

Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life

Alondra Nelson and Thuy Linh N. Tu, eds., with Alicia Headlam Hines. 2001. New York, NY: New York University Press. [ISBN 0-8147-3603-3. 205 pages, including index. \$55.00 USD.]

A short five years ago, my access to the Internet consisted of one hour each week at the Albuquerque Public Library. I'd ride the bus downtown on Saturday morning and join the line of shaky guys with old-growth beards and backpacks waiting for the library doors to open.

Into that hour I somehow crammed job-hunting and studying, and my fair share of aimless clicking. I was rarely tough-minded or sneaky enough to try for more than my allotted hour per week. The shaky guys formed a welcome counterpoint to my overly carpeted and fluorescent-lighted life; the librarians were kind; and it never occurred to me to feel victimized or underprivileged because my time in cyberspace was limited. Maybe I was wrong.

Last summer, I thought I might learn a little about the rights and wrongs of wired life from *Technicolor: Race, technology, and everyday life*, a collection of essays that promises a "first step toward a fuller understanding of race and technoculture" (p. 9).

The book originated as a graduate school project. Its contributors range from academics to entrepreneurs to artists. Because it was written during the dot-com boom, some of its theory might bear reworking now. Much of its prose could use some fine-tuning, and it's not always clear that the loose term *technology* is a strong enough thread to hold these disparate essays and interviews together.

Still, *Technicolor* offers insights into varied and interesting worlds, and raises important issues, from language barriers in cyberspace to the abuse of women immigrant workers. When its contributors manage to forget themselves and focus on the people whose causes they champion, it can be downright fascinating. Topics range from community technology centers to lowrider design, from workplace politics, to karaoke, to the trials of setting up and maintaining a commercially viable Web site with African-American or Latino content.

In spite of its vital subject, much of the book strikes me as predictable, self-congratulatory, and emotional. Unexplained insider talk makes it an uninviting read for a beginner, yet I'm not sure it's meaty enough to satisfy anyone who's spent a lot of time thinking about the issues covered.

Many passages show a tin ear for language—"revolutionary conve-

nience" (p. 16), "underground loft party" (p. 68), "a decidedly not-so-abstract me" (p. 182)—and an indignant moral tone that draws little distinction between radically different levels of misery and exploitation. Everyone's a victim—the "armies of data processors in places like Bangalore and the Caribbean" (p. 74); the dot-com entrepreneur who found it "exhausting to work in a squalid environment" and "decided to . . . return to the middle class" (p. 66); factory women earning poverty wages (p. 51); skilled immigrant programmers saying "no one comes here for below 40K" (p. 81).

Everyone might be a victim, but not everyone has a heart. Internet exec McLean Mashingaidze Greaves touts his own "egalitarian view" one moment; the next, asked about sweatshop conditions in semiconductor factories, he says, "To be honest, most new media professionals are too overwhelmed with their own personal manifest destiny" to care (pp. 73–74).

In spite of its faults, *Technicolor* does offer glimpses of some fascinating corners of America, both states and states of mind. If you can make it past the clunky language and heavy moralism, you're likely to meet a few people who will shake up your world a bit and even entertain you.

Some of its chapters are gems—well written, brimming with enthusiasm and color. An interview with filmmaker Vivek Bald is my favorite, because he gets so much joy out of his multicultural pursuits.

He recalls working with limited resources and cheerfully embracing the DIY (do it yourself) attitude of his punk-rock heroes: "Documentary filmmaking isn't so much about high-end equipment as it is about content" (p. 91).

He's well aware of the hardships his subjects face, whether they are immigrant cab drivers in New York

City or young black and Asian musicians in England, and he celebrates their ingenuity and spirit. South Asian cabbies rework the circuitry on CB radios (Bald happily admits he couldn't figure out how until they showed him) to create their own private channels. Why? To get away from the racial abuse that was coming through on the open channels. He's no preacher, but he gets his point across.

He's just as inventively analytical as any contributor to *Technicolor*, linking, for example, punk rock values to

places like the electronics market behind Jamma Masjid in Old Delhi, where you have men who sit in stalls surrounded by wires and transistors and soldering irons and bits and pieces of all kinds of equipment. I swear they can make anything out of anything. (p. 89)

People just seem to write better when they write about what they love instead of what they hate.

There are other fine chapters. Sociologist Karen Hossfeld's "Their logic against them," a study of immigrant women in Silicon Valley, is respectful, sensitive, and carefully reasoned. And "Take a little trip with me: Lowriding and the poetics of scale," by doctoral student Ben Chappell, is poignant and serious, but it is also good fun—as well as a very nice art crit/social crit workout.

Getting all these members of the American family under one book cover is no mean accomplishment, but it's hard for me to recommend that you read *Technicolor*. Maybe someone with more patience for academic jargon and self-congratulation could dig more meat out of this lobster than I did.

If you're after that promised "first step toward a fuller understanding," you might get just as much out of a few hours spent volunteering at your local Y or high school. Many of the

book's contributors give the impression that they, too, could benefit from a few hours spent off campus.

