and maids, prisoners, conscripts, pirates, sailors, religious heretics, woodcutters, water carriers, prostitutes, indigenous peoples, commoners, runaways, deserters and vagabonds', and so creates an alternative utopian imaginary, one that does not paint the road to freedom and equality (economic, political, social) with rosy colours. Her protagonists paved the way to our freer world (albeit one that still needs major structural transformations) by sacrificing or endangering themselves. Utopian worlds, Gordon concludes, are not worlds located in the future. On the contrary, they exist in the very crux of our present and are made by those who we fail to notice, acknowledge or recognise as utopian. Utopia is not built overnight, nor is it build in isolation, without the collaboration of others. Individualism and no possible exit from the alienating current conditions is the myth propagated by utopia's not-so-friendly sibling, dystopia, a myth that Gordon elegantly undoes, showing that a better world is possible.

The rich content of *The Hawthorn Archive* enables us to see the truth about utopia, its exclusions, the effort that it takes to build a fairer society. Nevertheless, whilst the content of Gordon's archive may displace More's definition of utopia, its form does not differ dramatically from the props and dramaturgy used in *Utopia*. Like More, Gordon uses epistolography to transmit the development of her and her collaborators' idea of utopia; like More she uses dialogue to convey ideas; and, like More, she uses images to convey location or different languages. *The Hawthorn Archive*, despite the radicality of its content, is rather conventional in form.

Additionally, whilst the book invokes numerous utopian voices, it leaves unresolved the tension between those utopians who think that the structure of the state (radical left legalists) can be the vehicle for a free and egalitarian society and those who see the state (i.e., anarchists) as the obstacle to a better life. The book may include a recipe for celery soup, but there is of course no simple recipe for resolving such a tension. The tension nevertheless holds the promise of utopia not being totalised or closed, a potential danger of utopia that Jorge Luis Borges warns about in 'A Weary Man's Utopia'. This tension is an invitation to continue the work of utopia, bring our own subjugated knowledges to *The Hawthorn Archive*, collaborate with it in perpetuity so as to keep dystopia at bay.

Elena Loizidou

Race after information-value

Seb Franklin, *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2021). 254pp., £86.00 hb., £19.00 pb., 978 1 51790 714 3 hb., 978 1 51790 715 0 pb.

As our tech overlords flee a blighted planet, a scholarly consensus is taking shape around the fallout of unchecked innovation and the subsequent need for 'algorithmic justice'. This consensus is perhaps distilled by Shalini Kantayya's award-winning 2020 documentary *Coded Bias*, which tells the story of Joy Buolamwini, a researcher who, in the course of her work at the MIT Media Lab, uncovered a design flaw embedded in facial recognition systems: certain of these AI-driven technologies fail to accurately register dark-skinned faces. To supplement its retracing of Buolamwini's journey from this discovery to the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, the film includes interviews with Cathy O'Neil, Virginia Eubanks, Zeynep Tüfekçi, Safiya Umoja Noble, Meredith Broussard and Shoshana Zuboff, thinkers who are among the torchbearers of a growing body of research on information technologies' role in entrenching and perpetuating inequalities of race, gender and class. Exploring how historical modes of subjugation live on in algorithms, surveillance technologies and other mobilisations of big data, such studies often conclude – much as *Coded Bias* does – with overtures to transparency, fairness and ethics, proposals for socially conscious approaches to technological design and use, and calls for increased governmental regulation of the industry.

But what if Buolamwini's discovery were no glitch at all? What if instead it were an index of an inherently *informatic* logic – not simply one underpinning contempor-

ary techno-imaginaries, but one central to the racialising and gendering dynamics from which capitalism draws? These are among the questions that Seb Franklin's highly ambitious *The Digitally Disposed* indirectly poses and enables us to answer. Yet, while Franklin's text may be related in theme to the body of work mentioned above, its contributions lie in its dramatically different approach to the Gordian knot of information and inequality. For whereas the conversations animating Kantayya's film tend to foreground contemporary practices and products fuelled by data, *The Digitally Disposed* shifts our attention to an epistemological mode that historically connects the trans-Atlantic slave trade with the seemingly immaterial realm of digital computing.

