

The Cultural Work of Drone Automation

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Why do stories of automated drone delivery so often feature mothers, midwives, and babysitters? To answer this question, this talk takes at its starting point the tech industry claim that advances in artificial intelligence and robotics promise to relieve reproductive and domestic laborers from the drudgery of menial tasks. Unencumbered from these obligations, we're told, humans are free to reach their full potential. As feminist scholars remind us, however, this vision of automation regards the gendered and racialized workers who historically perform devalued tasks under racial capitalism as less than human. Moreover, despite forecasts of human obsolescence, the automated workplace hasn't eliminated human labor so much as degraded it: workers in these environments are routinely subjected to unsafe conditions, sped-up production schedules, and longer work hours. Looking to technological and cultural imaginaries of drone delivery, this talk examines how reproductive and domestic labor gets framed—not as degraded toil but as laudable work organized around affective investments in the child and the family form. How does drone automation sanitize historically devalued labor? And more broadly, how do literary and cultural studies help us theorize this nexus of gender, labor, and AI-assisted automation and the cultures it gives rise to?