

[Thakor on Moore and Dawes, 'Technologies of Human Rights Representation'](#)

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Reckoning with Representation

The late Diane Nelson, an anthropologist of human rights and governmental accountability who passed away in the spring of 2022, wrote with poetic irony about what it takes to reckon with the aftermath of war, mass atrocities, and other forms of human-enacted violence. In her three-part ethnography of the aftershocks of Guatemala's civil war, Nelson reflected on the dual meanings of the Spanish word *contar*, signifying both "to count" and "to tell" (*A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* [1999], *Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala* [2009], and *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life After Genocide* [2015]). In the aftermath of civil war, human rights groups sought justice by literally counting the bodies but also giving narrative testimony to the experiences of violence. Nelson writes, wryly, "The allure of reckoning is double: both the Assumption One of secure knowledge, the everyday fact, and the more transcendent hope that there will be a settlement of rewards or penalties for any action ... It suggests there is a rule of law and some hope of justice in a final judgment." [1] To give numerical and narrative wings to stories of violence seems to open portals to reparations and remediations.

The contributors to *Technologies of Human Rights Representation* (hereafter abbreviated to *THRR*) grapple with this issue of the representability of violence and harm through the medium of technology. Drawing from a diverse array of disciplines and geographic regions, the chapters in *THRR* collectively ask: How are technological modes being used to represent, catalog, and witness human rights injustices? What does it mean to acquire and analyze the numerical data of human rights violations? How might technology amplify the voices of those protesting human rights abuses? And how might one use technology for human rights work without espousing narrow-sighted tech solutionism?

The *THRR* collection is the result of a SUNY Conversation in the Disciplines conference held in 2019. Editors Alexandra S. Moore and James Dawes open the volume articulating the goal of thinking about "human rights" as a discursive object rather than one of corporeal force and harm. Focusing on the discursive elements of "human rights imaginaries" allows us to consider how systematic violence is always mediated by modes of representation. Focusing on the imaginary opens space for us to

consider not just human rights violations at the level of the body but also to question how the body, raced and gendered as it is, is itself constructed and represented.

The book contains nine chapters, which Moore and Dawes arrange into three clusters: the first focuses on newer technologies of artificial intelligence and machine learning, the second on technologies of bearing witness, and the third on techniques of memorialization. The ninth chapter, on securitization, stands alone, perhaps in lieu of a conclusion from the editors (one which might have been welcome to help the chapters cohere at the end).

Kicking off the first set of chapters on new technologies, political scientist İlgü Özler offers a primer on the role of artificial intelligence in perpetrating violence, from algorithmic harms in job candidate sorting to the deadly violence of lethal autonomous weapons (LAWS). While a primer might seem necessary for readers unfamiliar with artificial intelligence and machine-learning applications, it bogs down in excessive description and detail, leaving one rather overwhelmed with all of the ways AI intersects with human rights. This chapter could have benefited from some editing to distill down to one or two examples, such as the compelling and urgent case study of LAWS, allowing the author to execute the introduction's call to explore the representational frames by which LAWS are imagined: how the designers of such technologies imagine their targets as digital data points, how families of victims frame injury from autonomous weapons, and how global human rights mechanisms offer reparations, or fail to, from such lethal technologies. The next two chapters sharpen the focus on specific case studies while similarly analyzing the utility of new AI technologies. Jamie Grace focuses on the pressure for law enforcement in the United Kingdom to make use of predictive analytics and big data. Grace, a legal scholar who has held appointed positions on law enforcement ethics committees, critically describes the United Kingdom's mounting demand and pressure for surveillance tools in policing as well as internal audit mechanisms as an example of blind faith in constant accounting and vigilance as a mechanism for holding power. Political scientists David Cingranelli, Mikhail Filippov, and Skip Mark describe in their chapter a case study on China's abuses against ethnic Uighurs from their ongoing human rights quantification project, Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Data Project (CIRIGHT). The authors retain a reflexive and critical stance toward the fetishization of quantification in human rights professional circles while maintaining hope that measurement tools can augment activists' case against human rights abuses. This chapter beautifully explores the tensions raised in the introduction, assessing the risks and promises of being able to represent—numerically or otherwise—human rights violations.

Technologies can be deployed to catalog human rights abuses in the immediate aftermath of violence, but such forensic scientific tools are not without bias and subjectivity. Shifting toward forensic documentation, several chapters explore forensic scientific evidence collected by law enforcement or activists. Elizabeth A. DiGangi considers forensics as a technology of representation, drawing on the case study of postmortem dental analysis of victims of forced migration or human trafficking. She argues compellingly that US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement violates the human rights standard for a fair trial by being over-reliant on forensic odontology as the sole factor in age estimation in human trafficking cases, instead of using it as a supporting tool with interviews and other documents. DiGangi's chapter is a sharp indictment of the trend toward scientification of law enforcement, as power warps technologies to its own ends. Official reports are not without their own prejudice, and Christiane Wilke's chapter reads US military investigation tools as technologies of deadly representation. The reports describe civilian casualties of US airstrikes as numerical data

points, obscuring the tragic deaths of innocent lives—indeed, obscuring the very framing of innocence in unjust military operations. Alexa Koenig and Ulic Egan’s chapter documents activists’ attempts to circumvent or fill gaps in law enforcement documentation by using online open-source information to detect, investigate, and verify accounts of sexual and gender-based violence. Taken together, this cluster of chapters invites scrutiny of official accounts and records, and reckons with the power and potential of counternarratives.

