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Almost nobody says that they are “for” the machine. Italian Futurists paid boisterous tribute to the violent possibilities of twentieth-century warfare and automotive speed, and modernists of the thirties did their best to valorize the shiny surfaces and design imperatives of industrial capitalism. But few of the U.S. writers and artists that Leo Marx famously described in *The Machine and the Garden* (1964) express unalloyed excitement when they heard the railroad coming and sensed the clouds of smoke on the horizon. And even the most strident celebrations of the “American Technological Sublime,” to borrow the title of David Nye’s 1994 book, are cut with moments of dread and alienation, awe mixed always with anxiety at the prospect of inventions like Hoover Dam or the atomic bomb that utterly remake—or threaten to unmake—the natural world. From the corrupted and corrupting electoral schemes of “machine” politics in the Progressive Era to the “machinery” that is “too much” for Allen Ginsberg in “America”—which is why, after all, he’s putting his “queer shoulder to the wheel”—there is a longstanding tradition of resistance in US culture to the social institutions and systems that embody the instrumentality of power. The actual human beings that most perfectly evoke the values of the “machine” would be variously repellent industrialists like Andrew Carnegie or Henry Ford, or a Silicon-Valley version of the same like Elon Musk: men whose drive for profits and control is all too familiar in the flesh and blood. Rage Against the Machine is not my favorite band by a long shot, but I definitely see their point.

So does Matt Tierney, whose excellent and impassioned new book *Dismantling: Words against Machines in the American Long Seventies* reminds us that some of the most powerful critiques of technology throughout the period drew on rhetorics steeped in Luddite ideologies that were cannier than we think. Tierney’s focus is not on the back-to-the-land romantics of Hippie lore and legend, nor on the cocktail-party dystopianism of Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo. He looks instead at writers across a brilliant range of genres, styles, and institutional milieus—from technologists and Native American land activists to science fiction novelists and experimental poets—to show how the contours of our contemporary world emerged in debates about the economic effects of automation and deindustrialization, the power of media in a networked public sphere, and the uneven damage that was experienced along lines of race and sexuality as one “machine age” mutated into another. Tierney’s readings of works by Ursula K. Le Guin, Audre Lorde, W. S. Merwin, Samuel Delaney, Stanley Elkin, and Paul Metcalf are incisive and direct, working less as comprehensive treatments of their styles and themes and more as searching excavations of their views on—and generally against—technology. Lorde
represents both the figurative and intellectual horizon of the book, providing Tierney with his title by way of her famous statement that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

Tierney does not exactly take Lorde at her word here and say that she refers to all the artifacts of human making—from hammers and axes to ENIAC and ICBMs—that have constructed society and its forms of racial hierarchy, misogyny, and sexual exploitation. Nor does he let Lorde’s ideas become abstracted and dispersed into the rich but also limiting discourse about technology and “tools” in Heidegger, though Tierney later turns to this and other philosophical approaches that flourished in the seventies. Tierney makes Lorde central to his several lines of argument in Dismantlings because he wants to revisit the multiple registers of radical critique aimed at all the different machines—from computerized systems of control and information to the weaponry of military and police violence—that at once symbolized and reinforced the increasingly oppressive politics shadowing the long seventies as they gave way to the Reagan revolution. Tierney begins with the writings of Alice Mary Hilton, the computer engineer who coined the word “cyberculture” in 1963 as part of a precociously sweeping attack on the idea of “unremitting innovation” as the default ethic of the new world of computers (1). His story ends, or perhaps better, starts again with revived intensity during the 2016 protests at Standing Rock, where “anticolonial liberation technologies” faced the machines of U.S. governmental force (168). In between, Tierney gives his readers a persuasively heterodox and imaginatively conceptualized account of how writers understood the terms of their struggle against the machines of economic exploitation and oppression that they faced.

It would be possible, and partly accurate, to describe Dismantlings as exploring the fallout from the epoch of cybernetic exuberance tracked so searchingly by N. Katherine Hayles in How We Became Posthuman (1999). There are also resonances between Tierney’s attention to the culture of technology at its stranger, more contested fringes and such books as Tung-Hui Hu’s A Prehistory of the Cloud (2015) and Joe Milutis’s Ether: The Nothing that Connects Everything (2006). The book also makes provocative forays into media theory, though it is telling that the dizzying subversiveness of Siegfried Zielinski’s archaeological models is more inspiring to Tierney than the sardonic techno-fetishism of Friedrich Kittler’s later work. These affiliations, however helpful they may be in situating Tierney’s positions, can also obscure the deep skepticism toward technology that shapes his book at every turn, an antipathy increasingly more eloquent and convincing as Dismantlings proceeds.

