Benjamin Ruha, *Race after technology, Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code,* Polity Press, 2019.

In a classic study of how names impact people’s experience on the job market, researchers show that, all other things being equal, job seekers with White - sounding first names received 50 percent more callbacks from employers than job seekers with Black - sounding names. 5 They calculated that the racial gap was equivalent to eight years of relevant work experience, which White applicants did not actually have; and the gap persisted across occupations, industry, employer size – even when employers included the “equal opportunity” clause in their ads. 6 With emerging technologies we might assume that racial bias will be more scientifically rooted out. Yet, rather than challenging or overcoming the cycles of inequity, technical fixes too often reinforce and even deepen the status quo. For example, a study by a team of computer scientists at Princeton examined whether a popular algorithm, trained on human writing online, would exhibit the same biased tendencies that psychologists have documented among humans. They found that the algorithm associated White - sounding names with “pleasant” words and Black - sounding names with “unpleasant” ones.

Such findings demonstrate what I call “the New Jim Code”: the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era . 8 Like other kinds of codes that we think of as neutral, “normal” names have power by virtue of their perceived neutrality. They trigger stories about what kind of person is behind the name – their personality and potential, where they come from but also where they should go.

Codes are both reflective and predictive. They have a past and a future. “Alice Tang” comes from a family that values education and is expected to do well in math and science. “Tyrone Jackson” hails from a neighborhood where survival trumps scholastics; and he is expected to excel in sports. More than stereotypes, codes act as narratives, telling us what to expect. As data scientist and Weapons of Math Destruction author Cathy O’Neil observes, “[r]acism is the most slovenly of predictive models. It is powered by haphazard data gathering and spurious correlations, reinforced by institutional inequities, and polluted by confirmation bias.” 9

Racial codes are born from the goal of, and facilitate, social control. For instance, in a recent audit of California’s gang database, not only do Blacks and Latinxs constitute 87 percent of those listed, but many of the names turned out to be babies under the age of 1, some of whom were supposedly “self - described gang members.” So far, no one ventures to explain how this could have happened, except by saying that some combination of zip codes and racially coded names constitute a risk. 10 Once someone is added to the database, whether they know they are listed or not , they undergo even more surveillance and lose a number of rights. 11

Most important, then, is the fact that, once something or someone is coded, this can be hard to change. Think of all of the time and effort it takes for a person to change her name legally. Or, going back to California’s gang database: “Although federal regulations require that people be removed from the database after five years, some records were not scheduled to be removed for more than 100 years.” 12 Yet rigidity can also give rise to ingenuity. Think of the proliferation of nicknames, an informal mechanism that allows us to work around legal systems that try to fix us in place. We do not have to embrace the status quo, even though we must still deal with the sometimes dangerous consequences of being illegible, as when a transgender person is “deadnamed” – called their birth name rather than chosen name. Codes, in short, operate within powerful systems of meaning that render some things visible, others invisible, and create a vast array of distortions and dangers.

I share this exercise of how my students and I wrestle with the cultural politics of naming because names are an expressive tool that helps us think about the social and political dimensions of all sorts of technologies explored in this book. From everyday apps to complex algorithms, Race after Technology aims to cut through industry hype to offer a field guide into the world of biased bots, altruistic algorithms, and their many coded cousins. Far from coming upon a sinister story of racist programmers scheming in the dark corners of the web, we will find that the desire for objectivity, efficiency, profitability, and progress fuels the pursuit of technical fixes across many different social arenas. Oh, if only there were a way to slay centuries of racial demons with a social justice bot! But, as we will see, the road to inequity is paved with technical fixes.

Along the way, this book introduces conceptual tools to help us decode the promises of tech with historically and sociologically informed skepticism. I argue that tech fixes often hide, speed up, and even deepen discrimination, while appearing to be neutral or benevolent when compared to the racism of a previous era. This set of practices that I call the New Jim Code encompasses a range of discriminatory designs – some that explicitly work to amplify hierarchies, many that ignore and thus replicate social divisions, and a number that aim to fix racial bias but end up doing the opposite.