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Disenchanting Technoliberalism

Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. x + 256 pp. $25.95.

In a recent issue of *PMLA*, Wai Chee Dimock's Editor's Column, entitled "AI and the Humanities," refers to two distinct paths for the artificial intelligence of the future: "How can we create algorithms that would complement rather than replace human beings, help rather than destroy us?" she asks.[1] Dimock prefaces these alternatives with *PMLA*'s readership in mind, citing studies that warn "those 'with graduate or professional degrees will be almost four times as exposed to AI as workers with just a high school degree'" and that the advent of new AI will "[hit] educated workers the hardest."[2] What "exposure" to AI might mean for literary scholars practically is never specified but the implication is that impending automation poses yet another threat to knowledge workers in literature programs who already find their material livelihoods jeopardized by the crises of defunding and adjunctification. To adapt, Dimock intimates that scholars of literature might enter into interdisciplinary arrangements with the computer scientists and engineers who have a hand in AI design. She observes that Stanford's Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, for example, now counts English professors among its faculty. In

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1. Wai Chee Dimock, "Editor's Column," *PMLA*, vol. 135, no. 3, 2020, p. 450.
2. Dimock 449.

such arrangements, the disciplinary practices and objects of literary study take a back seat to the collective pursuit of ethical AI. Here, literary expertise is narrowly defined as the dispensation of "humanistic perspectives" that will facilitate the creation of cooperative AI and hopefully stave off apocalyptic outcomes.[3]

In *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*, coauthors Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora lay bare the complex imaginaries that feed these contrasting visions of an automated future. If Dimock's questions betray concerns about the state of the discipline, they also rehearse a false opposition. What seems to be the utopic alternative, in which robots help rather than hurt us, recasts the value of literary study as moral instruction and reproduces exploitative labor relations. As Atanasoski and Vora write in their book's introduction, the "engineering projects that create the robots, program the AI, and enhance the digital infrastructure associated with a revolutionary new era are in fact predetermined by techniques of differential exploitation and dispossession within capitalism" (4). Although these technologies seem to advance a new era of freedom from the hardships of work, *Surrogate Humanity* contends that, more often than not, these advances ultimately shore up and further entrench existing racial hierarchies.

To elaborate these claims, Atanasoski and Vora open their book by explaining the ideology that underpins our current technological revolution. This structural transformation, sometimes referred to as the second machine age or fourth industrial revolution, promises to alter work as we know it by automating those tasks associated with "wage labor, domestic and reproductive labor, the work of care, and even the work of waging war" (4). While the socioeconomic impacts these changes will have on workers prompt fears of obsolescence for some, for others the displacement of humans by smart robots heralds a new epoch in human history. Unburdened by repetitive tasks, the thinking goes, smart technology will release post-industrial workers from their daily toil, liberating them to explore their full human potential. This vision of a postlabor future made possible by technology is precisely the gambit of *technoliberalism*, Atanasoski and Vora's term for "the ideology that technology

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3. Dimock 450.

advances human freedom and postracial futurity by asserting a postlabor world in which racial difference, along with all human social difference, is transcended" (28).

As Atanasoski and Vora make clear, technoliberalism is a ruse. Its fantasy of a world that transcends existing social inequities obscures the politics of difference that continue to fuel racial capitalism. They argue that "racial logics of categorization, differentiation, incorporation, and elimination are constitutive of the very concept of technology and technological innovation" (5). Building on Saidiya Hartman's conception of the surrogate self, they contend that "the freedom of the fully human liberal subject cannot come to be without the unfreedom of the less than human or nonhuman" (33). While Hartman discusses this racial formation in terms of the slave master and the enforced captivity of the enslaved person, Atanasoski and Vora adopt it to account for the structure of the "surrogate relation" that technology assumes relative to "human spheres of life, labor, and sociality" (5). Surrogacy in this sense does not mean that technology steps in as a substitute for the human. Rather, the dependent nature of this relation

> enables the function and differential formation and consolidation of the liberal subject—a subject whose freedom is possible only through the racial unfreedom of the surrogate. Yet there is no liberal subject outside the surrogate-self relation through which the human, a moving target, is fixed and established. In other words, *the liberal subject is an effect of the surrogate relation*.
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> (5)

Far from inaugurating a bold new era that reconceptualizes the post-Enlightenment human then, twenty-first-century advances in robotics, AI, and digital infrastructures have returned us to a familiar past. This retrenchment of the autonomous liberal subject might come as something of a surprise as advancements in artificial intelligence and talk of disruption continue apace. But for Atanososki and Vora, to tell the story of surrogate humanity in the realm of technology is to reveal the liberal subject's tenacious persistence as the prevailing model of the fully human. To demonstrate the indebtedness of this claim to the long history of the surrogate human effect,

Surrogate Humanity positions itself within a critical conversation that elaborates this effect as it has operated in post-Enlightenment modernity. In addition to Hartman's book on slavery and its after-life for bonded black laborers, it cites Lisa Lowe's work on the un-freedom of the British Empire's enslaved and indentured laborers, David Theo Goldberg's account of liberalism's developmental nar-rative of overcoming racial difference, and Jodi Melamed's thesis that the postwar United States touted antiracism to justify its impe-rial expansions. Building on these arguments, Atanososki and Vora carry surrogacy's dependence on racial unfreedom through to non-human robots and AI, insisting that such technologies are designed to perform a surrogate function as well.