Tierney does not return us to the 70s so that we can learn from perhaps neglected histories how to make our reliance on technology more equitable or responsible, or how, as literary scholars and cultural critics, we can better understand—and thus assimilate—the
quantitative methods and information practices of programmers and engineers. Tierney recognizes that these are precisely the sorts of projects that many of his counterparts and colleagues are pursuing, and with a great deal of seriousness he is asking, in effect, is this really something we ought to be doing? What are the costs and consequences of accepting that technology is unavoidable and ubiquitous? Even if the environmental externalities and profit motives of the tech industry were tamed, and if the balance of power somehow rendered magically more equal between Silicon Valley (and its colonies on every campus) and the communities it neglects and exploits, would we genuinely find out where technology belongs in our world, or would we just strike a better bargain about where we belong in its?

These are the questions that Tierney raises in *Dismantlings*. Impossibly big and flagrantly daunting, they also reflect, as his chapters show, a series of conversations that were happening throughout the 1960s and 70s in science fiction and poetry, as well as in both popular discussions and academic critiques of computerization and automation as linked processes of Marxian “valorisation,” though not all of Tierney’s figures would approve this terminology. The language of political economy comes easily to discussing *The Dispossessed* (1974), where Le Guin produces an anarchist allegory about “the high costs and meager benefits of centralized power and property ownership” (59). Even more suggestive than Tierney’s discussion of the novel is how he frames her Hainish cycle from *Rocannon’s World* (1966) through *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and her early 70s novels as deliberately “nontechnical” in their world-building so that her interest in political and social systems can operate with greater freedom. At the same time, the possibility of instantaneous intergalactic communication is a predicate for Le Guin’s novels in this period, providing Tierney with a departure point for examining the fantasies of “communion” as a technological ideal challenged in Delaney’s *Triton* (1976). That novel tried to answer Le Guin’s ambivalence about the dilemmas of technological development by exploring how language itself was “heterotopic,” too mutable to ground the Manichean oppositions Le Guin conceives.

In a study that moves as quickly as *Dismantlings*, Tierney’s shifts of analytic framework occasionally require a second look before they seem solid enough to bear the weight his arguments demand. These moments, however, feel like the necessary effects of his style and rhythms as a critic; they generate excitement and intellectual energy that more than justify the swerves they make the reader navigate. And since Tierney is so little interested in the technocratic fineries characterizing so much work in media studies—where cool devices and elegant designs get salvaged from the wreck of capitalism—there are also moments when the reader of *Dismantlings* is confronted with challenge of seeing how technology patterns modes of sheer rationality even when there are no machines in sight. By the time we get to a late chapter on “Revolutionary Suicide,” Tierney argues that
technology “has basically become shorthand for software and hardware and the connections between,” and that one of the most lasting legacies of the “literary Luddism” he has detailed is its critique of “the logics of power” (112).

Looming behind this profound extension of the category of technology is Tierney’s work in prior chapters, which make the case that “to call oneself a Luddite” can’t just mean the “claim that one hates smartphones and laptops and networks” (112). Too many of our objections to the objects of technology that claim our psyche and attention are pleas for tinkering and reforms, more the special pleadings of consumer preference than any of the acts of “machine-breaking” that Tierney hopes we can again imagine (113). Obviously, we will not simply disassemble the technologies we have built, nor should we indulge in the naive pastoralism about some better world to come if only we unplug our various devices, quit Facebook or Twitter or Instagram for good, and finally detach from the late-capitalist imperatives that drive them. In paying tribute to different models of technological revolt from before and after the seventies, Tierney’s Dismantlings demonstrates the potential for and enacts the politics of “epistemological Luddism,” a term that he adapts from Langdon Winner’s 1977 book Autonomous Technology. There, Winner himself invokes the iconography of Ned Ludd to teach his readers what “‘carefully and deliberately dismantling’” might entail (39). It is a lesson that Tierney shows is utterly worth learning again. And getting right.