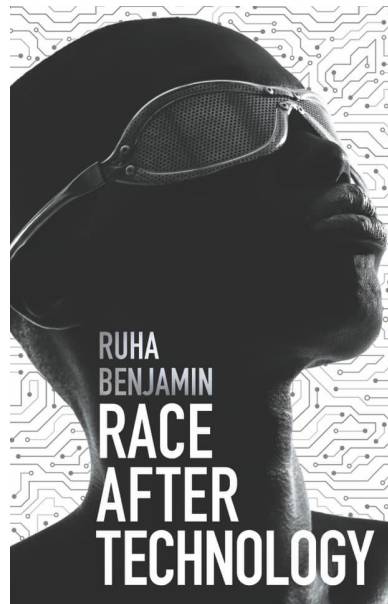


A person wearing a black cap and goggles, looking upwards against a purple background with circuit patterns.

# RACE AFTER TECHNOLOGY

DISCUSSION GUIDE





# RACE AFTER TECHNOLOGY:

Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code

by Ruha Benjamin

## GUIDED READING and DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**“Remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within.” — Ruha Benjamin**

### PREFACE

1. Ruha Benjamin describes early memories of growing up in a heavily policed neighborhood where her family, friends, and neighbors are caught in a carceral web of surveillance and incarceration. How did the police interact with you and your childhood neighborhood? How does your identity impact your current proximity to and relationship with the police?

### INTRODUCTION: The New Jim Code

2. How are names racially coded? What technologies do our names interact with? What considerations did Benjamin make when choosing a name for her son? What coding is embedded in your own name? How does your name determine how racially visible or invisible you are?

3. What is the New Jim Code? How do racial codes facilitate social control? Should technological advances be developed without accounting for human bias? Why or why not? How is the production of data connected to a long history of exclusion and discrimination?

4. How can we draw attention to coded inequity? Why is it important to identify how tools and data represent reality? How can we resist the creation a digital caste system? How are racist results connected to the encoding process?

5. How do choices made by private tech industries influence and operate as public policy decisions? How do decisions made by social media companies uphold and impact political values? What are some of the harms that tech companies have caused?
6. What are some of the potential harms of government data sharing? Can you think of a time that your personal data has been used against your individual interests? Is it important to intervene in the tech industry's attempts to self-regulate? Why or why not?
7. What are some examples of how cosmetic diversity is utilized in technology? How does marketing cosmetic diversity shift attention away from creating and amplifying substantive change? How does utilizing cosmetic diversity boost engagement and profits? Where have you seen this happening in your life?
8. Is technology a neutral tool? Why or why not? Why is it critical that we assess technology by its outcomes rather than by the intentions of its creators?
9. Why is it impossible for designers and developers to be colorblind? How has the white aesthetic influenced artificial intelligence? What examples of this dominant aesthetic have you witnessed in your own use of technology? When have you seen tech companies use Black celebrities to advertise their products?
10. How can centering intentions make the social costs of technology invisible? Why is it important to acknowledge that technology is developed within political and social contexts? How have you witnessed access to technology positioned as a solution to racial inequality? Have these examples downplayed structural barriers to access? Have they included or ignored the participation and innovation from people of color?

## PART 1: Engineered Inequity

11. What was the Beauty AI initiative? What were the outcomes of this contest? Is it possible to assess health based on a photo? Why or why not? How are algorithms trained to see and assess beauty?
12. What is a robot? How have robots been included in discourse about dehumanization? How are robots included in discourse about racialization? How does a focus on robots obscure the realities of a deeply unequal tech labor force?
13. How does the example of the automated soap dispenser illustrate racist design? Why does Benjamin suggest that we should avoid thinking about technology within a binary of good versus bad or trivial versus consequential?
14. What did you learn about China's social credit system? How does this system shape and investigate its users' behaviors? What apps do you currently engage with that utilize ratings and ranking systems? Does knowing that you will be rated or ranked impact your behavior and choices? Why or why not?

## Part 2: Default Discrimination

15. What is a glitch? Why does Benjamin suggest that we think about glitches as signals of how systems operate? Have you witnessed anti-Blackness framed as a glitch by tech companies, by the media, or by the police? How can glitches alert us to deeper patterns of discrimination?
16. How is technology used for surveillance? What messages have you seen about surveillance as a necessary or helpful mechanism? How is surveillance used to facilitate systemic discrimination?
17. Where have you seen the narrative of individual "bad apples" used? How does this narrative obscure harmful policies and structures? How can you resist this narrative?

- 18.** What are some examples of hostile and defensive architecture? How does this engineering reflect and reinforce social hierarchies? Where have you witnessed examples of this type of design in your community?
- 19.** How do search engines reproduce social biases? How do algorithms replicate the technology of race? What are some of the consequences of a system that is regularly updating, refreshing, and reflecting stereotypes of criminality, innocence, and sexualization?

### PART 3: Coded Exposure

- 20.** What does exposure mean? What are some examples of technologies that fail to see Blackness? What are some technologies that make Blackness hypervisible? What is scopic resistance?
- 21.** Is photography objective? Why or why not? What were some of the consequences of using whiteness as the default setting for film? Why did the photographic industry begin to adapt film? What did you learn about the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers' Movement?
- 22.** What did you know about the eugenics movement prior to reading this text? What did you learn about this harmful movement? What are some negative eugenic practices that are still practiced today? How does modern eugenics technology reinforce racist and ableist beliefs? How is the Movement for Black Lives implicitly an anti-eugenics movement?
- 23.** How has predictive guilt operated as a cornerstone of police work? What are some examples of how crime and victimization are visually represented? Can algorithms be used to accurately detect innocence and criminality? Why or why not?
- 24.** What did you know about Saartjie ("Sara") Baartman prior to reading this text? How was Baartman subjected to violent exposure throughout her life and after her death? Why did the South African committee that negotiated the return of her remains decline to test them? How can privacy be created or upheld for people who are already publicly exposed?
- 25.** What did you learn about the UK's Human Provenance Pilot Project, India's Unique Identity Project and Kuwait's National DNA Initiative? How do these initiatives interact with global borders? How do they create and reinforce a digital caste system? What could resistance to these forms of exposure look like?

