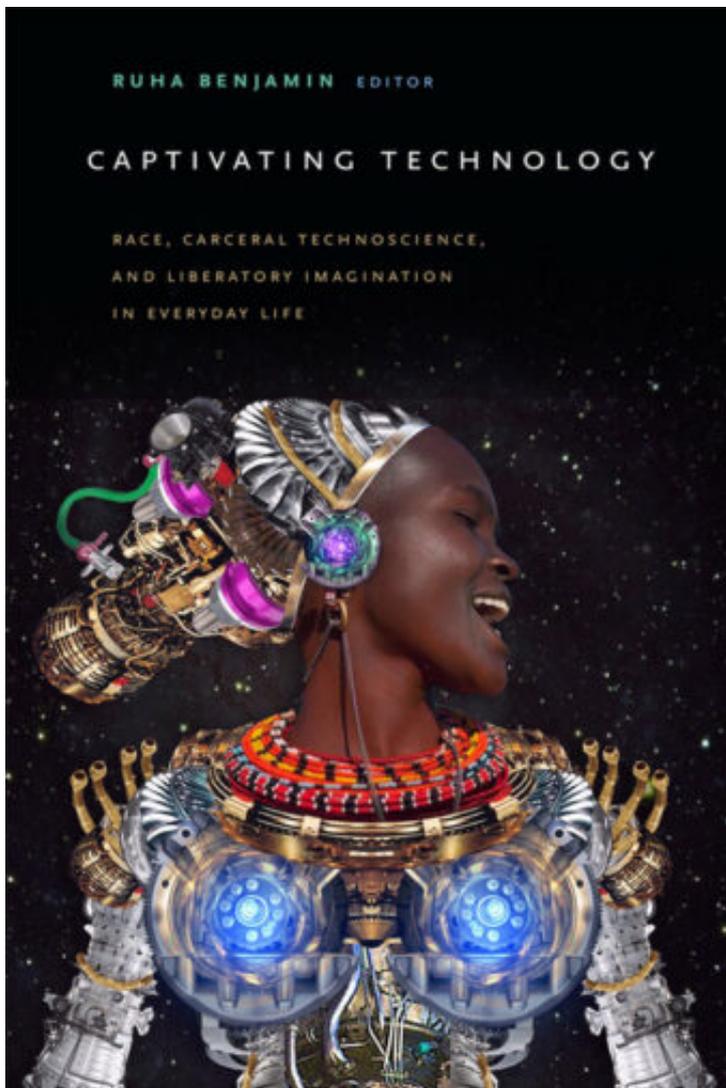


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*Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral  
Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in  
Everyday Life*

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*By Naomi Zucker*



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## [Everyday Life.](#)

### [Ruha Benjamin, Ed.](#)

*Duke University Press, 2019. 416 pages.*

*“How might we craft a justice-oriented approach to technoscience?” asks Ruha Benjamin in the introduction to *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life* (11). This question is at the core of the book’s project, knitting together its diverse chapters as they grapple with how novel technologies and existing sociotechnical systems encode, naturalize, or amplify hierarchies of power and difference. The question also opens up an alternative through line, raising the possibility of imagining (and of building) a liberatory technological otherwise. Bridging science and technology studies and critical race theory, the edited volume draws together contributions by scholars of race, science, law, health, labor, gender, and media to interrogate the entanglements of race and technology across a number of domains, both everyday and exceptional. From prisons and policing to health systems and workplaces to banking and credit systems, the book’s chapters chart how discriminatory design and the increased technological management of poor and*

*othered bodies produce new configurations of control, surveillance, and punishment. How, the book asks, are we to understand the role of technology in the upholding and remaking of contemporary racialization and inequality? What possibilities exist and are in-the-making for a transformative, abolitionist future of technology? What might be gained by thinking carcerality broadly, holding together the logics and tools of oppression across always already blurred boundaries of distinct institutions, practices, and contexts?*

*The carceral sphere, as it is taken up in the book, is not limited to the domain of the prison proper, but rather extends to encompass a much broader “carceral continuum” of technologies, economies, policies, and social formations premised on racialized and class-based exclusion, punishment, and the subordination and containment of “surplus populations” (Wacquant 2001; 2009; Shedd 2011; Beckett and Murakawa 2012). The carceral is here figured less as fixed location than as a tentacular logic that transcends the walls of the prison, where the continuities of “carceral conditions” (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018) animate a more pervasive, diffuse understanding of control (Deleuze 1992). “The sticky web of carcerality,” as Benjamin writes, “extends...into the everyday lives of those who*

*are purportedly free” (2). From this perspective, an abolitionist framework requires dismantling not only prisons and policing, but also carcerality as it operates in the spheres of healthcare, employment, housing, and social services, to name but a few. Asking us what it means to be free, who is granted freedom (and what kinds), and what continuities bind the forces that hold certain kinds of (racialized, poor) bodies captive both behind and beyond bars, the contributors to this volume thus focus their attention on a capacious understanding of “carceral technoscience,” turning to a wide range of contexts to explore how technology is enlisted in, and productive of, contemporary dynamics of confinement, classification, and control.*

