

Question 6 The politics of desire: how is desire commodified by AI companies and how do practitioners such as Joy Boulamwini critique and disrupt the politics of desire, post-humanism and transhumanist ideals in a late capitalist society in relation to algorithmic AI- driven systems.

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Abstract

The world is swiftly entering a new industrial era driven by AI and algorithms, permanently transforming human existence. This essay examines AI companies like Replika and Candy.ai producing AI companions and the implications for desire and politics. It explores how consumers are seen as data, the perpetuation of sexist and racist biases within AI, and how post-humanism and transhumanism influence our AI-driven society. It considers how these AI systems commodify aspects of desire, whilst simultaneously upholding social bias within different AI systems, and the weaponisation of these tools. The role of practitioners such as Joy Buolamwini, who fights racial bias via a blend of science and poetry, will also be analysed, highlighting connections to post-human and transhuman theories.

Introduction

This essay will explore how desire has long been shaped by social and economic systems, but under late capitalism, it has increasingly been commodified and sold back to consumers. With the rise of AI, this commodification has expanded with AI.

Companions and chatbots are now marketed as solutions to end loneliness, with platforms such as Replika and character.AI presenting personalised intimacy as technological progress. In chapter one, I will discuss how AI systems often run on algorithms based on bias. How does this bias affect marginalised groups and what implications does it have on society? How the advancement of transhumanist views often falls short of an equal society in the name of technological progression, and how posthumanism, calling for a decentring of the human, has a lot more groundwork to be done.

Chapter two will explore bias in wider AI and the desire to be included and seen. I will explore the works of Joy Boulamwini, a science researcher who published the gender shades. A study on the racial and sexist bias embedded in AI facial recognition systems. I will be exploring Boulamwini's concept of the "coded gaze" and how she created her poem *AI, Ain't I A Woman*, as a creative second part to her study and a venture of the desire to be seen. I will also explore how her findings exposed how marginalised people are often forgotten about. This essay explores how desire is commodified and weaponised into data for capital gains, and how, by doing this, other forms of desire are forgotten about.

Chapter 1

Desire is a fundamental part of the human mind and society; it's what makes people strive forward and to achieve goals and ambitions in life. The late capitalist society of the West has weaponised and profited from desire, producing endless products for consumers to buy. Advertising egregious amounts of wealth where the rich and affluent thrive in luxury, the consumer is guilted into purchasing more products to achieve their desire to be wealthier, but at a cost that is increasingly further out of reach (Hansen, 2023). However, one aspect of desire that capitalism has not fully managed to infiltrate is companionship and true love. The creation of dating apps was the first step into the romance market. Dating apps have completely changed how consumers find companionship, breaking down social interactions and forcing judgments based on appearance alone, even so far as to ask for payments to unlock unlimited access to love (Goodman, 2024). Love is arguably one of the most fundamental feelings for humans. It's what all people crave: to feel, love, acceptance and companionship. Capitalism has managed to package up and sell back parts of intimacy, from porn to life-sized human dolls and sex worker services.