With the concepts of technoliberalism and surrogacy front and center, the authors turn to the dynamics of the liberal subject's re-trenchment through technology in the post-World War II United States. In this period, they argue, the racial scaffolding that struc-tured Cold War and post-Cold War technological developments was erased from view with the emergence of post-civil rights mul-ticulturalism. This shift paved the way for purportedly race neu-tral machines to function as vessels for disregarding civil-rights era progress. *Surrogate Humanity*'s first two chapters elaborate US technoliberalism as a twentieth-century historical formation ideo-logically rooted in midcentury liberalism and totalitarianism. Here, the centrality of mechanization to both the liberal-capitalist and totalitarian-fascist imaginations in the Cold War era gives way to technoliberalism's present-day extraction of collaborative and col-lectivist discourses that obscure the structural exploitation of labor. To elaborate on this exploitation, the next chapters turn to contem-porary forms of service labor. Chapter 3 looks at how digital plat-forms including Amazon's Mechanical Turk and Alfred facilitate the growth of the gig economy by touting enchanted technologies while hiding human workers, while chapter 4 addresses the racist under-pinnings informing the development of "social emotional robots" that readily affirm human autonomy by appropriately responding to emotional cues (110). The book's final two chapters turn to the military's uses of robots and AI in the form of semiautonomous and autonomous weapons. Chapter 5 argues that so-called "unmanned"

technologies are "cobots" insofar as they depend on the racialized dynamics of killable human targets (137), while chapter 6 elaborates how the specter of killer robots has naturalized the liberal subject as the exemplary human.

Across the chapters, the logic of surrogate humanity proves widely applicable. The range of techno-objects that the authors test against this concept is staggering: Westinghouse's "mechanical servant," MIT's Kismet, Amazon's Alexa, as well as various service apps, military drones, and sex robots are each held up for scrutiny in turn. That each affirms and further nuances the tenets of surrogate humanity, often in surprising and counterintuitive ways, testifies to the robust nature of the paradigm's explanatory power. Looked at through the lens of technoliberalism, for example, contemporary US imperialism carried out through smart weaponry betrays itself as an extension of the liberal project. As Atanasoski and Vora state in the book's fifth chapter, entitled "Machine Autonomy and the Unmanned Spacetime of Technoliberal Warfare," "the 'new' technoliberal imperial form proclaims its innocence through the twin conceptions of human autonomy and the unmanned in contemporary warfare" (137). The US state draws on this innocence when it claims that its reliance on "unmanned" martial weapons has eliminated the possibility that military life will be lost in combat. Reimagined as a tool of "vital self-preservation,"[4] Grégoire Chamayou has noted the drone's paradoxical recasting as "a 'humanitarian' weapon: the humanitarian imperative is to save *lives*. And the drone does indeed save *our* lives. It is therefore a humanitarian technology."[5] To be sure, scholars in the nascent field of drone studies have thoroughly dispatched the popular misconception that drone technology qualifies as "unmanned." Instead, they tend to highlight the drone's historical continuities with earlier forms of martial air power and its networked character as a human-machine assemblage. Atanasoski and Vora contribute to this conversation by insisting that this assemblage requires further unravelling for it too is predicated on the

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4. Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, translated by Janet Lloyd, New Press, 2015, p. 137.

5. Chamayou 136.

surrogate effect. In other words, bringing a critical race and feminist framework to bear on the nexus of human and technological actors that constitute the drone foregrounds how it preserves relations of exploitation and domination that may be overlooked with infrastructural approaches.

One can see the value of *Surrogate Humanity* for scholars of literature and culture who study the ramifications of the United States' technoliberal projects outside, along, and within the country's geographic borders. Likewise, for those who study literary art produced by gig economy labor or mediated through digital infrastructures. For scholars of speculative fictions, the book offers compelling motivation to assess how imagined futures perpetuate or resist existing racist imperial practices. The book's audience, however, should not be limited to readers with these interests. *Surrogate Humanity*'s foregrounding of technology's racial logics ought to incite a broader reconceptualization of the way we have thus far conceived of literature's relation to the field of AI. As Dimock's column implies, the institutionalization of interdisciplinary approaches to AI in higher education has meant that literary and cultural expertise is often refashioned as humanist insight. When liberal humanism informs the design of technologies to assist human users, this arrangement risks reproducing racial capitalism's mode of production in which less-than-human helpers serve those who already enjoy the advantages of being recognized as fully human.

More broadly, we might also recognize how our object of study has been enmeshed with technoliberalism from the start. Literary art is not incidental to but constitutive of the technoliberal project. Buying into the utopian vision of the robot revolution depends on buying into what constitutes human flourishing once the drudgery of wage labor is behind us. Time and again in visions of this flourishing, literary art assumes pride of place. Among other things, "[w]e'll be free to read or write poetry," writes journalist Kevin Drum in an article cited by Atanasoski and Vora entitled "You Will Lose Your Job to a Robot—And Sooner Than You Think" (2). In other words, technoliberalism has already subsumed literary objects into its account of how our "creative capacities" (4) and "higher activities of the mind" (as one IBM executive called them) will be occupied (41).

The ruse of technoliberalism flatters the humanist by placing those activities we associate with literary art—the reading and writing of it and about it—at the heart of its narrow vision of what it means to be fully human. Before literature departments yield fully to a technoliberal future perhaps it's worth asking: Is this the future that literature wants?

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