Introduction to the Special Issue on Robots and Labor

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The automation of the human workforce in the last two hundred years has been cause for both celebration and concern (see Ford; Rhee). On the one hand, innovations in automation led to the "golden age" of post-World War II factory labor and an economic boom that shaped the middle class in industrialized nations (Ford). On the other hand, automation has had widespread negative impacts on human workers; indeed, a recent study published in *The Journal of Political Economy* has shown a direct relationship between the introduction of robots into an industry and the loss of human jobs (Acemoglu and Restrepo). In short, robots make human lives, labors, and economies simultaneously better and worse.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, popular culture has offered a means of exploring this ambivalence about machine labor, while also offering commentary on the dehumanization of human laborers. Indeed, as the essays in this special issue demonstrate, fictional robots are often not just robots; rather, they are also metaphorical portraits of humans, representative of the ways we build systems of oppression and dehumanization. The essays presented here offer a broad array of pop culture research on robots and labor, including analyses of literature, film, television, video games, advertising, music, and fan culture. Using a range of methods and theoretical frameworks, the contributors stretch the definition of labor to include not just the literal workforce but also emotional labor, semantic labor, and the labor of birth. Throughout, they uncover new ideas about humanity's fraught relationships with technology as well as humanity itself. I have organized these fifteen essays around broad categorizations of analysis: we begin with a theory-driven reflection on robots and labor, followed by six different cultural histories, five in-depth case studies, and finally two essays on artificial intelligence as both production and producer.

I would like to say thank you to the Editor of *PCSJ* and every single one of the contributors for coming on this journey with me. In creating this special issue, I set out to design an anonymous peer review process that would foster a supportive academic community, encourage constructive feedback, and avoid gatekeeping. The contributors went above and beyond in their thoughtful, compassionate reviews of each other's work while still maintaining rigorous academic standards.

As a result, this special issue on robot labor, produced by scholars from around the world with the help of computer and media technology, is the product of truly collaborative human labor.

Works Cited

Acemoglu, Daron and Pascual Restrepo. "Robots and Jobs: Evidence from US Labor Markets." *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 128, no. 6, 2020, pp. 2188-244.

Ford, Martin. *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future*. Basic Books, 2015.

Rhee, Jennifer. *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor*. U Minnesota P, 2018.