Book Review

Review of Benjamin, Ruha (ed.). 2019. *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life is a powerful and deeply creative text that excavates suppressed histories just as much as it works towards building new futures. Its title captures the dualities of what readers can expect from the volume: we are at once made aware of how technologies are crafted as racialized, gendered, and classed tools of hegemony to subjugate marginalized groups to enclosure, containment, and punishment, while also directed towards the ways that technologies serve as tools to preserve, remember, and archive resistance and liberatory strategies for insurgent groups. Editor Ruha Benjamin assembled a group of contributors whose insights are individually remarkable but the effect of reading these essays in concert is—without question—captivating. Benjamin’s introduction to this edited volume captures the spirit of the text—a clear call for an abolitionist movement that extends beyond the formal bounds of the prison to “seek an end to carcerality in *all* its forms,” recognizing that “such an approach rests on an expansive understanding of the ‘carceral’ that attends to the institutional *and* imaginative underpinnings of oppressive systems” (3; italics in the original). Though the introduction is rich in its quotable moments, the following passage is emblematic of one of the most compelling threads running through the volume:

you the reader are encouraged to explore the edges of your own imagination – the border patrols others have imposed, as well as the monitoring systems you may have installed yourself, including those gatekeepers squatting in the nooks and crannies of your thinking, forcing you down certain pathways and telling you to avoid others. How can we expect to change social structures when we continue to nurture the same habits of mind in our mental structures? Angela Y. Davis advises, “*Dangerous limits have been placed on the very possibilities of imagining alternatives. These ideological limits have to be contested. We have to begin to think in different ways. Our future is at stake.*” (Benjamin 11; italics in the original)

Seriously engaging with Benjamin’s provocation—to explore the carceral-informed limitations of our imaginations that many of us learn to accept as natural, normal, and inevitable—is facilitated by the ensuing chapters. It is, in my understanding, a relatively unorthodox move for a sociological text to directly address its readers as possible co-conspirators in a movement for justice. Yet this spirit—coupled with a provocative set of essays diverse in their methodological, substantive, and historical exploration—invites the reader to

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consider the limitless possibilities of intervention in pursuit of a more just world with radical Black feminisms as a point of critical departure. I broadly take up Benjamin's call to push at our ideological limits by illustrating some crucial insights and questions that *Captivating Technology* raises and I conclude with a brief gesture towards how this text compels an inward look toward the academic institutions that many scholars inhabit.

The collection is organized into three parts: (I) Carceral Techniques from Plantation to Prison, (II) Surveillance Systems from Facebook to Fast Fashion, and (III) Retooling Liberation from Abolitionists to Afrofuturists. The abstraction of carceral technologies advances with each section of the volume—with the first tracing more traditional terrains of state punishment, the second progressing to surveillance mobilized under the stated presumption of “the social good,” and the third concluding with a focus “guided by sociologist Alondra Nelson’s query, ‘at what moments and through which tactics did black communities strive to tilt the balance of authority’ toward collective freedom and flourishing?” (Nelson 2013: xii, as quoted in Benjamin 2019: 13). Across twelve essays and two transcribed interviews (with sociologist Troy Duster and legal scholar Dorothy Roberts, conducted by Alondra Nelson and Ruha Benjamin, respectively), the three parts of this volume sketch how technological apparatuses are weaponized against people of color—especially those who are poor, queer, women, Black, immigrants, and otherwise marginalized—while also mobilized as tools of historical, ongoing, and possible future subaltern resistance.

A common thread running through the volume is the role of gender-racialized capitalism in shaping hegemonic technological use as a tool of domination. The authors show how market logics are structured by and through devaluing the *humanity* of people of color, while at the same time extracting enormous value from punishing, surveilling, and enclosing these same populations. Yet articulations of how marginalized people mobilize technology to advance collective self-determination is never lost throughout the text, though it is most clearly centered in Part III. The breadth and depth of knowledge to be gleaned from these chapters—individually and as a collective—reveal important historical and contemporary contours of racialized and gendered carceral control and resistance. Simone Browne’s *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015) informs foundational arguments across the volume and the authors also reference each other’s essays throughout the volume. The sweeping and specific invocations of Black feminisms—centering the contributions of Black women and citing their work, making visible the collective, dialectical construction of scholarship, and bookending the text with two of the most influential Black feminist voices in the contemporary academy—is one of many brilliant maneuvers in this groundbreaking text.

One of the most profoundly important ways that *Captivating Technology* provokes the abolitionist imagination is that it refuses what might be understood as conditional abolition—the misuse of the term “abolition” to advance reformist objectives of gentler punishment, surveillance, and state control. Instead, the volume peels away the carceral layers of what most of us have come to accept as normative conditions of our technological landscape. How have we invited surveillance and freedom-limiting conditions into our everyday lives and what we imagine is possible? How are we accountable to each other—as scholars, teachers, students, community members, and human beings—to demand something better?

Captivating Technology compels us to consider how academia’s professionalizing mandate conditions and socializes us into the carceral imagination. A quick survey of the surveillance surrounding typical graduate student, instructor, and faculty professional life—time-tracking and productivity measurement technologies; university course-management tools that reveal student behavior, actions, and “engagement”; Google scholar citation counts; and mandatory reporting under Title IX that most often amplifies harm to those experiencing sexual and/or racial violence—reveals how we are embedded in conditions that normalize the use of technology to discipline our intellectual and political energies for efficiency, compliance, and surveillance on behalf of the neoliberal university. *Captivating Technology* not only illuminates possible paths of resistance we might take that the hegemonic academy obscures, it presses us to make the journey accessible for others as well.

This volume pushes us to look toward examples of marginalized and underrepresented scholars building and co-opting technologies for liberatory aims within and beyond the academy. From scholars like Kahente Horn-Miller, who conceived of Carleton University's Collaborative Indigenous Learning Bundles "as a way to gather Indigenous ways of knowing and make them available to the...learning community without overburdening Indigenous experts" (Carleton University 2020) to the Cite Black Women Podcast, which "features reflections and conversations about the politics and praxis of acknowledging and centering Black women's ideas and intellectual contributions inside and outside of the academy through citation" (Cite Black Women Collective 2020), it is clear that people of color have long mobilized technology from within the university to advance freedom projects. *Captivating Technology* is a text that drives us towards generative justice (Eglash in Chapter Ten) and Techno-Vernacular Creativity (Gaskins in Chapter Eleven) both by showing us how it is done and teaching us how to recognize initiatives we might support through collective action and solidarity.

Captivating Technology could serve as an anchoring text—in its entirety or through chapter excerpts—for courses across the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, geography, political science, ethnic studies, gender studies, science and technology studies, and information studies. Specific course topics might include inequality, race, gender, technology, the digital divide, security, surveillance, policing, criminal justice, abolition, and governance. Some chapters might be challenging for undergraduates to parse through without substantial guidance, though the magnitude of insights and diversity of subjects would make the intellectual struggle a worthwhile endeavor for many students and instructors. It is, at its core, a volume that drives "you, the reader, to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live *without*, just as you dismantle the ones we cannot live *within*" (14; italics in the original).

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