

Panel Proposal: 72nd Annual Meeting “Kinship in American Studies”

Remaking Kin with the Machines: Conceptualizing Relationality in the Technological Age

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Interactions between humans and technological entities have long been the subject of human thinking and experience, but advances in technology have shifted how we think about our relationship with nonhuman actors. Neither supposedly brute, passive substance nor mystified natural force, innovations in computation and technology urge us to rethink the “vibrancy of things” and of computational and technological matter, to use Jane Bennett’s vocabulary. From assistive technologies such as prosthetics to eldercare robots that support aging populations to chatbots that serve as conversational partners or therapists, contemporary technologies are increasingly experienced as extensions of the self or even companions, rather than tools and mediators, thus reshaping how relationality is lived, imagined, and theorized.

As artificial intelligence technologies become increasingly available to the general public, millions of individuals interact with these algorithms daily. Their rapid and widespread adoption relies on a design that replicates human social practices. Although not all AI technologies are specifically built to interact with human beings, chatbots, for example, are programmed with the sole purpose of communication and replicate seemingly sentient behavior. The interaction often appears reassuring, caring, and compassionate. It encourages human attachment as communicative affect and obscures issues of absent physical embodiment, the simulative nature of the perceived interlocutor, and their embeddedness and function in contemporary capitalism. Departing from substantialist approaches to kinship, there is a need to consider the social world as a domain that is not exclusively human and to explore alternative ontologies that recognize the ways in which machines and other entities socially interact and coexist with humans. While chatbots represent an example whereby technology might be treated as kin, Matthew Wolf-Meyer proposes a second approach to address human-technology relationality, namely to “conceptualiz[e] kinship as a conduit that composes emergent relations and bodies” (233). His disability studies approach is based on considering technology (such as, for example, prosthetics) as relational actors that render kinship relations possible. It therefore calls attention to the corporeality of bodies and their dependencies, and politically questions normative constructions of bodies within kinship relations.

Kinship studies have historically challenged assumptions that kinship must be rooted solely in biology and genealogy and have looked beyond constructed boundaries of the familial and the social. Contemporary kinship studies pose questions of how to rethink human-technology relations as kinship (see for example Haraway; Hayles; Arista et al.; Bateson; Wolf-Meyer), but they also help us critically investigate parasocial and affective uses of technology, which might not

just serve purely anthropocentric ends but also prosthetically disconnect us from social exposure and the “inconvenience of other people” (Berlant), be they human or nonhuman.

This panel is intended to join these discussions, exploring how human-technology relationships figure into conceptualizations of kinship. Inspired by Lewis et al.’s endeavor in “Making Kin with the Machines,” which takes its cue from Indigenous epistemologies and their rethinking of planetary relationality, the panel provides a forum to investigate the “creat[ion of] mutually intelligible discourses across differences in material, vibrancy and genealogy” (1) and asks which schools of thought, theories, and literature can support us in addressing human-technology relationships.

We invite speakers to consider the following questions:

- Which theories of kinship can be mobilized to conceptualize relationships between humans and technology? How do these discussions figure into the kinship discourse of the human-nonhuman?
- Which theories (like, for example, Indigenous epistemologies, disability theory, animal studies, etc.) offer alternatives to hegemonic Western-centric approaches to technology and help us reconsider human-nonhuman relationships?
- How can we theorize the quality of these relationships and the partners’ “mutuality of being” (Sahlins)? How do we account for the technologies’ lack of experiences of vulnerability, a factor that has oftentimes been decisive in the formation of kinship relations?
- How do we account for the embeddedness of digital technologies in an extractivist logic and their reproductive function within contemporary capitalism?
- How do we reconcile the embodied / material and the virtual / immaterial differences that mark the partners in this relationship?
- How can fiction help us to rethink human-technology relationality, both by historicizing it and by imagining potential futures?

Confirmed Speaker:

PD Dr. Karin Höpker (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Please send proposals (of up to 300 words) and questions to Juliane Gamböck-Strätz (gamboeck@staff.uni-marburg.de) and Ruxandra Teodorescu (ruxandra.teodorescu@fau.de).

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