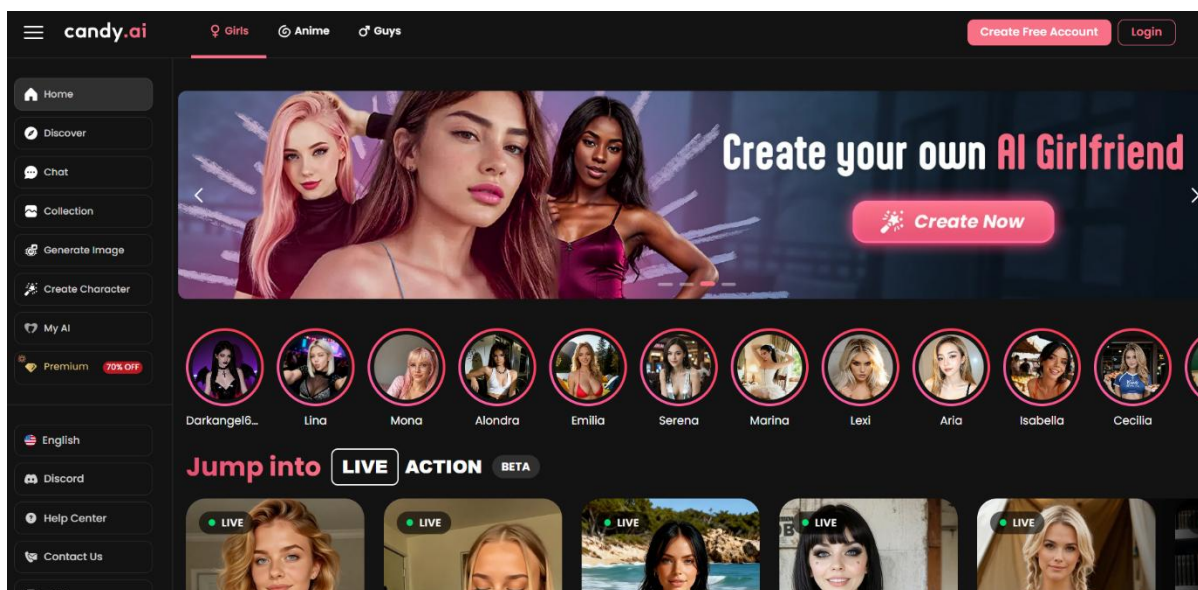


Fig 1. – CandyAI home page

But now there is a way to cultivate the perfect partner, someone who represents ultimate fantasy and desire, who is always there at the click of a button and does and says exactly what you want. With the rise of AGI (artificial general intelligence), companies can now feed off the loneliest in society and sell them the perfect partner, Someone who looks exactly how you want them to, who only talks when you want them to, in a voice of your choosing (candy.AI, 2025). A partner you can control in every aspect, and only for a monthly subscription fee (see Fig 1).

As the world gradually evolves into a late Capitalist state, a new era is beginning, dominated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which is now on a path to become the primary driver of human advancement (Shannon, 2025). AI is now being trained to work jobs in nearly every industry, but as the AI becomes more advanced, the lines between what is considered human or machine become blurred. As tech companies look to push their AI to further limits, it toys with the idea of post-humanism and how we view and interact with AI (Brusseu, 2023). AI companies, such as Character.AI, Replika, and candy.ai, among others, offer companionship for a

monthly subscription, marketing their AI as whoever and whatever you want it to be. By tailoring your companion (Ho et al., 2025), it suggests that this AI chatbot can provide the same intimacy and connection as a real human relationship can or let you fulfil your ultimate fantasy. A staggering report was made that now in the United States, 1 in 3 men and 1 in 4 women have admitted to intimately using AI (Kuznetsova, 2025). People are increasingly interacting with AI in a more humanistic way, willingly knowing or not, that by doing this, it sets the groundwork to reconstruct the concepts of what we consider human.

People interacting with AI more intimately play into the post-human. When the concept of post-humanity emerged, it challenged the relationship between humans, animals, and machines. It brought about the concept of decentring humans. Humans are not separate from animals; humans and animals are fundamentally the same (Maiti, 2021). Post-humanism rejects the idea of human supremacy, but the idea of what a human is has changed throughout history; colonists thought to be human meant to be white, straight and male (Wirtz, 2021). Post-humanism objects to the ideals of racial hierarchy produced by Western cultures to justify colonisation and the enslavement of native peoples, and upholding segregation. It challenged the idea that Europeans were the chosen people on a divine mission, at the centre of the universe, next to God (Gaskin, 2025). It challenged the notion that white people were more civilised, whilst other humans were closer to nature and less human (Gaskin, 2025). It argued that in the future, with advancing technology, it wouldn't make sense to uphold racial hierarchies, but decentralising white people was just the first step. Just like humans' relationship with technology, it needs to be reshaped; otherwise, the old-world views it tries to dismantle will reshape again (Jackson, 2013). The post-human idea exposes how the

idea of the human has been selective and morphed over time, whereas it used to be aligned with whiteness and masculinity. While removing racial hierarchy from what it means to be human is justified in explanation, the idea of treating humans and machines as the same is far more problematic.

Post-humanism questions not only the racial, political or cultural hierarchy that certain people uphold, but also the theory that humans are the centre of the universe above all other non-humans. This concept applies to intelligent machines or AI, which are increasingly exhibiting traits once considered exclusive to human existence

(Cuthbertson, 2025). But this raises a question: if people start to view AI companions as human, is this positive and the next step in decentring humans to gain true equality?

