



## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

### The Surrogate Effect: Technoliberalism and Whiteness in a “Post” Labor Era

Neda Atanasoski

University of California Santa Cruz  
natanaso@ucsc.edu

Kalindi Vora

University of California Davis  
kavora@ucdavis.edu

#### Abstract

This paper offers preliminary reflections on the relationship between the seemingly opposed logics of white supremacy and racial liberalism by sketching the contours and workings of what the authors call technoliberalism. First, the article briefly overviews the relationship between the discourse of “white loss,” immigration and automation in contemporary US national politics. It then addresses how technoliberal imaginaries that argue that it is robots, not racialized others, who are taking US jobs, pin their anti-racist logics on a post-racial technological future. Through examples of robotic and digital technologies intended to replace human bodies and functions, the paper thus excavates the suppressed racial imaginary “technoliberalism.”

Atanasoski, N. and Vora, K. (2018). The Surrogate Effect: Technoliberalism and Whiteness in a “Post” Labor Era. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 4(1), 1-13. <http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312  
© Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora. 2018 | Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license

Automated teaching and learning characterizes the new generation of factory robots. This is a central aspect of what the World Economic Forum has recently dubbed the “fourth industrial revolution,” in which even the production and programming of technology can be performed by machines themselves. Even though the development of human-free industrial robots announces that an ostensibly post-labor (and as we will go on to argue in this paper, a “post-race” and “post-gender”) epoch is upon us, the automation that was an inherent part of the first industrial revolution has signaled the threat of the replaceability of specific types of human functions and human workers that are racialized and gendered. Following the 2016 US presidential election, for instance, the media announced that Donald Trump could not live up to his promises to return jobs to the white working class because these jobs were lost to robots rather than to threatening racial others (i.e., to illegal immigrants and racialized outsourced labor in the Global South). Nonetheless, the machine and the racialized other pose a similar threat of displacing those already fully human in this conception of (white) loss.

In this paper, we offer preliminary reflections on the relationship between the seemingly opposed logics of white supremacy and racial liberalism by sketching the contours and workings of what we call technoliberalism that is a part of the so-called fourth industrial revolution. We begin by briefly overviewing the relationship between the discourse of “white loss,” immigration and automation in contemporary US national politics. We then move to addressing how technoliberal imaginaries that argue that it is robots, not racialized others, who are taking US jobs, pin their anti-racist logics on a post-racial technological future.

Through examples of robotic and digital technologies intended to replace human bodies and functions, our paper thus excavates the suppressed racial imaginary of “technoliberalism.” According to the logics of technoliberalism, technology advances humans toward a post-racial future by asserting a post-labor world in which racial difference, along with all human social difference, is transcended. Though

technoliberalism asserts anti-racism as a central premise, we show that technoliberalism's post-racial imaginary is in fact another variation of racial liberalism that has been a part of US governance from the inception of that nation. By insisting on the continuing importance of racial and gendered histories of labor that expand the category of labor and the worker far beyond the myth of the factory worker as the only subject of labor, we can see that technoliberalism not only fails to be anti-racist, but is in fact an affirmation of the US racial empire.

To open our analysis, we begin with a short video, entitled *M.A.M.O.N: Latinos vs. Donald Trump* (Ale Damiani 2016) that brings together the imaginary of robots, labor, and Trump's infamous wall.



Figure 1. Latinos vs. Donald Trump

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q\\_bSi5rBlw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_bSi5rBlw)

We see in this spoof of the border wall an argument that closing the border increases the need for automation (even as the inefficiency of the automated border system frustrates the violently expelled workers). We will return to how this video is a critique of both the white supremacist and technoliberal imaginaries of the US economy at the end of this essay. For now, we observe that one of Trump's first executive actions on 24 January 2017, thematized in this video, announced the immediate

construction of a border wall. Both Trump and the phantasm of a border wall promoted in his presidential campaign are symbols that bring together labor, technologies of control, and white supremacy. The fantasy of isolation, closing of borders, and expelling immigrant labor animating Trump's promises to build a border wall to revive a formerly booming national economy. The imagined result would restore the (unmarked white) working class laborer to a former glory, symbolized by figures like the auto industry worker and coal miner.

In response to claims that immigrant others are responsible for the loss of a glorious era of white labor in the United States, tech industry leaders emphasized that in fact it was automation that was the biggest threat to American workers. These claims were positioned as anti-racist, redirecting concerns about white loss from the immigrant threat to the threat of robotics. Yet, as we contend here, these arguments are also part of a problematic relationship between what we call technoliberalism and the fantasy of post-racism in the labor arena. It is thus crucial to ask: What is the relationship between white loss and the discourse of post-labor technology/technoliberalism?

