

The Algorithm's Plantation Physics
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Abstract:

Though framed as objective knowledge production and neutral decision making, it is widely recognized that data-driven practices often exacerbate pre-existing social biases and extend the unequal impacts of economic and social hierarchy. Rather than attempt to expose bias hidden behind the black-box of source code, this paper undertakes a genealogy of the metaphors and metaphysics that authorize algorithmic tactics of governing, connecting critical data studies to a concern with the dispossessive tactics of racial capitalism. Specifically, this paper traces the transit between the plantation, thermodynamics, and techno-science, which culminates today in the networked mainframe of algorithmic governance. If algorithmic practices and capitalism appear so tightly-knit, what might an historical tracing of this mutual imbrication reveal? By following the shift from energy to information to data, this paper argues that it becomes possible to trace the emergence of the human--in its white european model--as an energetic system needing to be steered. I argue that this conception of the hu(man) was learned from the slave plantation where some humans were treated as energy machines, whose features were re-coded as thermodynamic properties--enlightenment rationality, self-determination, self-transparency, and terra-nullis are thus entangled to discourses of "nature." The algorithm's pre-disposition toward the production of self-productivity and governable bodies extends discourses already deployed to designate and authorize racial hierarchy. Thus, this paper shifts from a concern with "data's" ideological function to its kinetic,

exposing how power operates through the forces that move the algorithm and that, in turn, move us.