

Yarden Katz. *Artificial Whiteness: Politics and Ideology in Artificial Intelligence*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2020. £22.00 / \$28.00. 352 pp. ISBN 9780231194914.

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It has been said that, by standing on the shoulders of giants, one gets to see further, and in *Artificial Whiteness*, Yarden Katz stands on the shoulders of various figures in critical race theory and other disciplines to mount a critique of artificial intelligence for its alleged complicity with imperialism, capitalism, and the maintenance, expansion, and refinement of white supremacy.

Setting the tone of the book from the very outset as an exploration of the politics and ideology rather than the history of AI, Katz refers in the Preface to the “avalanche of ‘AI’ propaganda”, and “a depressing willingness on the part of academics to serve empire and the corporate world with remarkable flexibility” (x). The author, a white male anti-Zionist Jew of mixed Arab, North African, and Bulgarian Sephardic ancestry – and I mention this because he provides an autobiographical note exploring the “personal motivation” for his study in the Introduction, namely, “the settler-colonialist coordinate system connecting Jewishness and whiteness” (16) – is explicit about his concern to interrogate the “self-evident discourse on AI” by focusing on its discursive constitution, “read[ing] AI’s present through its past and . . . examining the political and ideological projects served by its reappearances” (3), that is, the maintenance of white supremacy under neoliberalism and the advancement of settler colonial, carceral, and surveillant projects.

Crucially, Katz insists that “from the start, AI was nebulous and contested” (5), and he points to the need for empire and capital to iteratively rearticulate its value given such contestation, “each of AI’s iterations [having] produced racialized, gendered, and classed models of the self, delivered with imperialist rhetorics of colonization and conquest” (7) On his reading, AI serves a dual purpose: *politically*, it functions as a prosthesis in the maintenance of racial social order and the advance of imperialist and capitalist projects; *ideologically*, it functions as a site for reinscribing the invisibility of whiteness. As he says, “to understand AI’s formation, trajectory, and function . . . it should be viewed as a *technology of whiteness*: a tool that not only serves the aims of white supremacy but also reflects the form of whiteness as an ideology.” Importantly, in this connection, Katz maintains that “AI takes the form of a makeshift patchwork” which he characterises as “nebulous and shifting” and which mimics “the structure of whiteness as an ideology” (9), thereby suggesting AI functions as a floating signifier for imperialist racial capitalism (20, 27, 35, 163). As an interesting discursive aside, Katz indicates a

possible “quilting point” for AI in referring to “the militarized frame [that] gave AI its apparent coherence and force” (37) consistent with his view of AI as “a malleable technology of power” (Katz 2020: 68).

According to Katz, the aim of AI was to build systems capable of learning and reasoning without recourse to social context, a ‘view from nowhere’. Crucially, however – and in a remark broadly consistent with the stance of feminist critique, critical race theory, and decolonial theory – Katz maintains that this “turned out to be a view from a rather specific, white, and privileged place” (6).

The argument is developed in detail across the book’s three sections. (1) Formation (chapters 1 and 2) explores the historical entanglement of AI with both imperialism and capitalism and where the author points to the link between AI and militarism, tracing AI’s formation in the 1950s to the American military-industrial-academic complex (24-5). The first chapter in this section is notable for engaging, albeit briefly, with themes of “Manifest Destiny” in connection with computing in general, and Orientalism in US depictions of Japan’s Fifth Generation computing project as imperialist, more specifically (39-42). The second chapter is notable for pointing to the masking function served by AI in relation to what some commentators have referred to as surveillance capitalism and/or data colonialism, developments that are entangled with the political-economic shift toward societal quantification (“governance by numbers”). The author draws attention to various insidious entanglements of US academic institutions (e.g. Harvard, Stanford, MIT) with settler colonialist and land dispossession projects. (2) Self and the Social Order (chapters 3 to 5). In this, in addition to examining what he refers to as AI’s “epistemic forgeries”, and mounting a controversial critique of the discourse of critical AI ethics for its entanglement with corporate and state actors and ostensible liberal commitment to an adaptationist rather than abolitionist orientation to the carceral state, he expands on the idea of AI as a technology of whiteness. Chapter 3 is notable for drawing attention to AI’s entanglement with neoliberal economic theory (Hayek) and behaviourist psychology (Skinner) (119-22). (3) Alternatives (chapters 6 and 7) considers the limits of embodied and situated approaches to symbolic and connectionist AI in relation to their failure to reflexively consider their own entanglements with imperialism, militarism, and (racial) capitalism, and a commitment made to refusing the AI project *per se*. Chapter 6 is notable for presenting an important critique of the phenomenological stance of Hubert Dreyfus, an early critic of GOFAI (Good Old-Fashioned AI), for his pragmatism and alleged complicity with the military-industrial complex – for example, the RAND corporation (188-92).

Insofar as the space afforded by a review precludes the possibility of extended engagement, in what follows I shall confine myself to making a few critical remarks.