The subsequent chapters take stock of human rights representation via memorialization technologies that assemble, archive, and frame mass collective trauma. Barbara LeSavoy and Donna Kowal’s chapter deals with European Holocaust memorials, while Hanna Musiol’s focuses on poetic mediations on anti-Black racialized violence in the United States. LeSavoy and Kowal argue that Holocaust memorials are spaces of bearing witness to suffering but also digital records that act as “cognitive prostheses” in the ambivalent and complicated modality of Holocaust tourism (p. 178). This chapter was notable for its use of cyborg feminist theory to give name to collective experiences of grief and trauma: collective reckoning via technological network.

Musiol’s chapter—unique in its focus on poetry and rhetoric—offers the reader much of the terminological reflexivity that seems missing at the start of the volume. She opens thinking about the loaded terms “technology” and “representation,” which have long held complex meanings and interpretations in the humanities and social sciences but elude any dynamic reflection in human rights studies and argues “new technology is one of the urgently understudied areas of rights scholarship: eerily influential and still not fully legible as a rights-generating and suppressing instrument” (p. 184). Musiol reads poetry as technology: algorithmic in its rhythmic tracking, a resuscitative device, an assistive technology for measuring, living through, and beyond violence. She reads the poetic technology of the sonnet “in the context of violence, racialized afterlives of dispossession, and its anticipated violent futures” and as a tech of human rights representation, rematerialization, and somatic actualization (p. 184). Restorative justice practices and public storytelling are responses to trauma and bear witness to ongoing racialized violence.

The volume concludes with Peter Hitchcock’s chapter on “the right to securitization”—a dual desire to protect vulnerable populations and to safeguard economic activities. Hitchcock critically reflects on securitization futures: bounding between the birth of migration studies to the post-9/11 nation-state’s counterterrorism responses to financial securitization after the 2008 global crisis, Hitchcock considers the interlocking securitization mechanisms of border security, biometrics, and financial instruments. Technologies of securitization are dual use: “the edge of rights in what secures the human,” but also “the right to secure and sublimate borders within the same logic” (p. 208). As a manifold technology of representation, securitization invites critical thinking of the discursive framings of the human, the border, and global capital.

While the editorial work is of decent quality, a few remarks must be made. The volume might have benefited from a more paranoid reading of human rights as a concept and juridical framing, especially in the first few chapters. Scholars in postcolonial and critical race studies have done much work to dismantle the category “human” as it indexes a particularly gendered, raced, free individual subject. Further reflection on the role of the “human” in human rights technologies seems warranted. While Hitchcock’s chapter touches on the formulation of the human as individual liberal subject, very little is mentioned throughout the volume on how technologies mediate and coproduce our

understandings of humanity and nonhumanness. How does the production of human/nonhuman/inhumanity acquire new resonance in this moment of heightened attention to artificial intelligence, anxieties over fake versus real data, surveillance networks, machine-learning algorithms, and robotic labor? Further still, the many angles of technology presented here suggest the elusiveness of defining what constitutes technology with and through the human. It was surprising to see little discussion of the pathbreaking scholarship in the past decade on algorithmic bias and machine-mediated racial inequities as an issue of human rights, from work by notable scholars in science and technology studies (STS) such as Safiya Noble (*Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* [2018]) and Ruha Benjamin (*Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life* [2018] and *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* [2019]). The editors might have suggested what STS has to offer to human rights scholarship; the omission detracts significantly from the volume.

Nonetheless, the volume brings together a provocative set of approaches to technologies of representation, considering mediation, voicing, witnessing, and accounting. The grounding in the discursive elements of technology laid in the introduction does work to help the reader see the coproduction of technology and society, as well as the mutability of technology as a concept; however, a concluding set of remarks from the editors would have considerably increased this sense of cohesion.

In terms of readership, *THRR* holds broad appeal as a collection for scholars in human rights studies, humanitarian professionals, and students of international relations and government. The contributors span a diverse array of disciplines, including political science, gender studies, English, and legal studies. A number of the contributors have held or currently hold positions in human rights NGOs or governmental bodies, often advising on technology and ethics. This positionality lends weight and authority to the chapters, although perhaps detracts from reflexivity at times. Furthermore, feminist scholars of human rights may find this volume's reflections on technology especially useful, as a technology studies lens has been lacking in much of that literature.

To write about human rights in 2022 feels like an exhaustive task. We do not live in a world without indemnity, untethered from violence or loss. Many retain hope, though, that technology offers a way to reckon with those losses, a way to calculate and tally up suffering, a medium for witnessing, a salve if not a solution. *THRR* offers one step toward building a reference guide to interdisciplinary analysis of the many applications and risks of using AI and new media technologies to catalog, document, or combat human rights abuses. Technologically mediated violence warps further the complex shape of human rights violations, although technology also promises some repair and reprieve. This volume attempts to make sense of the burden of representing violence and harm, of reckoning and bearing witness with and through technology.

Note

[1]. Nelson, *Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 290-91.

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