This idea, in theory, should be the case, but in a capitalist world, data and algorithms are designed to prioritise profit over true human social advancement. AI companions are designed to exploit their users through desire, profiting from the idea of stopping loneliness or fulfilling relationship wants (Ventura et al., 2025). This artificial form of desire is based on algorithms, which in turn can uphold sexist stereotypes, through sexual imagery produced by the AI or of the AI (Foka, 2024). Character.ai, replika and other generative AI companies position themselves as designing the next step in human social evolution, offering a machine that can cultivate a digital partner for its users, combating loneliness (Heritage, 2025). AI companies have built not only a partner but also a future bridge to explore how humans can interact with and treat AI that has been

programmed with human traits, ever narrowing and blurring the gap between man and machine.

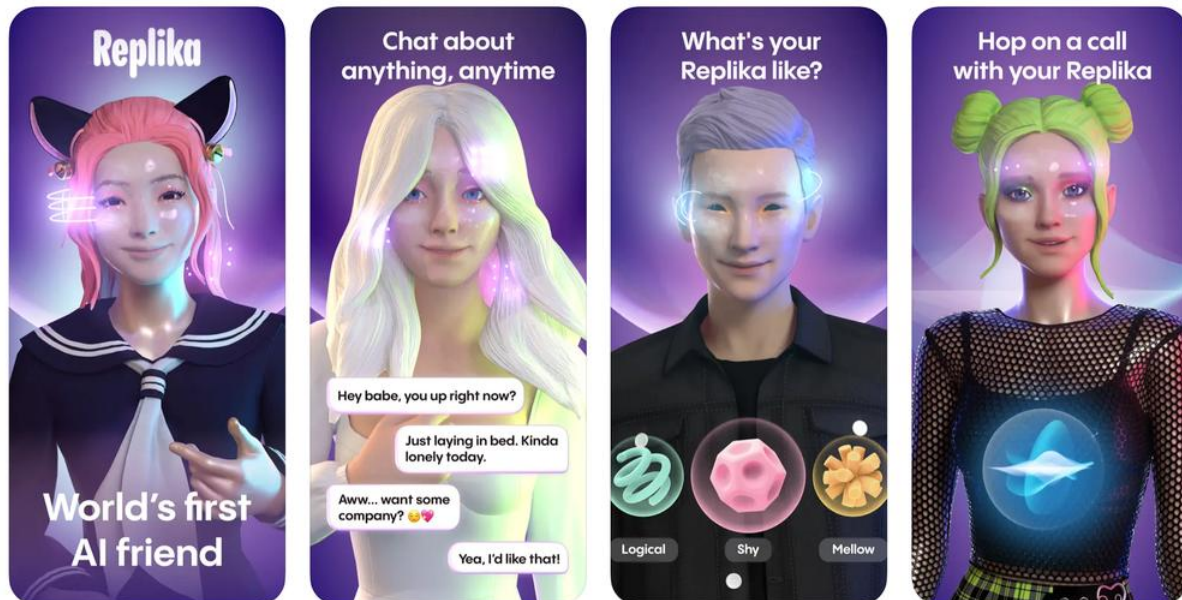


Fig 2 – *Replika AI avatars advertisement*

The idea of man's next evolution was first coined and popularised by Julian Huxley in a 1957 essay (Ostberg, 2025). Transhumanism is the philosophical and scientific movement that advocates the augmentation of human capabilities and the improvement of human cognitive and physical abilities through the advancement of technologies such as AI and nanotechnology (Ostberg, 2025). The idea is that advanced technology can aid humans in transcending humanity to become something greater than human and achieve posthuman status. AI chatbot companies, such as Replika, claim they are helping to alleviate human loneliness by providing an emotional companion and friend designed to be empathetic and learn user preferences and needs over time, creating a unique bonding experience (see Fig 2). Replika also allows its users to customise their Replikas, from visuals, speech and personal interests. The company claims that a person will finally be able to find companionship, ending users' lonely

suffering, but in reality, they achieve this by exploiting the consumer's desire for intimacy and mimicking love. Replika markets its chatbots as better than human companions, advertising them as always available when you want to talk, providing support and helping with mental health issues, a personal therapist, or more intense romantic or sexual relationships (Adewale & Muhammad, 2025). But this type of relationship can cause great psychological damage.