It is this mode that Franklin terms the 'informatics of value', a formulation that signals how 'information' and 'value' constitute a homology that subtends the material pasts and presents of racial capitalism. This ultimately leads Franklin to rearticulate both parts of his work's subtitle as together representing 'a system of accumulation based on "spontaneous" interconnection, dispossession and differential integration'. Drawing on Black, Indigenous, postcolonial and feminist scholars, as well as on figures affiliated with the post-Marxist school of 'value-critique', Franklin's critical intervention lies in his demonstration of how the informatics of value as a mode of abstraction is acutely visible in (but necessarily precedes) much of the thought that laid the foundations of the Information Age. Through nuanced readings of the writings of cyberneticians and information theorists Claude E. Shannon, Norbert Wiener, Heinz von Foerster and R.S. Hunt, 'father of the computer' Charles Babbage and psychosociologist Jacob L. Moreno, as well as supplemental ones of literature and media by Elena Ferrante, Samuel Delany, Sondra Perry and Eduardo Williams, *The Digitally Disposed* implicitly calls not for a program of regulation and reform aimed at curbing bias in technological systems, but for the abolition of capitalism and value altogether.

Franklin begins by asking: How are the principal tenets of digital capitalism – e.g., that data transmission *is* commodity circulation and that freedom, self-expression and transmission capacity together constitute the key to flourishing – predicated on differentiation, connectivity and dispossession? Part I of the text, 'The Informatics of Value', offers readers the basis of a response in the form of a series of concepts that establish how the foundation of capitalist society, or 'value', has always been 'informatic'. These investigations extend Franklin's previous analyses in 2015's *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* – which centre on how 'digitality' 'posits its objects as already fundamentally discrete' and promises to render the world knowable through 'processes of capture, definition, optimisation and filtering' – by showing how that *cultural* logic is underwritten by a more general set of social relations (or 'forms of disposal') that, while specific to the longer history of racial capitalism, become most clearly legible at the dawn of the digital age.

