

BOOK REVIEW

The Robotic Imaginary: The Human & the Price of Dehumanized Labor by Jennifer Rhee, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2018. \$27.00, softcover, ISBN: 978-1-5179-0298-8. Pages 1 – 226.

Reviewed by Josh Grant-Young¹

What does it mean to be ‘staying with’ the human in an age of growing artificial intelligence? When all manner of fields (posthumanism, the ‘nonhuman turn’, and other challengers) for suggest the human remains “one of our elastic fictions” (per Diana Fuss), is there a danger in jettisoning such fictions – ones with “incredible ideological force” with “very real material effects” for various excluded groups (in terms of privilege, right, safety and other considerations)? Jennifer Rhee’s work suggests that despite the ‘bagginess’ of the human, there is a fundamental need to attend to the discourses, privileges and exploitative conditions wrapped up in the human – ones often forgot in the desire to move ‘beyond the human’ (per Zakiyyah Ima Jackson) and put such an idea to rest (2-3).

In short, to imagine ‘beyond the human’ or to conceive of new relations with A.I. requires, rather than mere speculative steps into the dark, a concerted effort to remain with the human and the various troubles associated with care, feeling, thinking and death found within the human and bound up in A.I.’s very history. Rhee’s *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human & the Price of Dehumanized Labor* (2018) is as much a cautionary tale of desires to take that speculative step beyond the human and capitalism without attending to past and present as it is a compelling account of the dehumanized among us who we (in seeking such an exit) continue to forget.

While tarrying with the human, Rhee’s *The Robotic Imaginary* also explores various controversial and informative links between the cultural robots of science fiction (film, literature, art) and the reality of artificial intelligence and labor, presenting an intriguing account of their co-constitution. The human and the dehumanized, for Rhee, has considerable truck in conversations about the anthropomorphized robot (paradoxically modelled after the human and not human). Rhee employs the term ‘robotic imaginary’ to consider the various “inscriptions of humanness and dehumanizing erasures” wrought within the very form of the robot, providing readers with an impressive survey of speculative fiction and stark reality (4-5).

Rhee’s foreword hammers the matter of dehumanization home, drawing on Ezzaldeen Tuaiman’s experience of the increased drone warfare (which took the life of his father and older brother) perpetuated by the United States military drone program and operators accounts of the ‘ants’, ‘black blobs on a screen’ and ‘fun-sized terrorists’ they were targeting. At the heart of these gut-wrenching statements, and Tuaiman’s fear that his death is impending, is Rhee’s contention that the labor of such operators is “embedded in the history of robotics and its various inscriptions and erasures of the human” – the latter quite evident in the book’s later discussions of drone warfare in the section “Dying” (1).

The Robotic Imaginary is organized into several parts, shaped by various ‘anthropomorphic paradigms’ which “centrally organizes robotics research” in relation to the notion of devalued or

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dehumanized labor (24). Each section – “Caring”, “Thinking”, “Feeling” and “Dying” – explores one facet of A.I. in relation to these paradigms, revealing crucial insights along the way.

“Caring”, the first chapter of *The Robotic Imaginary*, argues convincingly that A.I. and care labor – “a feminized and routinely undervalued form of labor” (31) – has always been (per Rhee) wrapped up in the history of A.I. Drawing on Joseph Weizenbaum’s Rogerian therapist A.I. named ELIZA, the character Helen in Richard Power’s novel *Galatea 2.2*, Samantha in the Spike Jonze film *Her*, and art installations featuring A.I., Rhee explores how Alan Turing’s foundational essay “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” sets the pace for care work to be a crucial part of A.I. labor (with care labour being an undervalued and unwaged one under capitalism). “Caring”, as a chapter, is a profoundly rich one, allowing readers to re-evaluate their conceptions of care politics, labor and the affectual considerations that come with care itself.

“Thinking” takes aim at domestic labor and closed worlds with aid from fictional works like *The Stepford Wives* and (an admittedly less developed but still intriguing engagement with) *Ex Machina*, investigating the dual issues of dehumanization in the domestic sphere and ‘mindless’ labor of real and fictive domestic robots. In an answer to these confining parameters for the human and robotic, Rhee explores robotic embodiment through art installations which highlight both corporeal vulnerability and the need to enact, not merely theorize, more open worlds (99-100).

“Feeling” tackles the theme of emotional labor – a form of labor forged by normative assumptions (via expression) which determine ‘humanness’, power relations and various ‘claims to universality’. Whose emotions, in this discourse, are legible, appropriate, and valued? Rhee examines how in the 1990’s, a ‘turn’ towards emotions as a defining quality of the human experience (counter to the Enlightenment’s insistence on reason) arises in tandem with the development of machines who communicate with humans via emotional expression – termed ‘sociable robots’. Such sociable robots, at this juncture an unsurprising revelation for readers, are manifested with the intention to serve in care labor professions (education, care for the elderly, healthcare) alongside human companions. Rhee guides the reader through two science fiction tales of Philip K. Dick, social robots built at the MIT Media Lab, and provides a thoughtful series of reflections on emotional labour, shame, and the value of emotions.

“Dying” presents the bleakest vision of dehumanization within *The Robotic Imaginary*. Within, Rhee tends to both the racialized and gendered humans who are eradicated with extreme prejudice and the operators of the drones who perform this labor – ones whose humanity is compromised in the execution of their orders. Contrasting the digital projects *Seven Short Stories About Drones*, *Dronestagram* and *#notabugsplat*, Rhee draws the reader into a powerful meditation on ethics, dehumanization, colonialism and Orientalism, and dis-identification, pushing readers to not only question the vantage of the drone, but their own ethical position in this discourse.

The *codas* which follow each chapter, along with the epilogue of *The Robotic Imaginary*, present the reader with various visions of the human which works against both the overdetermined normative values of the human and the desire to ‘go beyond’ the human. Presenting readers with thoughtful theoretic and artistic renderings of the complex relation of A.I. and the human (via

installation art), themes like corporeal vulnerability, grief, fragility and encounters with the unknown help Rhee inquire as to how one might work to overcome the present robot imaginary.

Rhee's *The Robotic Imaginary* is a welcome addition to A.I. scholarship, offering an interdisciplinary and wide-ranging cultural and political exploration of the complexities of labor as a primary site of dehumanization via the robotic imaginary. Scholars of A.I. seeking a fruitful account of the various ethical challenges entangled in the history, present and future of A.I. and its implications for the 'human. The inclusion of various pop-culture and artistic content further expands the readership of *The Robotic Imaginary* – making it an accessible and important text for popular audiences curious about A.I. as well. In sum, such a work demands we look to the very circuits and seemingly closed systems of thought which dominate our concepts and see how we might re-wire, rather than hardwire our visions of the future.