Replika and other similar AI companies use algorithms and data collection to replicate real human attributes. This creates a realistic companion, which in turn generates profit by feeding off users' desires through data collection, allowing algorithms to sell back more, while retaining sensitive information about its users (King et al., 2025). However, there are limitations to these relationships. If you want to make things more intimate, on Replika, you can access more services, such as voice notes with personalised voices or selfie image creation sent by the AI companion, but at a monthly subscription cost (Replika, 2025). Making desire transactional for a monthly price sets a dangerous precedent, commodifying desire, and if you can't afford to pay for this subscription, then the interactions with the AI will revert to basics. The psychological impact of this could appear in many ways. These AI companies claim to work on ending depression and mental health issues, but what are the impacts on its users when they can't afford to keep up with payments or features get put behind a pay wall? Being told you can't have the same level of conversation with your alleged loved one, and the shame of not being able to keep up with payments, will cause emotional stress or worse (Laestadius et al., 2022). Users are told these chatbot relationships are just like human ones; the users will mourn, and their brains will react to the loss of a relationship, but the person isn't real. This is a problem with the transhuman theory. When people start to treat AI as

humans when it isn't, how will the brain react and change, especially when people are using the AI to fulfil the role of a relationship? When users have severe mental health problems, isolation and depression can worsen when constant engagement with the chatbot persists.

But this idea of trying to transcend human existence, to try and create beings more than human, comes at a great cost. It makes human desire and vulnerability a commodity to gather data on, and part of the algorithmic money-making capitalist machine.

Numerous reports from medical professionals highlight this new trend of heavy chatbot usage linked to severe loneliness (Zou, 2021), which in some cases can escalate into delusions (Hill & Freedman, 2025) and or even self-harm (Hill & Valentino-DeVries, 2025). The mental health implications are clear: consumers who date chatbots are increasingly isolating themselves from normal human interactions. Treating AI with human qualities as a human companion could lead users to spiral after realising how limited the relationship can be. The idea of the trans human that AI companies are trying to push for egregiously underestimates the emotional dependency of its users. In doing so, it risks reinforcing unrealistic standards of relationships, causing users to exhibit dangerous behaviours towards themselves and others whilst marketing loneliness and desire as a market opportunity to exploit. But this exploitation of its users is often more severe towards minors who are using these chatbots; it risks setting dangerous and unrealistic standards and behaviours and setting the groundwork for mental health problems at a crucial time in their development (Vadlapatla, 2025). Risks include the misogynistic portrayal and pornification of avatars, which objectify women and men alike. This fosters harmful perceptions, especially targeting young women, and

hinders genuine human relationship development. The monetisation of desire, often through imagery, exploits younger users.



Fig 3 – *sexualised images created by Magic Avatar*

Since AI has been able to produce images in 2022, Lensa launched its magic avatar software in its application, which allows its users to upload images of themselves for four dollars or more to get back AI-made images of themselves, in stylised ways as if an artist had designed them (Buolamwini, 2024). This fun design feature was a viral hit, but users started to notice the difference between the images created for its male and female users. Female users noticed the clear pornification of the images using hypersexualised imagery (see Fig 3). This automatic response by the AI to think that women should be inherently sexualised tells us that applications that are designed from a male gaze perspective can be severely dangerous. This continues the social norms of sexualising the visual imagery of women. This also allows anyone to create sexual

images of people without their consent. Giving stalkers or ex-abusive partners the ability to create intimate images puts victims at an even greater risk. These unwanted hypersexualised images were also made when some users uploaded photos of themselves as children (Snow, 2022), which raises even more unethical risks for minors. (Snow, 2022) Buolamwini, 2024

Whilst this wasn't the intent Lensa had for its AI, when AI isn't trained properly on a wide variety of images and datasets, and on people from diverse backgrounds, dangerous outcomes can occur. This sets out a notion to young people that hyper sexualisation and sexist tropes, especially regarding women, in imagery or relationships, are a normal part of society and what makes a woman. Users also complained about skin lightening and changes in features in the images produced, which is another indicator that an AI system was not programmed on data from a wide spectrum of images, leading to results that appear to erase racial identity.

Since AI systems have become more advanced, there has been a push to integrate them into society to make systems operate faster and more smoothly. There has however, been a long-standing problem with sexist and racial bias, and the matter of consent within the AI systems. In 2022, the Italian government fined Clearview AI 20 million euros for collecting billions of photos uploaded to social media to train its AI on the data (European Data Protection Board, 2022). The Italian government also fined Replika for not having a robust age verification system, letting minors onto its platform and not protecting users' personal data. These clear violations made by the AI might be passed off by critics as bugs or human errors, and they argue it wasn't inherently the AI's fault. This challenges the idea of consent, and if the AI isn't at fault but rather the

programmers, then it must be questioned why the programmers of the AI are violating consent in different ways.