Amanda A. Morgan

AMANDA A. MORGAN is associate editor at *National fisherman*, a monthly magazine for commercial fishermen. She has a master's degree in Pacific Islands history and has worked as a copy editor and wire editor for daily newspapers in California, New Mexico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Caught in a cold wind

BY AMANDA MORGAN

"The truth is, we always fish hard bottom. It's the only fishing left."

Ex-longliner G.F. Michelsen's novel "Hard Bottom" follows a Cape Cod fisherman through nearly every hardship the post-Magnuson Act world has to offer. The book's protagonist, draggerman Ollie Cahoon, is part hero and part anti-hero, a thoroughly believable character who struggles with pained integrity and baffled courage against the tidal forces of nature, human greed, official idiocy and pure cussed bad luck.

Michelsen's book-jacket bio credits him with a wealth of experience — from commercial fishing to merchant marine to journalism to teaching — that would be the envy of any writer. His love for the sea and for his native Massachusetts coast is unmistakable.

"Hard Bottom" is crammed with information — about fishing, nature, New England history and small-town politics — but never seems to lecture. It would make good reading for fisherman and non-fisherman alike. There's language and detail to make one feel at home, and enough context and explanation to keep the other up to speed.

Michelsen has taken to heart the notion that "God is in the details." His approach is strangely sensuous, whether he's describing the atmosphere of a jail cell ("the smell of cherry disinfectant is pervasive and strong as guilt") or the texture of the sea at dusk.

He tells us things about a scene that a participant might feel but never mention, giving an oddly formal but believable sense of being there. "The fresh air tastes good. The flavors I make out in one sniff include applejack, maple smoke, car exhaust. Cold, and dust from piles of leaves that children kick through and cars scatter in their slipstreams."

Likewise he brings into words and carefully worked-out sentences the emotions of a man unlikely to make a parade of his feelings. "This family never learns.... Everybody in this kitchen always hoped and hoped despite all evidence. If hope was a fuel you could burn like oil, Harriet would never have to worry about heating bills again." On anger: "She wanted us to free the children locked inside of us but with me that did not help because the kid inside was more pissed off than I was."

When we first meet Cahoon, he's in jail awaiting trial; the rest of the novel tells us how he got there: his roots on the Cape, his love of fishing, his disintegrating marriage, and a maddening run of bad luck

that mirrors the "what next?" quality of all our worst days. (At one point his son breaks into the pound to rescue the family dog, leaving him a fresh set of bills and a daunting new bit of parenting to perform.)

"Hard Bottom" is not exactly powered by plot, yet I find myself reluctant to give away what happens. There are no car chases, but you won't want to put it down. It's peopled by lovable, flawed, realistic characters who redeem the disappointments of their lives through steady, humorous affection.

Nature itself is a character in this novel, and the grief of losing familiar places drives much of Cahoon's desperation. "Every single day of my life I have driven the roads of home and felt my mood sink a notch as a plot of checkerberry, or a pond, or a clear view of marsh, was disappeared by

construction. I began setting deadlines when I was fifteen. When that field goes, I used to say, I am leaving the Cape for good.... The field went, the woods went, and I never left."

It's nature seen through a fisherman's

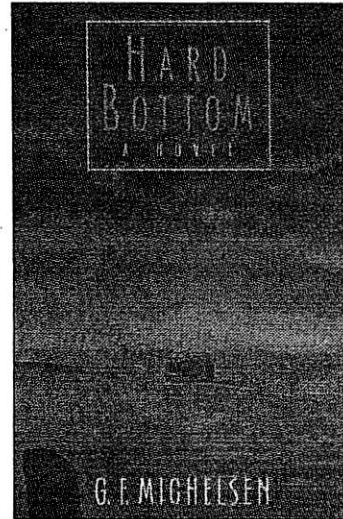
eyes: at sea, a stunning encounter with right whales (a "glimpse of black isle among the sea's hard change"); on land, cut off by a "bluehair" in a Crown Victoria with save-the-whales vanity plates.

And on every page, there's Ollie Cahoon himself — clear-sighted, brave but often helpless, without pity for himself or much for others, he is harder on himself than his worst critic (of which there are plenty) could be. Throughout the book, an eerie counterpoint of loss — a runaway dog, radio messages from a long-drowned vessel — accompany his fight to survive.

I zoomed through this book to beat a deadline, but I have little doubt I'll be returning to it often — for its poetry, its characters, and the privilege of entering its compelling world. Michelsen clearly loves and respects the commercial fishing community. He's paid it the highest compliment by refusing to romanticize it.

Cahoon sees himself as a failure — like an engine or ship's structure that's given out under too much strain — but he is wrong. As he grows into his own skin, he becomes part of something more enduring than the shopping-mall construction site that forms the book's key symbol of despair.

"I would need to multiply my own tiny power a hundred, a thousand times," he says as that despair grows, "until it matched in strength the girders of this bizarre palace." That's not as impossible as Ollie Cahoon seems to believe. But if G.F. Michelsen's got an opinion on the subject, he's keeping it to himself. **NF**



HARD BOTTOM

G.F. Michelsen

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