie, the computer model of a Philippine child used to track down paedophiles online (188-208). This part ends with an essay on the employment of technology to monitor workers in retail, a practice that is often narrated as neutral but is in fact hiding discriminatory biases (209-223).

Part Three deals with opposite practices of anti-racist technologies appearing from the contact between science and generative justice (understood as the right to generate unalienated value and to participate in its benefits) (227-251). The discussion continues examining the techno-vernacular creativity of minorities, that are normally excluded from technological fields of work and study and still manage to interact, update and upgrade them autonomously (252-274). To this follows a reflection on the unseen bias of the developers of photographic technology towards people of colour and the need for cognitive equity, which would eradicate racial discrimination from the material underside of technologies and products (275-307). This third section of the volume ends with two interviews to prominent sociologists Troy Duster (308-327) and Dorothy Roberts (328-348).

Taken in isolation, each of these essays explores a very precise, sectorial issue of social relevance to the discourse of race, discrimination, incarceration, and technology. In the wider context of the volume, they all sum up to offer a detailed, multifaceted portrait of the issues that arise from the assumption that technology is neutral and thereby liberating, a vessel towards a society without discrimination.



Captivating Technology provides abundant evidence of the contrary in the first two parts, showing how discriminatory biases lead to incarceration, surveillance and oppression through technology, and then sets out to prove that the only way towards a non-discriminatory society must acknowledge such biases of technology in order to develop anti-racist, truly liberatory technologies.

Works cited

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.