*“Technology,” Benjamin argues, “is not just a bystander that happens to be at the scene of the crime: it actually aids and abets the process by which carcerality penetrates social life” (2). Benjamin has been a leading figure in calls for (and experiments with) an emergent “critical race STS” (Benjamin 2016; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2016), and this volume follows and complements the recent release of her latest single-authored book *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019), which aims to understand technological bias and systemic racism as coproducers of contemporary inequality. Against*

*both naive technological determinism and simplistic understandings of racism structured only around questions of individual intent, she theorizes the “New Jim Code” as the combined forces of “coded bias and imagined objectivity” (3) that simultaneously reinforce and obscure racial discrimination. As new modalities of prediction and automation (alongside unprecedented collection and use of personal data) gain traction and power from hiring to policing to criminal sentencing, powerful narratives of “neutral” technological decision-making render unseeable (and thus unaccountable) the existing biases baked into existing data, the infrastructures of classificatory systems, and new designs. How, this book asks, do old hierarchies get smuggled into new technologies? What makes “some technologies appear inevitable and others impossible”? (4). What would it look like to decarcerate our technological imaginations?*

*Captivating Technology is composed of twelve body chapters divided into three major parts. Part One, “Carceral Techniques from Plantation to Prison,” consists of cases and contexts more traditionally understood as carceral, spanning the plantation, the sanatorium, the prison, and urban geographies of policing. Addressing questions of biopower and health, containment and exclusion,*

*and the racialized logics of coercion that get enacted under the guise of treatment, care, or public safety, the essays in this section show how carceral configurations are made in and on particular bodies and spaces. Where Part One—the book’s longest—engages with paradigmatic sites of containment and confinement, Part Two, “Surveillance Systems from Facebook to Fast Fashion,” builds from the broader understanding of carceral technoscience discussed above, exploring how automation, surveillance, and prediction intersect with existing dynamics of race, class, and gender in shaping access to and experiences of services, safety, and social and economic capital. The third and final section of the book, “Retooling Liberation from Abolitionists to Afrofuturists,” takes up the liberatory potentials of an alternative technoscience that might animate different ethics, aesthetics, and values. Looking to both histories of science and technology and present-day projects at the intersections of technology, art and design, these essays emphasize resistance, imagination, and the productive work of fighting for a different and more just technoscientific future.*

*Part One: Carceral Techniques from Plantation to Prison*

*In “Naturalizing Coercion: The Tuskegee Experiments and the Laboratory Life of the Plantation,” Britt Rusert draws on the history of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments in Macon County, Alabama to explore the intertwining of public health, the plantation, and racial capitalism. Tracing emergent forms of governmentality around racialized population hygiene, Rusert shows how Tuskegee turned black bodies into exploitable “natural resources” in state projects of modernization, arguing that particular forms of inclusion and oversight ultimately sustained violence and abandonment. Also attuned to how projects of population health have long justified and relied upon racial exclusion, Christopher Perreira, in “Consumed by Disease: Medical Archives, Latino Fictions, and Carceral Health Imaginaries,” turns to Chicano fiction as a kind of counter-hegemonic archive of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century tuberculosis sanatorium in Los Angeles. Taking us into the prison proper, in “Billions Served: Prison Food Regimes, Nutritional Punishment, and Gastronomical Resistance,” Anthony Ryan Hatch examines how food becomes the terrain of embodied political contestation, where force-feeding, hunger strikes, and food “hacking” become sites for the deprivation and enactment of agency within the extreme constraints of incarceration. Understood alongside the political*

*economy and regulatory infrastructure of the food industry (for and beyond the prison), food becomes a “living technology” and a “symbol of the carceral imagination run amok” (80). In “Shadows of War, Traces of Policing: The Weaponization of Space and the Sensible Preemption,” Andrea Miller explores notions of preemption from drone warfare to predictive policing, drawing on fieldwork in Atlanta to examine geographies of exclusion and the management of perceived threat. Situating policing in a longer history of colonialism and anti-blackness, Miller understands new predictive technologies and surveillance systems as not radically new, but rather continuous with older forms of racialized sense-making. Offering another perspective on prediction and policing, in “This is Not Minority Report: Predictive Policing and Population Racism,” R. Joshua Scannell draws on analyses of the 1956 story and 2002 film adaptation of Minority Report to argue that predictive policing actively produces racialized oppression, reifying a criminalizing common-sense under the pretense of a neutral and data driven technological solution.*

