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## ***SURROGATE HUMANITY: RACE, ROBOTS, AND THE POLITICS OF TECHNOLOGICAL FUTURES (2019) BY NEDA ATANASOSKI AND KALINDI VORA***

Review by Chase Ledin

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**Atanasoski, Neda, and Kalindi Vora. *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots and the Politics of Technological Futures*. Duke University Press, 2019. 240 pp.**

In *Surrogate Humanity* (2019), gender and critical race scholars Neda Atanasoski and Kalinda Vora argue that present-day capitalism sustains racial and gender imaginaries through the engineering and coding of technological innovation. They examine the racial logics of categorisation, differentiation, incorporation, and elimination (5), and explore how new technologies, including war drones, sex robots, and domestic Artificial Intelligent (AI), serve as a surrogate for a “racialised aspiration for proper humanity in the post-Enlightenment era” (10). Rather than simply “freeing” or “liberating” humans from burdensome and unfulfilling work, the incorporation of new, personalised technologies (equated to enforced slavery and contract labour) sutures states of freedom and unfreedom together within a “violent process of extraction and expropriation” in the name of human universality (11). The authors unpack the colonial, imperial, and racial logics encoded within technological innovation and resist technological futures, which they call “technoliberalism,” that reify contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

*Surrogate Humanity* contains six chapters, which explore chronologically the development of techoliberalism, capitalism, and automation. Chapters One and Two interrogate the racial and labour capacities of automation since the nineteenth century, defining the in/congruities of US “labor exploitation along colonial/racial lines” as well as the “erasure of racialised and gendered work in postcapitalist techno-utopias” (29, 57). Chapter Three interrogates the function of artificial intelligence and, what the authors call, the ethics of “invisible service” between nonhuman and posthuman bodies. Chapter Four details the relationship between AI and affect, drawing out the inherent contradictions between the posthuman and the “technological capitalist logics of service and automation that uphold the supremacy of the liberal subject” (109). For the purposes of this review, I will focus in detail on Chapters Five, Six, and the Conclusion, to engage with the book’s most notable contribution: the posthuman “surrogate effect.”

The book analyses how Enlightenment thinking is extended through the production of various technological innovations, including in chapter five – “Machine Autonomy and the Unmanned Spacetime of Warfare” – the use of robots to engage in distance warfare and battlefield clean-up.

Atanasoski and Vora question the extent to which the human is removed from the destruction of war, suggesting that “roboticized warfare renders the fantasy of remote control as a reconceptualization of empire that, by being human-free, can disassociate its power from earlier modes of colonial conquest” (149). The authors carefully articulate the parallels between the imperialism of drone warfare and previous forms of colonial conquest, particularly the dehumanisation of non-Western populations and the deployment of indentured, subaltern soldiers. Defining the “surrogate effect” as the “mechanization, automization, and industrialization” of the “human-machine entanglement,” the authors provide a rigorous argument against the claim that robots will free humans from racialised labour (40). Indeed, recycling the imperial logics of “human autonomy (command)” within the robotic surrogate removes accountability and thus contradicts the notion of human-machine progress (150-151). The war drone, in other words, serves as a vehicle for human labour-violence, even while it purports to revolutionise the means of war.

Atanasoski and Vora are primarily concerned with contemporary US imperialism and the racialised other. As they describe in the introduction, the relationship between white loss and discourses of post-labour technology draws from current debates about the future of work. The authors discuss US liberal modernity’s “obsession with race and the overcoming of racism” updated through recent fears of employment loss due to “foreign intrusion” (47). In a fascinating illustration, the authors interrogate Ale Demiani’s film *M.A.M.O.N.* (2016), which portrays US President “Trump as a giant robot at the promised border wall” (51). The dystopian Science Fiction film voices the imperial logic(s) from within the robot: using an “outdated intercom system,” the crudely technical outfit expels even green-card holding residents from the country. In this respect, the violence of the technological imaginary is made plain: the racial logics of technological dominance operate by way of innovation and cannot be displaced through the process of automisation. That is, the human continues to exist within the mechanisation of labour and technology. Thus, futures imagined through technological innovation will necessarily contain the human even while the human is removed in the development of personalised and ‘autonomous’ robots. As the film suggests, the robot is bound up in the human construct of the racialised other, and the politics of this racialisation results in casualties of both humans and machines.

