Book Review

Review of Atanasoski, Neda, and Kalindi Vora. 2019. *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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As we enter the fourth industrial revolution and second machine age, we participate in a supposedly post-human and post-racial present and future in which robots—as workers in domestic service, factories, and the military—free humans from having to perform dull, dirty, repetitive, and degraded tasks. As these tasks become increasingly automated, humans are free to aspire to, as well as perform, their full creative potential. To critically investigate these technoliberal claims, Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora ask that we pay attention to how engineering imaginaries and technologies are frighteningly, in Ruha Benjamin's (2016) terms, metaphors for innovating inequity. Although technoliberalism links technological development to a future-oriented, aspirational humanity in which race, gender, and even labour are transcended, the shiny veneer of this ideology camouflages the way it operates through a hidden racial grammar—what the authors call “the surrogate human effect.” According to Atanasoski and Vora, “technology thus steps into ... a surrogate relation to human spheres of life, labor, and sociality that 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” (5). Through surrogate-self relations, the politics of (racialized and gendered) difference undergird the production and deployment of mechanical surrogates as partners or replacements for human surrogates. With a longer history in post-Enlightenment modernity, human surrogates have included “the body of the enslaved standing in for the master, the vanishing native bodies necessary for colonial expansion, [and] invisibilized labor[ers who toil because of] indenture, immigration, and outsourcing” (6). The racialized and gendered form of the surrogate is used to imagine and assemble “the human,” or more precisely “the liberal humanist figure of Man” (Weheliye 2014: 8). By lucidly deconstructing technoliberalism's narratives, Atanasoski and Vora show us what is at stake in the definition of “the human,” and how the “human essence” is constructed in relation to those who have been deemed nonhuman or not quite human. Attributed with the capacity to (morally) reason and empathize, the fully human liberal subject is granted rights and freedom at the expense of racialized and gendered surrogates who find themselves objectified and enslaved.

To track the surrogate human effect in technoliberal fantasies in the United States from the early twentieth century to present day, the authors draw upon diverse examples of robot technologies, digital platforms, and media interfaces from across a wide range of fields. On factory floors and as part of the Internet of Things, for example, “smart” robots replace the bodies of racialized workers, whether of black slaves in the nineteenth century US or the bodies of workers in the Global South today, precisely because they can never come to political consciousness and rebelliously question the sociopolitical system in which they labour

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endlessly. As present-day technoliberal updates to imperial conquest, drones and “killer robots” (autonomous lethal weapons) reaffirm the humanity of those who command and control space in the field of war by sparing the lives of American soldiers. At the same time, these autonomous technologies are deployed to “eliminate [racialized] ‘targets’ that have been evacuated of humanity” (138) even as their remote control design was inspired by the Japanese—and more specifically, the Japanese kamikaze suicide bombers in WWII—as a racial other. In contrast to the replacement of human bodies with mechanical bodies, service platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) disguise human labour as machine labour. As a result, AMT’s surrogate human effect masks the fact that certain AI tasks cannot be performed without a low-paid human. Across these examples—which additionally include social, collaborative, and sex robots—Atanasoski and Vora compellingly demonstrate the ways in which gendered and racialized surrogates enable and improve the lives of already privileged subjects while the surrogates themselves continue to be dispossessed and exploited under the intersecting logics of racial capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

While *Surrogate Humanity* is not explicitly a study of surveillance, especially when surveillance is understood as a technologically mediated practice of humans watching other humans, it offers two important lessons about how to study technologies and human-machine interaction that could fruitfully advance surveillance studies. First, the popular imagination of robots tends to swing between technophilia and technophobia. Atanasoski and Vora sidestep these extremes by bringing science and technology studies (STS) together with feminist and critical race perspectives. The critical race perspective in particular is especially welcome given how the effects of both surveillance-related and automated labour practices have disproportionately impacted racialized communities both in the US and the Global South. While George Ritzer (1983) presumed that the “McDonaldization” of society would entail the replacement of human workers with nonhuman technologies, Atanasoski and Vora remind us that only some human workers are disproportionately bearing the burden of this replacement. In keeping with the histories of racialization and colonization that continue to play out in the US today, these are workers that have been constructed as less human in the first place. Thus, technological progress comes at the expense of positioning racialized communities in a past that has not passed. Such an argument aligns with Simone Browne’s (2015) analysis of how racism and anti-blackness continue to be co-produced alongside the surveillance practices and technologies of the US’s present order.

Second, the STS approach not only counters technoliberalism’s narrative of technological determinism (i.e., technological advances drive the historical, economic, and social progress of the liberal human subject) but also its claims of technological neutrality. Following Langdon Winner’s (1980) argument that technologies embody political properties, the authors demonstrate how the specific designs and builds of automated technologies require and depend upon a particular sociopolitical order. As such, technologies can be designed to open certain social and political options while closing others. By considering technologies as imaginative surfaces, *Surrogate Humanity* usefully provides examples from literary, artistic, engineering, and scientific projects that critique or outright refuse technoliberalism’s frame for recognizing full humanity. These rebellious acts of imagination show us that the potential exists to develop alternative designs and trajectories for technological development. They ask that we rethink what counts as technological innovation, urging us to refashion engineering designs, with their embedded hierarchies of difference, in ways that prioritize equity and justice.

Because *Surrogate Humanity*, as the book’s title implies, examines how “humanity” comes to be through the process of making surrogates, it tends to focus on mechanical surrogates as separate bodies that exist outside of the human body. As such, it seems to foreclose the possibility that robots can be potentially prosthetic. Serving as prosthetic limbs, robot technologies, in some instances, are not fully foreign to the human body and may enable new physical or social capabilities. As cyborgs are produced through the merging of the human with the technological, how might we think of surrogacy in such hybrid assemblages? I am curious about pushing the boundaries of the surrogate human effect to consider technological-human hybrids. At these new borders, critical disability studies (e.g., Goodley et al. 2014) might be valuable for further destabilizing the liberal humanist figure of Man in longer conversations about what it means to be

(post-)human. After all, the larger critical project involves questioning how robot technologies revolve around the category of “human”—“who defines it, inherits it, wields it... who rents it, tills it, toils for it... who gets expelled from it, buried under it, or drowned as they risk everything to inhabit it” (Benjamin 2019: 9).

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