The racial imaginary Trump invokes, both in his campaign rhetoric and in his presidential speeches, has led many scholars of race in the US to question whether we must now think about fascism rather than liberalism if we want to analyze race relations (we need only to think of the recent events in Charlottesville VA to understand why this seems to be an important move). Briefly, racial liberalism has long been viewed as a central tenet of governance and empire in the US. Jodi Melamed (2006) has argued:

In contrast to white supremacy, the liberal race paradigm recognizes racial inequality as a problem, and it secures a liberal symbolic framework for race reform centered in abstract equality, market individualism, and inclusive civic nationalism. Antiracism becomes a nationally recognized social value and, for the first time, gets absorbed into U.S. governmentality. Importantly, postwar liberal racial formation sutures an "official" antiracism to

U.S. nationalism, itself bearing the agency for transnational capitalism (4-5).

On the one hand, Trump's campaign and presidential rhetoric that has been overtly racist in tenor contradicts the tenets of racial liberalism in US politics and culture outlined by Melamed. On the other hand, we might consider the opposition to Trump's assessments of job loss as white loss articulated by tech leaders in particular as yet another innovation in the logics of racial liberalism. What we are theorizing in our work as the emergent formation of technoliberalism. By technoliberalism, we mean the way in which liberal modernity's simultaneous and contradictory obsession with race and the overcoming of racism has once again been innovated at the start of the twenty-first century (and TechBoom 2.0) through the frame of a post-labor world. Technoliberal futurity envisions robots as replacing human form and function in factories and other spheres (for instance, bus and taxi drivers, janitors, and call-center workers). As proponents of such futures argue, it is not that jobs are being stolen from the US white working class by Mexicans and the Chinese, but that, as robots take human jobs, other solutions for human obsolescence must be found. Thus, as we insist here, there is a need to parse out what racial logics continue to structure the technoliberal imaginary that is positioned in seeming opposition to white supremacy.

One representative example is a CNBC commentary (McKissen 2017), which noted that,

Eighty-five percent of manufacturing jobs were lost to technology from 2000-2010, not Chinese job thieves. ... We can expect more automation, and not just on the shop floor. Last year the White House predicted 47 percent of existing jobs will eventually be eliminated by automation and artificial intelligence. ... Unless Donald Trump has a time machine stored in a secret lair underneath Trump Tower, going back to a labor-driven manufacturing economy isn't an option."

<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/24/trump-jobs-robots-and-real-solutions-commentary.html>).

In the technoliberal logic of this report, it is not that the new economy uses cheap, racialized labor outsourced to the global south. Rather, *the new economy does not need any human labor*. Similar assessments abound in news reports pointing to Trump's racist fallacies, including his cornerstone promise to revive coal mining in the US (and thus dismantling the Obama-era clean power plan). Yet, as a recent *New York Times* article outlines,

In Decatur, Ill., far from the coal mines of Appalachia, Caterpillar engineers are working on the future of mining: mammoth haul trucks that drive themselves. The trucks have no drivers, not even remote operators. Instead, the 850,000-pound vehicles rely on self-driving technology, the latest in an increasingly autonomous line of trucks and drills that are removing some of the human element from digging for coal. ... Hardy miners in mazelike tunnels with picks and shovels [celebrated by Trump] — have steadily become vestiges of the past. (Tabuchi 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/business/coal-jobs-trump-appalachia.html?mcubz=3>).

What is interesting about this article and others like it is that the evidence that Trump's labor policies are racist is the same evidence that suggests that the laborer as a figure, and human labor writ large, is vestigial to the tech-driven economy. To be clear, we are not contending that the nostalgic vision of the white working class in the US is disconnected from the logics of white supremacy. Rather, we are proposing that there is *also* an urgent need to parse out the racial logics that continue to structure the technoliberal imaginary which articulates itself as separate from white supremacy.

The fully automated future, it is important to note, is not unconditionally celebrated. It is often articulated as loss — just not as white loss, but rather as universal human loss. According to Stephen Hawking, “The automation of factories has already decimated jobs in traditional manufacturing, and the rise of artificial intelligence is likely to extend this job destruction deep into the middle classes, with only the

most caring, creative or supervisory roles remaining.” (Larson 2017, <https://medium.freecodecamp.org/bill-gates-and-elon-musk-just-warned-us-about-the-one-thing-politicians-are-too-scared-to-talk-8db9815fd398>).