First, I should like to question Katz's tacit assumption that the appropriate way in which to conceptualise whiteness/white supremacy is as an ideology, one that can be used to explore "Artificial Intelligence" "as a concept, field, and set of practices". On his view, "whiteness is the organizing logic of AI, the frame that makes sense of its trajectory and political functions, its epistemic forgeries and models of the self" (153-4). Granted, yet why should this logic and frame be understood as ideological in nature with all the superstructural connotations associated with that term? For example, is it not possible that whiteness, like AI, is a discursive terrain, that is, "a concept, field, and set of practices"? Alternatively, might whiteness not be better conceptualised as a socio-material assemblage, or even as a technology itself as Chun (2009), Coleman (2009) and Benjamin (2019) have argued? (On this view, it might be argued that AI should be understood as a rhetorical tool/technology of the rhetorical tool/technology that is race – that is something of the order of a 'second-order' technology.) According to Katz, the latter position is "worthwhile and relevant", not least for disrupting essentialism about race. However, he is explicit about wanting to "reject the line of reasoning that suggests that since race is a technology and technologies have multiple uses, then perhaps racial categories are not inherently oppressive and can instead be put to subversive and liberatory uses by creative individuals" (239-40), a position that might be characterised as technological re-appropriation and advanced by Coleman (2009), for example. Given existing globally pervasive, sedimented, and asymmetric power relations, I am strongly inclined to concur with Katz, and hence sceptical about the possibility for "weaponizing" race (as technology) in pursuit of liberatory and decolonial ends.

Second, Katz maintains that "AI serves the aims of whiteness – and thus is a tool in the arsenal of a white supremacist social order – but that it also mirrors the nebulous and shifting form of whiteness as an ideology" (155). While prosthetic and ideological readings of AI are quite plausible, I want to suggest they are not exhaustive of possibilities in terms of the relationship between AI and white supremacy; in my own work, for example, I interpret AI as an ontological refinement within the iterative logic of whiteness/white supremacy itself, one prompted by "White Crisis" (itself prompted by contestation of whiteness) and conceptualised in terms of shifts about "the line of the human" (Ali 2019, 2020). In short, rather than "AI [being] adapted, like whiteness, to challenges from social movements" (155), I want to suggest that AI is an adaptive iteration of whiteness itself. Interestingly, Katz comes close to articulating such a view in stating that "Whiteness has always been artificial, and *in AI, whiteness as an ideology finds not only a useful technology but also another form of expression* [emphasis added]" (181), although there is a certain ambivalence in his position in that he appears to locate this "form of expression" in structural nebulousness rather than iterativity within the structuring logic of whiteness (167).

Third, Katz presents an important critique of embodied alternatives to mainstream AI grounded in the autopoietic theory of Maturana and Varela, drawing attention to their tendency toward structural determinism and ready assimilation into extant power structures (e.g. Hayekian market-dynamics under neoliberalism) (201-2). Yet it should be noted that the author fails to train his critical lens on the functionalist-cum-cognitivist position articulated by Noam Chomsky. This omission is significant since, according to cultural theorist David Golumbia, Chomsky's insistence that the individual human brain was akin to a computer and that "the most fundamental human phenomena – cognition and language – can effectively be reduced to computation" (Golumbia 2009: 33) generated much financial support from the US Department of Defence (Golumbia 2009: 85). While it might be countered that limitations of space (and time) precluded engaging every position, given the hegemonic weight and pervasiveness of cognitivism, I consider this, at minimum, a missed opportunity.

Finally, consistent with his endorsement of the view that capitalism must be understood as racialised, Katz maintains that "racial fictions run deep" (156-7), yet it is unclear just how deep he suggests we go temporally (that is, historically) and spatially (that is, geographically) given his US-centric framing of AI and its genealogy. In this connection, I suggest the need to situate Katz's critical race theoretical framing of AI within an encompassing decolonial frame enabling AI to be viewed in relation to the long *durée* project of colonial modernity which commenced in the late fifteenth century CE.

The above remarks aside, there is much to commend about Yarden Katz's book: as a critique of the racial political economy of AI, one engaging seriously with the entanglements of AI and whiteness/white supremacy, it is perhaps the most important work currently available in monograph form, copiously referenced and supported by extensive endnotes. However, as a source of ideas and practices for resisting with a view to ultimately dismantling white supremacy and AI, the book appears somewhat disappointing on account of the thinness of the sole proposal offered in the conclusion, namely, refusal. While Katz correctly frames this stance as distinct from mere rejection insofar as refusal is – or at least can be – generative rather than merely negative, he appears to offer the reader nothing in the way of concrete suggestions for tactical and strategic opposition to white supremacy and AI.

Yet what if reality is otherwise than it appears? Is it possible that the lack of concrete recommendations, a paucity that might be interpreted as an absence and silence, was intentional, a strategic move on the part of the author consistent with his invocation and advocacy of fugitivity as theorised by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) – that is, in relation to "fugitive planning and study" (230)? Are certain things better left unsaid? To adapt a phrase from the early Wittgenstein,

transposed from the terrain of the mystical (or metaphysical) to the ethical (or normative) and political, that of which we cannot – *should* not – speak for fear of co-optation by white supremacy, we must pass over in silence. But if this reading appears too apophatic, too negative, perhaps the most we can – and *should* – do is to gesture in the direction of travel, and for Katz, this appears to be fugitive refusal. For others, such as myself, taking their lead from an expansive and transformative decolonial reading of historical Luddism, it might mean fugitive refusal and more. Cryptically invoking the backstory of Frank Herbert’s epic *Dune* saga, is it possible that there cometh a Butlerian Jihad aimed at confronting the whiteness that is AI on a socio-material basis? And morphing the geo-politics and body-politics of the heroic resistance leader of *The Terminator* franchise (John Connor) along the post-positivist, post-Orientalist and decolonial lines of the Critical Muslim Studies project, in this connection it might be time to issue the following call:

Ya Jaan Khaana! ‘Ayna anta?

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