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Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

Profiles and Plotlines: Data Surveillance in Twenty-First Century Literature. By Katherine D. Johnston. U of Iowa P, 2023, 207 pp.

Katherine Johnston's first monograph sets itself an unusual task: It treats pressing social issues in real time and examines how those issues are treated in recent prose fiction and poetry. The issues are electronic data surveillance and collection, US-American racism, and the connections of all three to racial profiling and discrimination in the online and the real world. The literary texts examined are best-sellers by Jennifer Egan, Claudia Rankine, William Gibson, and Mohsin Hamid.

Johnston's work highlights the subtle and often creepy ways computer algorithms and literary narrators function in similar ways. As Wayne Booth once suggested, an author's voice is always present in a text, even when disguised. Unsettlingly, the same is true of computer software, artificial intelligence, and social media and commercial algorithms. Data surveillance's main job, as Johnston sees it, is to "tell stories" – not primarily to consumers, but rather to banks, governments, the police, and advertising agencies. "Profiling," she explains, continuing to draw parallels between data surveillance and literary techniques, "coincides with character development; surveillance reflects point of view," and "data points track as plot points in tales of political economy" (2). The problems inherent in profiling, Johnston suggests, all have their correlations in literary studies, new media studies, surveillance studies, critical race studies, and gender studies. The volume has baked them all together in its approaches to both its literary corpus and its case studies from internet users. For anyone working with literature, the book makes for a fascinating introduction to thinkers on new technologies such as David Lyon, Kirstie Ball, Rachel Dubrofsky, and Christian Parenti. For anyone working with new technologies, it makes for a great introduction to several terrific contemporary US-American writers.

Authors such as Egan and Rankine highlight how we co-construct reality with the private sector and its interests, a fact increasingly appearing as a theme in contemporary US literature. Meanwhile, private corporations often act like authors, creating stock characters from our collected data points. Mapping these onto pre-existing (of-

ten sexist and racist) hierarchies of human types, Johnston writes, exacerbates systemic discrimination. Johnston's sources extend to more traditional philosophers and critics. She adeptly uses Foucault's work on disciplinary power (exercised through its own invisibility while imposing compulsory visibility on its targets) to put a contemporary spin on pre-internet theory. Understandably, Johnston finds fictional narrators in the works she studies to often be unreliable, reflecting lapses and gaps, even with their "shiny new seductive pieces," "fragile gears," and "inflexible codes" (27), and she is apt to contrast such fiction to postmodern fiction of earlier decades. While postmodern protagonists often come to recognize themselves as fictional characters, here protagonists are more likely to begin to see themselves as fragmented, "traceable, fungible data sets" (27), exhibiting "not only the ubiquity but also the disturbing banality of being watched" (28).

Profiles and Plotlines includes a lengthy introduction with a wealth of secondary sources on the topic of technology's social and sexual injustices, and its chapters treating individual literary texts tend to repeat segments of the introduction, so it is rather slow going at first. A chapter on Egan treats *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), a series of loosely connected short stories. Johnston traces how the theme of watching in the story "Safari" moves from US-American tourists looking for animals on the plains of Kenya to their later developing software to manage crowd security via video footage (and notes the irony of Apple's search engine also being called "Safari"). Here, she draws astute attention to the ways contemporary technologies employ racist legacies of the colonial gaze, particularly as relates to racial profiling and visual recognition software. Surveillance technologies, Johnston suggests, "are not developed in a vacuum outside the context of social injustice" but are often "the vanguard of violence against gendered and racialized others" (40). Johnston reminds those familiar with Egan's work how ethereal her writing and dialogues are, illuminating ties between Egan's work and that of David Foster Wallace and Don DeLillo. Egan's characters' plans for video surveillance of Central Park in the early 2000s makes for eerie comparisons with the NYPD's more recent search for Luigi Mangione using the same CCTV cameras which Egan's work makes seem controversial, and which most New Yorkers now accept today as perfectly normal. One looks forward to what Johnston might make of Egan's even more technology-focused *The Candy House* (2022).

A chapter on Claudia Rankine focuses on "speaking affect to power" by "deconstructing the supposed neutrality of profile epistemologies by exposing their own embedded affects and the affects they attempt to exile" (77). Rankine, Johnston writes, focuses on the personal experiences which cannot be captured numerically, and on embodied, rather than digitalized memory. Reading Rankine through the lens

of Lauren Berlant and Naomi Klein, it seems that profiling works to make the present "look exactly the way it needs to in order to guarantee a very specific and singular outcome in the future" (Puar). Whether in algorithmic consumer profiling or police profiling, it produces outcomes, just as stop-and-frisk does not simply reduce crime but produces neighborhoods, social relations, personal futures, and data. Reading Rankine's work, Johnston concludes that "descriptions don't simply fit people; people in fact are fitted to descriptions" (84).