In chapter six, the authors discuss the ethics and politics of “killer robots,” extending the study into a philosophical discussion of the human versus the nonhuman. “Killer robots bring into crisis how violence constitutes the human against the nonhuman, subsuming racialized and gendered epistemologies of prior affirmations of authorized violence” (172). The authors embark on a critical analysis of human autonomy: discourses that enable and/or disinherit the e/valuation of humanity. This is important for understanding the relationship between morality and suffering, which are ascribed as “human values,” and consequently qualify a subject as “human” (174). Drawing from Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life,” the authors suggest that the surrogate robot, like racialised populations throughout history, “can be made useful as economic restructuring projects in the name of justice, reaffirming the supremacy of Enlightenment man against the other (nonsecular, noncapitalist) forms of being” (178). The surrogate robot is exempt, as such, through its technological production; yet it is held accountable for its actions via its human assemblage. This,

in short, amounts to the following: as a tool of human advancement, killer autonomous robots are essentially intellectual products of humanity, perceived as nonhuman, though paradoxically and conceptually human-like. The boundaries of monitoring robot behaviour, then, become bound up in the politics of ontology, producing eternal questions about the categorisation and legitimisation of human action, identity, and feelings through corporeal embodiment.

The book concludes with a reflection on the design imaginaries implicated in the development of commercial sex robotics. The authors assert that sex robots “animate *objects* that resemble human beings in ways that keep them nonautonomous, yet *simulate* pleasure, and therefore *simulate* consent” (189, original emphasis). Crucial here is the relationship between consent and technoliberal desire: in what ways might consent be granted or erased through the mechanisation of sexual intimacy and pleasure? The authors suggest that the customizable female robot “functions primarily as a mirror that lacks its own interiority” and thus normalises a modal fantasy of a robot-subject that serves only the sexual fantasies of the human user (190). “The surrogate effect takes the structure of the unfree diminished human through which the autonomous liberal subject may feel human through feeling free, and extends it to the technology of the sex robot” (191). In short, they argue that this form of sexual control never leaves forms of liberal domination resisted in feminist scholarship on consent and body autonomy. Thus, it is essential for scholars to consider the parallels between feminist approaches to sex and sexuality and the pleasure politics of technology and the sex robot.

*Surrogate Humanity* is a nuanced study, which will be of use to students and scholars interested in science and technology studies, neo/liberalism, critiques of Enlightenment, and technical modernities. The book provides a rigorous approach to mechanical warfare and important questions about the ethics and future of technological innovation. As the final feminist discussion of AI suggests, the book argues that the technoliberal desire to “expand intelligence reaffirms the racialized and gendered logics producing the fully human as moving target” (196). This study, as such, provides a crucial contribution to existing debates in post-humanism. It further questions the legacies of social progress in favour of a “de-colonizing project” which seeks to disrupt the technological categories of “use, property, and self-possession” and encourage a human intelligence which is itself “something to be hacked” (196). Ultimately, *Surrogate Humanity* delivers a compelling approach to understanding the racialised human-machine relationship and the prospects of technological futures.

## BIONOTE

**Chase Ledin** is a Ph.D. researcher at the University of Edinburgh, UK. His research explores the cultural representation(s) and epistemologies of “post-AIDS” in contemporary sociology, culture and theory. He has broader interests in the archivalisation of HIV/AIDS histories, the politics of STI treatment and prevention since the 1980s, pedagogical approaches to sexual health education, and the sociology of health and illness.