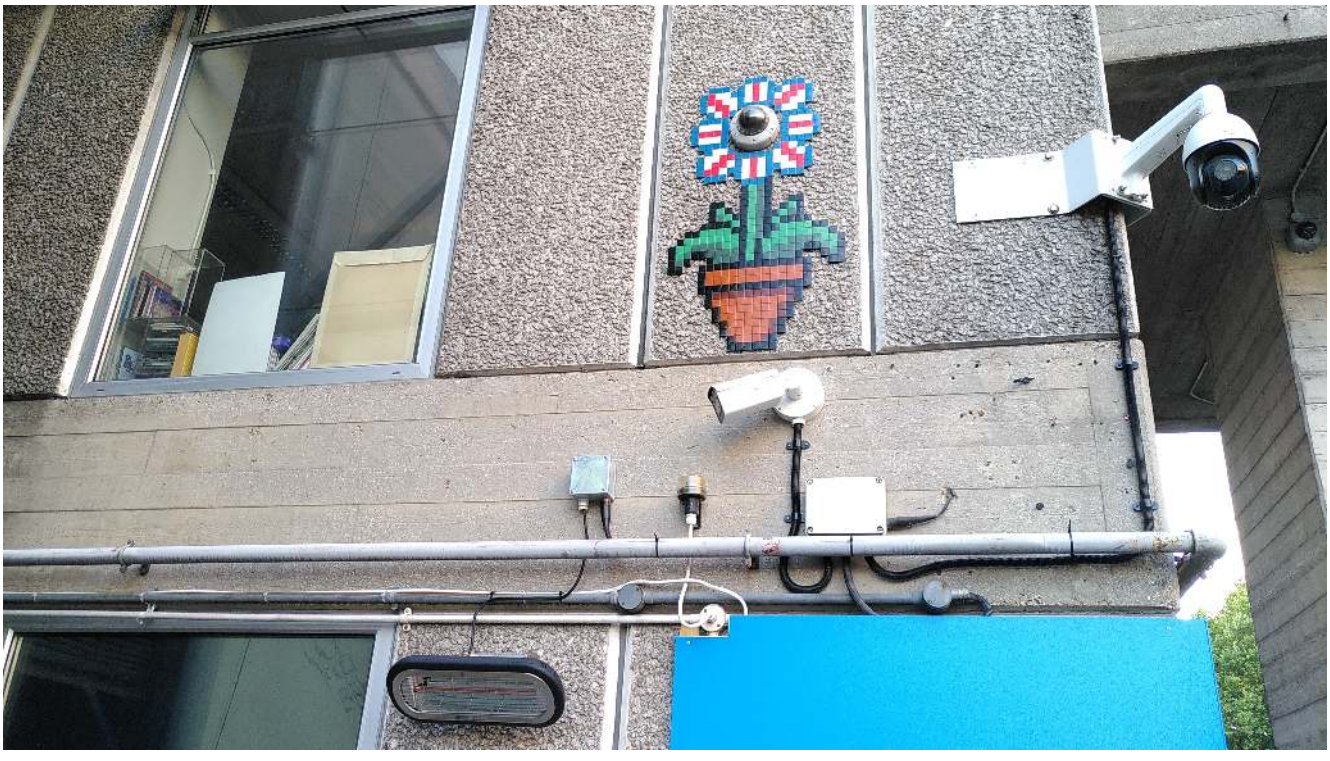
These forms of disposal are shaped by capitalism's governing abstraction, the 'informatics of value'. A clearer vision of the concept is implicit, Franklin begins by explaining, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and its recasting of capitalist value: instead of treating value as 'congealed quantities of homogeneous labour', Spivak asserts that 'under capitalism, *value*, as produced in necessary and surplus labour, is *computed* as the representation/sign of objectified labour'. Building on this framing, Franklin maintains that Marx's use of the word 'congealed' – or, the material process of boiling down animal matter to produce a jelly – does not fully capture the machinations of value, as, under this capitalism, bodies are affected in a way that not only marks and sorts them materially, but that also posits them as discrete nodes in a virtual network of exchange. This leads Franklin to note that while 'capital only recognises as valid that which is computed' (or that which can connect to what he terms the 'value network', itself a communicative refraction of the labour market), 'all labour entails some degree of *congelation*', or physical degradation. This is true – though to different degrees and ends – for the 'primitive accumulation' occasioned by the slave trade as it is for the precarity-inducing Uberisation of the present moment. Informed by thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter and Cedric Robinson (and indirectly calling to mind Caitlin Rosenthal's more recent analyses of slavery and quantitative management), here Franklin effectively prises the informatic from the more contemporary context of digitality to show how it epistemologically animates the entire history of racial capitalism. Reading an example from Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative, he registers that the enslaved body was mutilated during the Middle Passage before later being forced into

bondage and worked often to death, and that the same body underwent a concomitant process of abstract objectification (or computation) wherein it became a discrete statistic that could be transmuted into value, the legible instantiation of which, on the auction block, would be its price.

On this basis, Franklin convincingly argues, this system of accumulation, insofar as it must reduce everything to discrete information/values, can be understood as one of 'differential computation' whose ascriptive and violent processes code race (as well as gender and ability) as difference. This central argument permits readers to grasp how Gregory Bateson's famous adage – that information is simply 'a difference that makes a difference' – is in fact a cypher for how the racialising movements of capital must together be seen as the 'value-informatic' computation of difference. Franklin in turn reasons that the informatics of value as the core abstraction of racial capitalism '*determines – or dominates – the concrete*'. In other words, the quasi-objective, impersonal social forms expressed by the categories of value and information do not simply disguise 'real' material social relations; rather, the abstract structures expressed by these categories *are* those 'real' social relations. Under racial capitalism, individuals *are* value as much as they *are* information.