Johnston spends a good bit of time comparing William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) with traditional realist and modernist novels, with their 'round' characters created from details. Gibson's characters, likewise created through such details, are, however, not individual but rather – to use Deleuze's 1992 term – "dividuals," i.e., codified, predictable, consumer-citizen workers. They are also (in an arguably rather gimmicky manner) searchable online via Google. Gibson's novel depicts efforts at constructing meaning as power struggles, tugs and tussles between technology users and technology's producers. Johnston hints that all the works she treats in her volume are, in their own ways, social (or even social realist) novels in the tradition of Upton Sinclair – only the forces of corporations we are up against today a century later obscure their workings even more tightly, increasing "the gulf between what the public knows and how they act" (94). "In a sense," Johnston writes, "it is the apparent disengagement and dullness of data collection that makes it seem benign" (99). Like Gibson's characters, we, too, as citizens of the twenty-first century, are trapped in networks whose own workings are often invisible to us, while, for those with it, power increasingly means not visibility but rather "the ability to escape attention and side-step barriers" (109). Meanwhile, much as we may delight in personalizing our own social media in superficial ways, we are only offering ourselves the impression of being seen, "to offset the creepier feeling of being watched" (119). Johnston here is adept at drawing out patterns from the novels' plots to apply them to our own online experiences.

Johnston's chapter on Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) opens with references to Doreen Massey's analysis of the capitalist idea of economic growth and wealth redistribution. Hamid's novel, writes Johnston, critiques how the contemporary bildungsroman is often fitted to the neoliberal quest for material wealth, and our contemporary association of wealth with success, particularly if the wealth is seen as 'self-made.' Other critics have commented on the novel's clever use of second-person narration. Johnston adds to this body of analysis with the suggestion that Hamid's narrating and narrated "you" "unravels the notion of a 'sovereign' you to reveal the power structures it shrouds" (123), much as corporate images

shroud complex webs of shareholders, employees, and powerbrokers. Narrative techniques for this include images of "you" observable to others via variously positioned CCTV cameras throughout the novel, lists of "your" internet search histories, images from "your" laptop cameras, flight registries, and credit card records, which all characterize as they profile, whether in fiction or in our own real extratextual lives. The effect is something like an electronic (or Cubist) version of Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*. Creepily, Johnston writes, "what seems like coincidence as the narrator moves from one technology to another is actually a larger constellation of data collection" of which he is unaware (138) – the eeriness of which most of us have often felt online as we are fed targeted ads or suggestions by the algorithms we use (or, rather, which use us). Meanwhile, readers of Hamid's novel become like the drone operators it depicts, "our fleshy bodies . . . safely at a distance holding our books" (142).

A final chapter muses on Amazon's role in framing the US literary canon, as the most intimate aspects of reading itself become subject to digital surveillance. Johnston spends some time here outlining how the company originally constructed the cultural capital it has today, with Jeff Bezos himself seemingly relishing his role as a literary figure (148-49). Naturally, she points out the irony of the company's rise to being nearly the largest private US employer while not offering living wages, how the corporation uses data mining to surveille both its customers and employees, and its close ties to the CIA and US Department of Defense. Here, Johnston uses her skills as a literary critic to analyze public statements by Bezos and literary questions posed to Amazon's virtual assistant Alexa. More essentially, Johnston's conclusion suggests how our own reading patterns may change as we read on electronic devices tracking our progress, what passages we highlight, and precisely where and when we pause or stop. Johnston's work, here as elsewhere, points our attention to the fact that corporations such as Amazon do not simply use algorithms to better serve consumers but to actively shape our perspectives, indeed often perhaps limiting them while offering the illusion of broadening them. After all, Johnston points out, pleasing customers is of much less importance than engaging them. All this is not necessarily new information to most readers but brought together, it is enough to give us pause, even if Johnston has a rhetorical tic of repeatedly using "in other words," so that a good deal of the text are rephrasings of the same idea twice.

The instruments, as well as the ideologies, of meaning-making are challenged by the texts Johnston treats. Her critique of social media and consumer algorithms works especially well in her suggestions of how these phenomena mirror traditional literary techniques, with suggestions of how the literary works treated challenge "the dominant data discourse," and how they can depict "the often denied narrative dimension

of date profiling" (163). The monograph closes with some recent examples of positive uses of algorithms and social networking in social activist circles.

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Becoming bell hooks: A Story about the Self-Empowerment of a Black Girl Who Became a Feminist. By Aneta Ostaszewska. U of Warsaw P, 2023, 161 pp.

The latest publication by Aneta Ostaszewska, director of the Centre for Women's and Gender Research at the University of Warsaw, *Becoming bell hooks: A Story about the Self-Empowerment of a Black Girl Who Became a Feminist*, is an academic exploration of the life and intellectual evolution of Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–2021), better known under her pen name bell hooks. As the blurb on the last page summarizes, Ostaszewska's book examines the autobiographical dimension of hooks' literary oeuvre, for "it is a story about the 'biographical work' of a woman who creates herself in the course of writing her biography." By focusing her analysis on how the personal intersects with the political in hooks' development as an acclaimed feminist thinker, Ostaszewska investigates how the feminist theorist established her identity through the act of writing and the construction of her autobiography. The latter resulted in hooks' transformation from a Black girl growing up in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, into one of the most significant voices in contemporary feminist discourse. The central premise of Ostaszewska's publication, therefore, is that hooks' intellectual journey