*Part Two: Surveillance Systems from Facebook to Fast Fashion*

*In “Racialized Surveillance in the Digital Service*

*Economy,” Winifred R. Poster explores how consumers and users in the digital service economies of platform capitalism participate in “watching from below,” reflecting and reinforcing existing racial hierarchies. Through an analysis of transnational call centers and online platforms for hiring, lending, buying, selling, and transportation, Poster shows how these everyday forms of consumer surveillance can be as harmful as the more commonly discussed “watching from above.” In a chapter on “Digital Character in ‘the Scored Society’: FICO, Social Networks, and Competing Measurements of Creditworthiness,” Tamara K. Nopper discusses the rise of marketplace lenders as alternatives to traditional credit scoring companies. Rather than argue that one is inherently more just or discriminatory than the other, Nopper instead focuses on the ways in which both, in their own ways, depend upon and participate in a shared commitment to a “scored society” reliant on “digital character,” inviting us to consider the stakes of scoring and the perpetuation of inequality. Taking us into quite a different domain, Mitali Thakor, in “Deception by Design: Digital Skin, Racial Matter, and the New Policing of Child Sexual Exploitation” explores an entrapment scheme for locating sex offenders participating in digital sex tourism. Focusing on the use of a racialized avatar called “Sweetie,” Thakor asks*

*how particular ideas about otherness, innocence, and stranger danger cohere in new enactments of surveillance and punishment. Back in the more mundane and everyday context of retail labor, Madison Van Oort, in “Employing the Carceral Imaginary: An Ethnography of Worker Surveillance in the Retail Industry,” shows how surveillance technology and the policing of workers both pervades and extends beyond the contemporary low-wage workplace.*

### *Part Three: Retooling Liberation from Abolitionists to Afrofuturists*

*In the essay “Anti-Racist Technoscience: A Generative Tradition,” Ron Eglash rereads the history of science for moments of alliance and cross-pollination with anti-racist projects, focusing in particular on the “generative tradition” based on “opposition to the extraction and alienation of value by either capital or state” (228). Tracing points of contact between scientists and abolitionists, anti-racists, and activists, Eglash shows how ideas about hybridity, rather than purity, can animate more just visions of both science and society. Turning our attentions to the ways in which historically marginalized and oppressed groups themselves engage technoscience’s liberatory potentials, Nettrice R. Gaskins’ essay on “Techno-Vernacular*

*Creativity and Innovation across the African Diaspora and Global South” charts the creative, experimental projects of artists, innovators and “makers” often ignored by mainstream tech discourse. Exploring methods of re-appropriation, improvisation, and conceptual remixing, Gaskins gives space to the modes and methods of existing work through which practitioners “reclaim different levels of technological agency” (258). Finally, in “Making Skin Visible through Liberatory Design,” Lorna Roth traces the history of skin color balance and the reification of normative whiteness in photography since the 1970s, asking how new design strategies might challenge the “carceral entrapments” of technosocial norms and their corresponding tools. Decisions about representation and image-making, Roth shows, are not simply biproducts of technical constraints, but reflect existing norms and imaginaries and thus remain open to transformation. The section closes with interviews with influential scholars of race and science Troy Duster (in conversation with Alondra Nelson) and Dorothy Roberts (in conversation with Ruha Benjamin). These fascinating interviews offer a fitting end to the book, positioning academic work within personal and political life stories and showing how situating knowledge in this way makes “technoscientific accounts of the world accountable” (14).*

*The individual contributions in this volume span a number of disciplines and vary widely in their methods, scope, archives, and scale. Yet, taken together, they also draw on many shared theoretical and conceptual tools, visible in their analytic orientations and a set of recurring references: Simone Browne's work on the surveillance of blackness emerges as something of a key touchstone for the book, and multiple pieces invoke and draw upon danah boyd, Kate Crawford, and their colleagues at Data & Society; feminist abolitionists Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Angela Davis; and black studies theorists Sylvia Wynter and Christina Sharpe.*

*The book comes at a timely moment, contributing to pressing contemporary conversations about predictive algorithms, bias in AI, new modes of surveillance, and the myriad ways our increasingly technologically mediated lives are experienced unequally along lines of race, class, and gender. Situated alongside recent work on the automation of inequality (Eubanks 2018), bias in search (Noble 2018), the destructive forces (O'Neil 2016) and blackboxing (Pasquale 2016) of algorithms, and the history of race, gender and labor in shaping technology (Hicks 2017; Roberts 2019), *Captivating Technology* offers a meaningful contribution to public and scholarly discussions of technological (in)justice. It will be*

*of interest to scholars in STS and critical race studies, as well as to anthropology, sociology, American studies, and media studies, and might be usefully complemented by or read alongside *Race After Technology*, a highly readable and readily teachable introduction to many of the core issues underlying the edited volume.*

*The question of whether (and how) artifacts have politics (Winner 1980) has long been central to STS, and this book opens up a number of contexts for thinking through this question afresh. Grappling with the technopolitics of emergent technologies and technological imaginaries and, most crucially, doing so through the lens of critical race theory and a focus on racialization, hierarchy, and entrenchment and enforcement of power and difference, *Captivating Technology* urges us to denaturalize the sedimented histories of our present-day sociotechnical systems and cultivate—and design for—a different and more just future.*

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[Naomi Zucker](#) is a PhD candidate in cultural anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania.

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