Yet these arguments also highlight how value-informatic logic is not simply an ideological echo of some economic base, but rather a force that bends all of lived reality to its image. This material flip-side, Franklin suggests, can be glimpsed in the archives of computing, cybernetics, information science and sociometry. Across Part II, 'Media Histories of Disposal', Franklin turns to these sources to identify an idealised form of 'digital-liberal personhood' as well as specific binaries that ground the abstract domination of racial capitalism. These binaries, in making concrete the 'mirror world' of information-value, implicitly demand that we become 'reliable circuits' or face disposal – that we 'connect [to the value network] or die'.

These histories examine how such 'connection' depends on social relations – and not simply those of class – that differentially affect racialised and gendered populations. These forms may demand connection, but paradoxically require disconnection for their upkeep. Put otherwise, the worlds that these archives imagine are not new futures, but *digital* reformulations – and, in many ways, affirmations – of racial capitalism's differential computation of all into value. For example, Franklin shows how Wiener's techno-benevolence relies on a contrast between the optimal digital-liberal subject – understood as self-possessing, self-reproducing, upgradable and flexible – and 'mechanical slaves', a 'deplorable al-



ternative' (according to Wiener) defined by its 'foreclosed conditions of reproduction' and inability to secure 'wage-mediated access to the means of meeting basic needs'. The frictionless existence of digital-liberal personhood, in other words, is both counterposed to and made possible through the devaluation and dispossession of those deemed nonhuman.

This racialising penchant of value-informatic logic is elsewhere legible in Babbage's screed on 'intellectual workers' and 'street nuisances', Hunt's distinction between 'cleverness' and 'drive', and Moreno's social hierarchy of 'creators' and 'zootechnical animals'. In each case, the abstract, imagined ideal extracts the means of its existence from its opposite; form draws on formlessness, just as signal feeds on noise, just as the accumulation that Marx once described as 'primitive' is ongoing, propping up the very real illusions of digitality and capitalism, of information and value. 'This recognition', Franklin insists, entails 'the realisation that there is no spontaneous interconnection, no homeostatic reproduction; that computation cannot be separated from congelation; that the synthesis of reliable circuits requires the distribution of incapacity; and that it is necessary to find ways of living otherwise, modes of connection and relation not subordinated to the demand for accumulation'.

Such a call for the end of capitalism provides the grounds for a constructive reconsideration of certain more general links between technology and power, much as those brought to the fore by *Coded Bias*. Indeed, when considered through the lens of Franklin's arguments, the flaw discovered by Buolamwini in fact indexes the inner-workings of a system of accumulation that paradoxically depends on the differential computation of populations for its continued existence. Moreover, the demands for recognition, connection and transparency voiced by Kantayya's film and the scholarship of its interviewees are also eerily reminiscent of the abstract imaginaries that Franklin claims are determined by the informatics of value.

This problem of form determination also underpins certain of the text's methodological and theoretical contributions to literary and media studies. The first of these results from the fact that throughout his historical reconstitution of racial capitalism's core mode of abstraction, Franklin remains acutely aware of his investigation's limits. For while he ultimately concludes that it is the 'connections severed from the circulation of value' that constitute the 'foundations of the fullest collectivity', he resists the urge to prescriptively leverage his previous readings into political or aesthetic programs. By instead elevating thinkers whose work explicitly deals with collective forms and practices not predicated on information-value, *The Digitally Disposed* both encourages and lays out paths for similarly interdisciplinary research.

Finally, Franklin's insights about the abstract's domination of the concrete – particularly when thought alongside his close readings of novels, art installations and films – raise important questions about the very possibility of practices capable of existing outside of or counter to racial capitalism's forms of disposal. For example, if the logics that Franklin details are truly form-determining, what is the ontological status of artistic practice and its derivative objects? Can either function as anything but a reflection – however clarifying – of the informatics of value? By gesturing towards these and other issues, *The Digitally Disposed* establishes itself as critical reading and inspiration for the digital present, highlighting the continued need for anti-racist and anti-capitalist scholarship capable of rethinking the forms of knowledge and relation that connect our world.

Marc Kohlbry