Elon Musk, founder of Tesla and SpaceX, makes a similar point: “What to do about mass unemployment? This is going to be a massive social challenge. There will be fewer and fewer jobs that a robot cannot do better [than a human]. These are not things that I wish will happen. These are simply things that I think probably will happen” (Ibid.). The tech entrepreneur and Shark Tank judge Mark Cuban has been critical of Trump, and in particular of Trump’s racist understandings of job loss. As he put it,

“I’m willing to bet these companies [that promised to build new factories and create new jobs in the US like Fiat Chrysler, GM, Ford, Intel and Walmart] when it is all said and done ... are going to end up leading to fewer people being employed ... and there is nothing President Trump can do to stop that because of the trends in technology — machine learning, neural networks, deep learning, etc. — changing the nature of work” (Snider 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/02/20/cuban-trump-cant-stop-rise-robots-and-their-effect-us-jobs/98155374/>)

At the same time tech billionaires articulate a universal human loss and spell out the end of the worker, the connection between liberalism and capitalist development means that warnings about the inevitable obsolescence of manual jobs is paired with a simultaneous optimistic outlook for the growth of the capitalist economy. Thus, the technoliberal imaginary continually reasserts that US industry is growing, rather than being in decline as Trump has argued. According to a 2016 PBS Newshour report,

Despite [Trump’s] charge that ‘we don’t make anything anymore,’ manufacturing is still flourishing in America. Problem is, factories don’t need as many people as they used to because machines now do so much of the work. America has lost more than 7 million

factory jobs since manufacturing employment peaked in 1979. Yet American factory production ... more than doubled over the same span to \$1.91 trillion [in 2015], according to the Commerce Department. ... Trump and other critics are right that trade has claimed some American factory jobs, especially after China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 and gained easier access to the U.S. market. ... But research shows that the automation of U.S. factories is a much bigger factor than foreign trade in the loss of factory jobs. ... The vast majority of the lost jobs — 88% — *were taken by robots and other homegrown factors that reduce factories' need for human labor.* ... (Wiseman 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/factory-jobs-blame-robots/>).

The PBS report concludes that the upside of the robot revolution is that the Asian drain of jobs is ending, as manufacturing returns to the US where the use of robots can be easily implemented as an affordable solution to outsourcing. In the technoliberal imaginary, US imperial power has thus been reaffirmed through technological innovation.

By way of conclusion, we want to return to the critique of technoliberalism that we see in the Mexico border wall satire video featuring Robo-Trump, with which we opened this paper. As we read it, the short film asserts the need to understand racialized labor as central to automation (not as separate from it, as in the technoliberal imaginary). The film demonstrates that automation (or the expulsion of Mexican workers from the US — including doctors, beauty queens, meteorologists, and food truck chefs) is both violent and inefficient. The automated complaint system at the wall cannot do the work that a human could do, leading to a comical and purposeful miscommunication as the system thanks the angry food truck worker for his cooperation and asks him not to return. The film also insists that racialized labor is central to all aspects of the US economy, from the service industry to entertainment. Even more significantly, the film can be read as making a connection between fascist and technoliberal futures. Trump (or at least we can

assume the man is Trump, based on his hairstyle) is inside the giant killer robot who crosses the border wall to stomp on the expelled Mexican workers. That the body of Trump and the body of the robot act as one underscores the dual violence of automation and white supremacy. The film thus refuses to treat them as separate, as does technoliberalism. The film suggests that technoliberal imaginaries that utilize robots to frame antiracist arguments against the logic of walls are violent in their own way.

As we well know, new technologies of automation have historically often provided the rationale for actually *ramping up* production and the need for more workers whose labor has been devalued due to automation, for instance in twentieth century agribusiness (Marez 2016). More recently, we see this in the crowdsourcing of what Amazon calls humans as service in their data management platform Amazon Mechanical Turk. We thus agree with feminist and critical race scholars of science, technology and society (STS) and labor, like Vora (2015) and Subramaniam and Herzig, among others, who insist that what is needed today is an exploration of the ways in which geopolitical and economic shifts demand a grappling with new subjects of labor, which, with the simple privileging of the factory laborer would remain invisible. For example, Herzig and Subramaniam (2017) argue that the “very assertion of a subject’s ability to labor, like assertions of capacities for reason, suffering, or language, often serves as a tool for delineating hierarchical boundaries of social and political concern” (p. 104). In other words, only certain kinds of subjects (and certain kinds of work), following orthodox Marxist conceptual rubrics, could be legible as “labor,” while other kinds of work (for example, women’s reproductive labor or nonhuman, including animal work) fall away from that category. Affirming that we must account for these unnamed or unrecognized laboring subjects under biocapital (including nonagential, nonhuman, nonliving, and metaphysical labor), they call upon “radical scholars’ further reflection on the labor concept’s myriad entanglements with exclusionary categories of race, nation, gender, sexuality, disability, and species, while reaffirming the

significance of "labor" (p. 104) as a category of analysis. While class is still very much a part of the analysis, Subramaniam's and Herzig's point is that because of the over-privileging of the white blue-collar worker, other categories entangled with labor fall away. Instead, as they insist, these other categories must be thought alongside class in order to recast the stakes of who (or what) can be made legible as a laboring subject. Such an analysis would also open up new possibilities for thinking through the racialization of the white underclass (and/as failed whiteness, "white trash," etc.) (Hartigan 1997).