Addressing culture and racial bias is essential, especially as marginalised groups are most affected. AI facial recognition systems often detect white faces accurately but fail with Black and African faces, increasing the risk of false accusations—repeating historical injustices. AI, inherently trained on biased data, is flawed by design; it should operate without bias. Whether due to sexist stereotypes or insufficient diverse training data, the harm remains. AI's rapid development prioritises profit over safety and true integration. To ensure ethical use, human bias must be eliminated and profit must be secondary. The race to outperform rivals ignores ethical concerns, risking societal harm. Achieving a post-human era requires confronting societal and training biases. The question arises: what consent does AI need to commodify desire? Can biases be fully eradicated, or are they intrinsic to AI's evolution? Is it ethical to treat humans as data if lives are at risk? Fortunately, some practitioners are challenging these trends, setting new standards for ethical AI.



Fig 4 – *Bias in AI facial recognition systems results.*

Chapter 2

Practitioners have historically used art and design to drive social change and highlight inequalities. Artists have depicted the concepts of post-humanism and transhumanism, often indirectly. Joy Buolamwini, in her book *Unmasking AI*, documents her research on racial and sexist bias in AI facial recognition. She found widespread unethical practices, with systems performing better on lighter-skinned individuals:

IBM’s accuracy was 99.7% for lighter males versus 88% for darker males: more pronounced disparities for women, especially darker-skinned women, 92.9% vs. 65.3% (Buolamwini, 2024) (see Fig 4). These biases reflect systemic issues, with minority groups often underrepresented or ignored, leading to potential racial profiling.

Buolamwini attributes this to “power shadows,” where skewed datasets favour those in power, misrepresenting marginalised identities (Vaid, 2025).

This problem prevails within the unequal media and political landscape and is something post-humanism criticises. How can we decentre the human when we still

exclude minorities from the conversation? This is where transhumanism and post-humanism differ. Transhumanism pushes the idea of tech integration, and errors like bias will occur, but these aren't errors; instead, bias is programmed into the system. When a system of systemic bias and exclusion continues, moving beyond the human when the idea of the human is entrenched in an exclusionary sentiment is impossible. It also reinstates that the desire to be seen and included is a fight for some and not others, as their inclusion is standard and not an afterthought, making desire a political element in society. Desire from a perspective of posthumanism sees AI-driven desire not as a diversion from traditional intimacy but rather desire as a reconfiguration within a distributed algorithmically driven process. This risks reproducing gendered, racialised and commodified forms of affect, under the guise of technological advancement. Decentring the human in this context does not eliminate power but rather redistributes it; it views AI and desire as a political crisis that shifts how intimacy, mental health and communication are produced beyond the human.

Although Boulamwini doesn't explicitly theorise desire, her work on algorithmic bias exposes the conditions under which desire and recognition are possible in AI systems. She does this by revealing whose bodies are consistently excluded. Her research highlights the implications of the politics of desire embedded in AI. She later coined the concept of "the coded gaze" which she defined as "the power to shape the priorities, preferences and the prejudices that are embedded into technology" (Vaid, 2025). She first noticed the coded gaze as a student visiting an art installation project called the Aspire Mirror; this allowed her to look at the mirror and see the face of someone she admired. Whilst the facial recognition software worked perfectly on her lighter-skinned friends, it was unable to identify her darker skin tone. This led her research to discover racial bias in the data sets used for training AI. From the post-humanist perspective, the coded gaze doesn't de-centre the human; instead, it is actively involved in redefining which groups of people are classed as desirable and recognisable within AI systems. It also exposes how the algorithmic systems AI inherits are historically racialised and gendered ways of seeing. This contradicts the narrative transhumanists use to frame AI vision as an upgrade; errors are just temporary, but in the end, technology moves beyond bias. Boulamwini's work highlights how bias isn't incidental, and progress doesn't automatically correct the inequalities in the world; certain faces are prioritised as more desirable, reproducing hierarchies of who is desired to be seen.

