RACE AFTER TECHNOLOGY

RUHA BENJAMIN

2020 BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY LITERARY PRIZE WINNER
Dear Reader,

Though our libraries may not be fully open, we continue to believe in the importance of great books and quality library experiences. In this pursuit, we are launching Bklyn Book Club Kits. These kits are bursting at the seams with virtual swag that complements individual books, such as discussion questions, recipes, playlists and author content. The kits may be used in conjunction with a Brooklyn Public Library book club or on your own. Through these means we hope to foster deeper connections with authors, your books, your community and with you—even when we’re apart!

This title, *Race After Technology* by Dr. Ruha Benjamin, won the 2020 Brooklyn Public Library Literary Prize in Fiction & Poetry.

We hope you enjoy this book and the accompanying kit!

JOIN A BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY BOOK DISCUSSION OR AUTHOR EVENT: [BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/CALENDAR/LIST/BOOK%20DISCUSSION](http://BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/CALENDAR/LIST/BOOK%20DISCUSSION)

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BOOK SYNOPSIS

From everyday apps to complex algorithms, Ruha Benjamin cuts through tech-industry hype to understand how emerging technologies can reinforce white supremacy and deepen social inequity.

Benjamin argues that automation, far from being a sinister story of racist programmers scheming on the dark web, has the potential to hide, speed up and deepen discrimination while appearing neutral and even benevolent when compared to the racism of a previous era. Presenting the concept of the "New Jim Code," she shows how a range of discriminatory designs encode inequity by explicitly amplifying racial hierarchies; by ignoring but thereby replicating social divisions; or by aiming to fix racial bias but ultimately doing quite the opposite. Moreover, she makes a compelling case for race itself as a kind of technology, designed to stratify and sanctify social injustice in the architecture of everyday life.

This illuminating guide provides conceptual tools for decoding tech promises with sociologically informed skepticism. In doing so, it challenges us to question not only the technologies we are sold but also the ones we ourselves manufacture.
THE BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY LITERARY PRIZE

Each year Brooklyn Public Library, in collaboration with the Brooklyn Eagles, recognizes outstanding works of nonfiction and fiction & poetry with a prize given in the fall at the Brooklyn Classic, the signature fundraising event of the Brooklyn Eagles.

In 2020, librarians from across the borough submitted 110 titles for consideration. A volunteer team of nearly two dozen librarians—specializing in fields ranging from adult literature, business and career services, and historical collections—served on the selection committee. The committee looked for books that push boundaries, bring light to unheralded stories or give voice to the silenced.

_Race After Technology_ won the BPL Literary Prize for Nonfiction in 2020. Dr. Benjamin delivered a moving acceptance speech in which she shared her personal relationship with the late Taneya Gethers Muhammad, a former librarian at Brooklyn Public Library. Fighting through tears, Dr. Benjamin dedicated her award money to fund the Taneya Gethers Muhammad Memorial Scholarship at Spelman College. View Dr. Benjamin’s acceptance speech below.

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VIEW DR. BENJAMIN’S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH: [YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=CSJQSWCCUHA](YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=CSJQSWCCUHA)

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY LITERARY PRIZE: [BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/SUPPORT/BPL-LITERARY-PRIZE](BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/SUPPORT/BPL-LITERARY-PRIZE)

BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT: RACE AFTER TECHNOLOGY
INTERVIEW WITH DR. RUHA BENJAMIN

Enjoy this 3-minute video in which Dr. Ruha Benjamin discusses Race After Technology: vimeo.com/395807905

Check out Princeton’s full article on Dr. Benjamin and her book: princeton.edu/news/2020/05/15/benjamins-race-after-technology-speaks-growing-concern-among-many-technology-bias
ABOLITIONIST TOOLS

Curious about coded equity audits, algorithmic accountability or “sousveillance”? Check out some of Dr. Benjamin’s abolitionist tools and learn more about the technology developed to fight against racial inequality.

ALGORITHMIC JUSTIC LEAGUE—Combines art and research to illuminate the social implications and harms of AI
AJL.ORG

APPOLITION—The first technology to address the corrupt bail industry
APP.MOONCLERK.COM/C/H27CHMPLG

DATA FOR BLACK LIVES—A movement of activists, organizers and mathematicians committed to the mission of using data science to create concrete and measurable change in the lives of Black people
D4BL.ORG/ABOUT.HTML

STOP LAPD SPYING COALITION—The group’s vision is the dismantling of government-sanctioned spying and intelligence gathering, in all its multiple forms
STOPLAPDSPYING.ORG

WHITE-COLLAR CRIME RISK ZONES—Machine learning predicts where financial crimes are mostly likely to occur across the U.S.
WHITECOLLAR.THENEWINQUIRY.COM

Bonus resource: PANDEMIC PORTAL—Developed by the Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab, of which Dr. Ruha Benjamin is the founding director. “The Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab brings together students, educators, activists and artists to develop a critical and creative approach to data conception, production and circulation. Our aim is to rethink and retool data for justice.”
THEJUSTDATALAB.COM
Virtual reality (VR) technology in particular is routinely described as an ‘empathy machine’ because of the way it allows us to move through someone else’s world. Perhaps it does, in some cases. But, as some critics emphasize, this rhetoric creates a moral imperative to sell headsets and to consume human anguish, and in the process ‘pain is repurposed as a site of economic production...’ (p. 169)

Take a look at the previews for the following three VR experiences. Each of these were designed to combat racism and develop empathy for those experiencing it. In your opinion, could these VR experiences be some of the successful cases Dr. Ruha Benjamin mentions, or are they inadvertently exploitative? What makes the difference?