### PART 4: Technological Benevolence

- 26.** What is a technical fix? Why is it dangerous to frame electronic monitoring technologies as alternatives to incarceration?
- 27.** What are some of the potential benefits of using artificial intelligence in a hiring process? What are some of the likely harms? What were some of the reactions from applicants who interacted with AI technologies during their job search? How could algorithms be used to streamline discrimination?
- 28.** What are some of the design flaws present in Diversity Inc.? How are zip codes used to assume racial-ethnic identities? How is this assumptive practice connected to a legacy of Jim Crow policies?
- 29.** What is a racial fix? What is harmful about private companies creating racial-ethnic data to be sold to others? What are some of the potential harmful consequences of this information being available for sale?
- 30.** What is technological benevolence? What happened when Janet Vertesi attempted to keep her pregnancy private from online platforms? Have you ever tried to withhold your private information when engaging with technology? If yes, what happened?
- 31.** What are some examples of technologies being framed as neutral or benevolent tools that are being used to expand structural surveillance?



## PART 5: Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice

32. What is the difference between abolition and reform? Why is it important for some abolitionist strategies to be discreet and not publicly exposed? Why is a tool like Appolition considered to be abolitionist technology but Jay-Z's Promise app is not? What other examples of abolitionist tools have you learned about?
33. Can virtual reality technology induce and support empathy? Why or why not? How might these technologies perpetuate harm and exploitation, regardless of the intention behind their design?
34. What are some of the flaws inherent in the design thinking approach? What is design justice? How can an equitable design process impact how resources and power are distributed?
35. What is code-switching? How do power dynamics impact who is forced to code-switch and who defines standard expressions and norms? How has your own identity impacted your relationship to code-switching?
36. What is the Algorithmic Justice League's Safe Face Pledge? Why have none of the major tech companies been willing to sign this pledge? How do you think the tech industry should be regulated?
37. What are equity audits? How do they advocate for accountability and action? Why is it critical that these audits are independent and enforceable?
38. Why are abolitionist tools grounded in the practice of solidarity? How is this different from access and charity? How can we approach design from a place of solidarity?
39. What biases impact the data collection, processing, and dissemination processes? Why is it important to include stories alongside data when calling for systemic change?
40. What are some ways that we can reimagine the default codes and environments that we currently operate within? What can Afrofuturist and Chicanofuturist visions that center people of color teach us about using science and technology to advance liberation? What other creative alternatives can help us resist the New Jim Code?

## FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION & ACTION

1. Explore the list of tech and social justice initiatives, fairness, accountability and transparency initiatives, and statements on [Ruha Benjamin's resources page](#).
2. Watch the Vox video [Are We Automating Racism?](#) What examples of biased algorithms are shared in this video? What did you learn about how human developers impact machine learning?
3. Watch the film [Coded Bias](#) and review the questions and resources in the film's [discussion guide](#).
4. Watch the film [The Social Dilemma](#). What call to action does this film make? How are the solutions in this film different from those presented in *Coded Bias*?
5. Read [Algorithmic Accountability: A Primer](#), created by [Data & Society](#).
6. Read [A People's Guide to AI](#), created by the [Allied Media Network](#).
7. Read the [Digital Defense Playbook](#) created by the [Our Data Bodies Project](#).
8. Explore the [programs](#) and [actions](#) created by [Data for Black Lives](#).
9. Explore the list of [resources](#) compiled by the [Design Justice Network](#).

## ACTIVITIES

1. Create a timeline of your personal experiences with surveillance. When do you first remember being watched—in person, in school, and online? How has the surveillance technology around you changed over time? Ask an older family member or friend about their experiences with surveillance. What similarities and differences do you notice?
2. Read the article, [“Major Universities Are Using Race as a “High Impact Predictor” of Student Success.”](#) Imagine that you are in charge of overhauling the policies and algorithms used to predict student success. What would you get rid of and what would you change? How would you create an app—similar to the White-Collar Early Warning System—to address racism within institutions of higher education?
3. Write down your own definition of safety. Next, ask a younger family member or friend what their definition of safety is. How does their definition of safety differ from your own? Is it necessary to utilize technology or surveillance to be safe? Why or why not?
4. Think about some of the existing racial disparities in healthcare, employment, housing, and education. Choose a specific form of racial inequity that you are passionate about changing. How could you create an app—following the example of Appolition—to shift and disrupt the racist status quo? What resources or support would you need to build a tool like this? What are some of the limitations of this tech-mediated approach?
5. Set a timer for 10 minutes and open a social media app. Keep a tally of the number of ads you encounter during this period of time and the type of ads you see. Compare your list of targeted ads with a peer. What differences and similarities do you notice?
6. Choose a tech justice organization mentioned in *Race After Technology* (such as Data for Black Lives or the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition) and review their website. How can people get involved in this organization? What is a tech justice issue in your own community that you and your neighbors could address?

[ruhabenjamin.com](http://ruhabenjamin.com)

### About this Guide's Writer

Rachael Zafer is the author of over a dozen discussion guides for texts like *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, and *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* by Mariame Kaba. You can view all of her guides at [www.rachaelzafer.com/curriculum](http://www.rachaelzafer.com/curriculum).

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