Because of the technoliberal insistence that we are entering a post-labor world that is anti-racist because it is human-free, it is urgent to assess the ways in which technology has innovated upon capital's dependence on racialized and gendered labor. As we have argued here, a post-race world forecasted by tech industry icons and leaders asserts a universal humanity, thus rendering racialized labor invisible. As automation ostensibly "frees" humans from the drudgery of manual labor for more creative and innovative work (Atanasoski and Vora 2015), the people who get those creative jobs will be those representing the whiteness of how such skills are embodied (e.g., attendance at a liberal arts college or those who have experienced certain class privileges). Because, as we have pointed out, technoliberals cite automation, rather than immigration, as the main threat to the US worker, this occurs ironically though opposition to policies of exclusion, expulsion, and overtly racist discourse, even as the privileges of whiteness are reasserted. It is thus urgent to pay attention to the connections between the post-racial and post-labor logics of liberalism today even as we appear to be in an era ruled by the logics of fascism — the two, we suggest, are never disconnected.

## Acknowledgements

The authors thank Banu Subramaniam and Michelle Murphy for their encouragement to publish this piece, as well as the participants of the

Whiteness and Technoscience double panel that convened at the 4S conference in Boston in 2017. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

## References

Atanasoski, N. and Vora, K. (2015). Surrogate Humanity: Posthuman Networks and the Racialized Obsolescence of Labor. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 1(1). DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.28968/cfft.v1i1.42.g103>

Hartigan, J. (1997). Unpopular Culture: The Case of "White Trash". *Cultural Studies* 11(2), 316-343.

Herzig, R. and Subramaniam B. (2017). Labor in the Age of Bio-Everything. *Radical History Review*, 127, 103-124.

Larson, Q. (2017). A Warning from Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Stephen Hawking, *freeCodeCamp*, February 18. Retrieved from

<https://medium.freecodecamp.org/bill-gates-and-elon-musk-just-warned-us-about-the-one-thing-politicians-are-too-scared-to-talk-8db9815fd398>.

Marez, C (2016). *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

McKissen, D. (2017, February 24). Here's the one overlooked solution to America's job crisis we need to talk about now, *CNBC*. Retrieved from

<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/24/trump-jobs-robots-and-real-solutions-commentary.html>.

Melamed, J. (2006). The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism, *Social Text* 24.

Snider, M (2017, February 20). Cuban: Trump can't stop rise of the robots and their effect on U.S. jobs, *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/02/20/cuban-trump-cant-stop-rise-robots-and-their-effect-us-jobs/98155374/>.

Tabuchi, H. (2017, March 29). Coal Mining Jobs Trump Would Bring Back No Longer Exist. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/business/coal-jobs-trump-appalachia.html?mcubz=3>.

Vora, K (2015). *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Wiseman, P (2016, November 2). Mexico taking U.S. factory jobs? Blame robots instead. *PBS*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/factory-jobs-blame-robots/>.

## Bios

**Neda Atanasoski** is an Associate Professor of Feminist Studies and the Director of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She is the author of *Humanitarian Violence: The US Deployment of Diversity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), and co-editor with Kalindi Vora of *Postsocialist Politics and the Ends of Revolution*, a special issue of *Social Identities* (2018). Currently, she is completing a second book, co-authored with Kalindi Vora, entitled *Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (forthcoming, Duke University Press, 2019).

**Kalindi Vora** is the Director of the Feminist Research Institute and Associate Professor of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at UC Davis. Her first book, *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of*

*Outsourced Labor* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), takes up questions of technology, colonialism and raced and gendered labor under globalization. Her research has included ethnographic study of IT professionals and gestational surrogates in India, and a new project with Neda Atanasoski on the racial and gendered politics of robotics and artificial intelligence, about which she has edited special issues and published in journals such as, *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, *Current Anthropology*, *Social Identities*, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Postmodern Culture*, and *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*. Her current book project with Neda Atanasoski is entitled, *Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (forthcoming with Duke University Press, 2019).