TRAVELING WHILE BLACK: [OCULUS.COM/EXPERIENCES/GO/1994117610669719/?LOCALE=EN_US]

I AM A MAN: [IAMAMANVR.LOGICGRIP.COM]

1000 CUT JOURNEY: [VHIL.STANFORD.EDU/1000CUT]
THE SAVING SARAH COCKTAIL

Raise a meaningful glass to a Black inventor in tech history.

Otis Boykin (1920-1982) was an inventor of electrical resistors who had 26 patents to his name. His inventions are responsible for the improvement of many devices including IBM computers and, most poignantly, pacemakers. Boykin lost his mother Sarah (d. 1921) to heart failure when he was an infant. Her death inspired his work, resulting in the first implantable pacemaker, saving the lives of an untold number of people.

Award-winning mixologist, influencer and educator Tiffanie Barriere, a.k.a. The Drinking Coach, crafted the Saving Sarah cocktail "to make a toast to [Boykin] and his efforts. This drink is for him and his mother."

2 oz. vodka
3/4 oz. honey syrup
3/4 oz. lemon juice
4 blackberries (save one for garnish)
4 sprigs of thyme
Soda Water

Combine all EXCEPT soda water in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake for 30 seconds. Fill a tall glass with ice and pour soda water in half of the glass. Using a strainer, pour shaken contents into a tall glass with fresh blackberries and thyme sprig.

MEET OTIS BOYKIN:
LEMELESON.MIT.EDU/RESOURCES/OTIS-BOYKIN

LEARN MORE ABOUT TIFFANIE BARRIERE AT HER WEBSITE:
THEDRINKINGCOACH.COM

FOLLOW THE DRINKING COACH ON INSTAGRAM:
INSTAGRAM.COM/THEDRINKINGCOACH
BKLYN BOOKMATCH READALIKES

Did you enjoy *Race After Technology*? Want to read something similar? Check out these readalike titles below.

**Caste: the origins of our discontents**

*Wilkerson, Isabel, author.*

Wilkerson examines the unspoken caste system that has shaped America and shows how our lives today are still defined by a hierarchy of human divisions.

**Citizen**

*Randolph, Claudia, author.*

Claudia Rankine’s bold new book recounts mounting racial aggressions in ongoing encounters in twenty-first-century daily life and in the media.

**The color of law**

*Rothstein, Richard, author.*

This groundbreaking history of the modern American metropolis busts the myth that our cities are racially divided due to de facto segregation and makes clear that it was de jure segregation that promoted the discriminatory patterns continuing today.

**Hood feminism [electronic resource]: Notes from the women that a movement forgot**

*Kendall, Mikki, author.*

How can we stand in solidarity as a movement, Kendall asks, when there is the distinct likelihood that some women are oppressing others?

**A more perfect reunion: race, integration, and the future of America**

*Baker, Calvin, 1972- author.*

A provocative case for integration as the single most radical, disconcerting idea in America, yet the only enduring solution to the racism that threatens our democracy.

**The New Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness**

*Alexander, Michelle, author.*

Former litigator-turned-legal-scholar Michelle Alexander provocatively argues that we have not ended racial caste in America: we have simply replaced it with the criminal justice system.

You can access the list and place holds on these titles in multiple formats through the BPL catalog: [BORROW.BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/BOOKLIST/VY0YZ](BORROW.BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/BOOKLIST/VY0YZ)

In the mood for something else? Get customized reading recommendations from Brooklyn Public Library’s free BKLYN BOOKMATCH service: [BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/BOOKMATCH](BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/BOOKMATCH)
I am a professor of African American studies at Princeton University, founding director of the IDA B. WELLS Just Data Lab and author of two books, *People’s Science* and *Race After Technology*, and editor of *Captivating Technology*.

I am currently working on a fourth book, *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want*. I write, teach and speak widely about the relationship between innovation and inequity, knowledge and power, race and citizenship, health and justice.

Learn more about Dr. Benjamin: [ruhabenjamin.com/](http://ruhabenjamin.com/)

IDA B. WELLS JUST DATA LAB: [thejustdatalab.com](http://thejustdatalab.com)

PEOPLE’S SCIENCE: [ruhabenjamin.com/peoples-science](http://ruhabenjamin.com/peoples-science)


BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WARNING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDE SPOILERS!

1. Prior to reading Race After Technology, were you aware of racism in tech?

“The simplest explanation for biased algorithms is that the humans who create them have their own deeply entrenched biases. That means that despite perceptions that algorithms are somehow neutral and uniquely objective, they can often reproduce and amplify existing prejudices” (p. 50). Did this information change your understanding of technology and/or racism?

2. Do you use social media? If yes, think of your personal experience with it. Think also of the ways in which hate and misinformation vs. support and awareness have been spread online. Do you see social media’s influence as more negative or positive?

3. Have you ever felt perturbed by targeted ads that relate to your Internet searches or conversations? Did you ever suspect that such algorithmic tailoring might be harmful or racist? How did the related information in Race After Technology (p. 33) make you feel?

4. Does the "parody project" White-Collar Crime Risk Zones (p. 196 or this kit's "Abolitionist Tools" page) affect your perspective of "predictive policing techniques" or "citizen policing"?

5. Knowing what you now know about the racism built into and perpetuated by technology, do you have new plans to protect yourself, fight against it or make reparations?

6. Has your opinion of technology changed since reading this book?