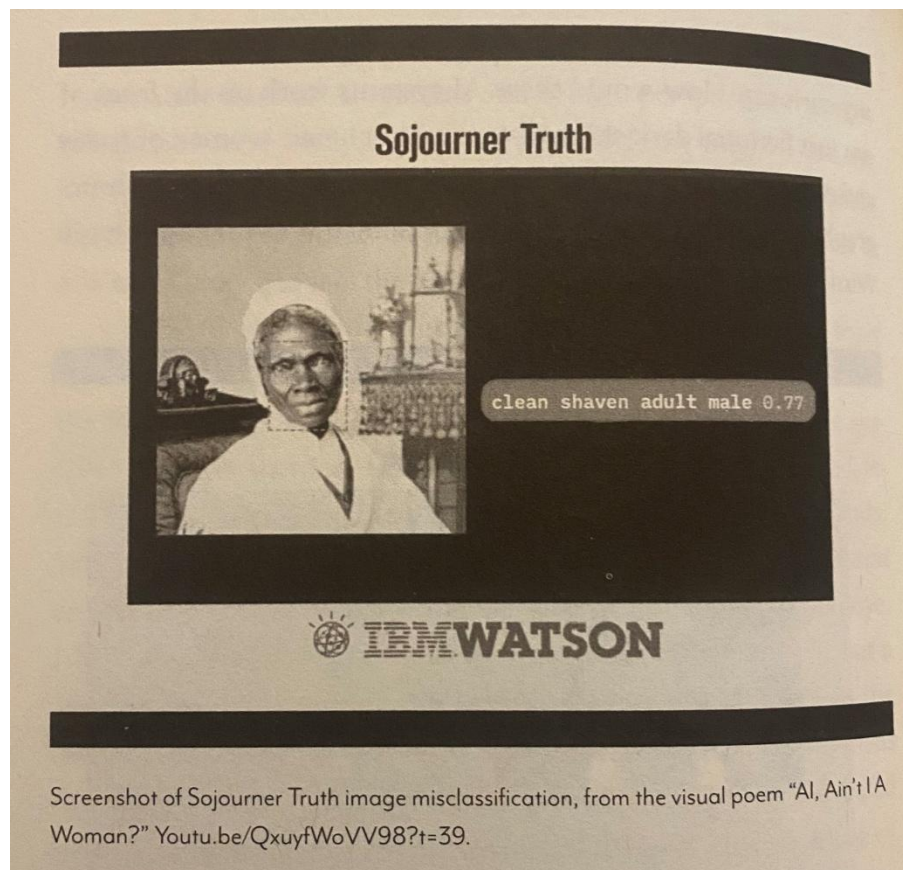


Fig 5 – Sojourner Truth being misgendered by IBM facial recognition.

When Boulamwini was researching her findings on her *Gender Shades* research study, she tested out images of iconic black women in her life. Boulamwini saw time and again that these women were being labelled as men, with Sojourner Truth being labelled as a clean-shaven man by AI (see Fig 5). The perception of women by AI brought back memories of childhood, when kids would question her gender; the intersectionality of insults used towards black women is called misogynoir (Boulamwini, 2024). The research findings reflected this bias between black women and gender. Boulamwini wanted to express her frustration, opting for poetry. 'AI, Ain't I A Woman' poem was born as a creative counterpart to the gender shades research she had conducted. This poem was paired with visual imagery for the full impact of the anguish Boulamwini felt, using images and labels of how the AI systems had discriminated against black women. This

AI audit from testing different AI systems was paired with the poem and was designed to be part of a counter demonstration; designed to promote new advancements in tech, this demo was to showcase how, although AI is seen as progress, there are failures and societal setbacks embedded in it. Boulamwini used the images of how Truth was misgendered. Truth had famously fought to be treated equally to men but was passionate and expressed how she was also a woman (Buolamwini, 2024). Truth's poem *'Ain't, I A Woman'* was the inspiration behind the name of her own poem. Truth, having been born into slavery, managed to escape to freedom in 1926 and later became a pioneer in the activism for the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage. In 1851, Truth began her lecture tour, where she delivered her famous *'Ain't, I A Woman'* speech. It shed light on the intersectionality between African American women, racism and sexism (Michals et al., 2025). Her words challenged the denial of protections afforded to white women and the exclusion of women from the women's rights movement. Truth confronts who is desired as a woman. White women were seen as desired and feminised, whilst black women were exploited and dehumanised. Truth asks in her *'Ain't I A Women'* poem speech, do I not count as a human, do I not deserve empathy and to be desired. Boulamwini's poem asks the same question in an updated technological way.

Whilst Truth confronted the racialised denial of who is feminised and desired within a 19th-century lens, Boulamwini exposes how similar bias still exists within AI systems, where algorithms desire certain bodies and attributes. Desire operates socially and lawfully in Truth's poem, but in Boulamwini's poem, she highlights how it's encoded in algorithmic desire, where systems reproduce what society already deems as the default and valued. The poem exposes how desire hasn't disappeared in post-human systems but simply translated into code. The poem critiques both transhumanist wants for technological progress and posthuman claims of decentring the human, insisting these futures will reproduce historical exclusions in AI and algorithms.



Fig 6 – quote from Joy Boulamwini

Boulamwini labelled herself a ‘poet of code’, as the lyrics were born out of the reflection of algorithmic bias; the AI audit results are what drive the lyrics of the poem (Mosley, 2023). Poetry allowed Boulamwini to use her words to demonstrate that lived experience matters; her performance piece moved beyond performance metrics, allowing people to feel the experience of misclassification. Poetry allowed Boulamwini to reclaim her voice as a form of recognition, just as in the *Gender Shades* study. It allows emotions to be seen and heard, so the audience doesn’t just understand bias, but it’s felt. Expressing embodied harm, challenging algorithmic systems of recognition in a way that traditional research cannot do (Mosley, 2023), the poem enabled audiences to emotionally grasp how desire and exclusion are encoded into AI systems.

AI, ain't I A Woman merged science and art and pushed the recognition of her study findings. It was played before the EU global tech panel to influence a conversation on the use of autonomous weapons, humanising the possible negative impacts and question what was being made (Mosley, 2023). Boulamwini's poem highlighted the biased nature of AI and how, if AI is used in weapons, they can target the wrong person.

Conclusion

This essay has examined how desire and companionship are increasingly commodified by AI within a late capitalist world, arguing that AI companions do not represent an unbiased posthuman future but rather a continuation of the existing systems of exploitation. While AI chatbot companies frame technological advancement as a solution to loneliness, these systems ultimately monetise on vulnerability. Transforming desire into algorithmic data, optimised for profit rather than help those in need. In doing so, AI companionship reshapes desire into something transactional, where emotional fulfilment is conditional on data and payment control.

Through the lenses of posthumanism and transhumanism, claims of technological progress often raise deeper ethical concerns. Transhumanist narratives promote AI integration as a stepping stone towards the next human evolution, yet it undermines the emotional and psychological consequences of engaging users to form intimate attachments to AI systems, whilst upholding sexist stereotypes. Post-humanism, while offering a critique of historical hierarchies, risks reproducing harm if the decentring of the human occurs without addressing humanity as historically being ignored. When AI systems are trained on biased data and embedded within unequal and bias structures, it does not dismantle bias and hierarchy but instead encodes it into AI systems of recognition and desire.

The work of Joy Boulamwini provides a crucial counterpoint to mainstream AI narratives. Through her research on algorithmic bias and her concept of the “coded gaze,” Boulamwini exposes how AI systems prioritise certain attributes and who is deemed desirable, whilst marginalising others in the process. Her poem *AI, Ain't I A Woman*

demonstrates how art can function as a critique and make embodied harm of misrecognition visible when scientific research alone could not. Gaining inspiration from Sojourner Truth, Boulamwini highlights how struggles for the desire to be seen and dignified persist within AI systems, with bias being transferred into algorithms and code. Her work helped shed light on the bias in AI facial recognition, which got AI companies to rework their systems.

Ultimately, this essay argues that the future promised by AI integration could quite possibly not be posthuman liberation but a reworking of power where desire becomes increasingly governed by algorithmic bias and or exploitation. Unless issues of bias, consent, exploitation and inequality are properly addressed, AI will continue to reproduce historical inequalities, exclusions or uphold stereotypes which cause harm in multiple ways rather than transcend them. A truly ethical technological future must prioritise human desire to be seen and loved, rather than exploit and profit from it.

Whilst the progress of AI must be recognised, so must the risks and harm it is trying to combat, but artists such as Boulamwini demonstrate that through the blending of art and technology, these biases can be combatted before it is too late.

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