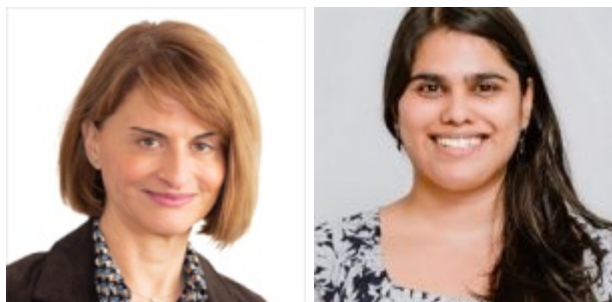


## Being Human in Digital Cities?



*Myria Georgiou and Sindhoora Pemmaraju consider how digital cities change what it means to be human, and show how Myria Georgiou's new book [Being Human in Digital Cities](#) addresses this question in relation to digital urbanism and digital justice.*

In the last few weeks, western news media have been debating the right of pro-Palestinian protesters to march on urban streets. But for some protesters, this debate is redundant. They have already taken to the urban street, albeit the urban [digital street](#). Since last October, media reported, children have organized pro-Palestinian marches on the online game platform, Roblox. Inside the virtual world of Roblox, kids, donning their virtual avatars, marched towards an urban virtual square, adorned with a flashing Palestinian flag. As an [CNBC news story](#) pointed out, one of the virtual areas was “visited more than 275,000 times”. This suggests that it was through *marching* on its virtual space that the gaming platform transformed into a sort of a city—a public space with certain areas cordoned off for protests. After all, a city is where so many fears and hopes for the future of humanity emerge, and urban streets are where they are manifested in public acts of individual and collective identity.

The Roblox protest might have taken onlookers by surprise – a rare display of solidarity on a virtual game platform – but it was anything but unique as a case where we see claims to public space made digitally. In fact, this is one among many examples that vividly illustrate how deeply digitisation is embedded into our lives, with the distinction between ‘offline’ and ‘online’ life now becoming almost impossible.

This incident was also revealing in another way: children, whose access to public urban space is often restricted, took over the digital urban street. The virtual world has not just become a ‘digital copy’ of the real world: it has become an extension, or even a

contestation of it. The possibility of acting and speaking on digital, as well as on material, urban streets now shapes how we imagine and perform humanity. The virtual 'playground' of Roblox is no longer a site of online play alone. It has now turned into a space for exploring what it means to be young, and to think and to act, not only as a gamer but also as a citizen-in-the-making. The virtual playground transformed into a vibrant 'city'. In this case, for political purposes.

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From gaming platforms to social media feeds, digital spaces have become sites for experimenting with our humanity, but also for questioning restrictions to our freedoms on the material street. What does this mean for how we relate to each other's humanity? Is it just ordinary people contributing to this change? Is the digital city a site of a *demotic humanism*, that is, a space where ordinary people set forward their claims to being human? What role do powerful actors, states, corporations and the media, play in changing cities on and off screens?

While humans try to transform platforms into *cities*, governments and corporations hope to transform cities into sites of 'digital order'. States and corporations often promise diverse, sustainable, and open urban societies and insist that [the pathways to these more humane futures are technological](#). We often see advertisements of shared working spaces, where digital work is supposed to mix with sociality, promising diverse communities as well as green futures. We also hear policymakers promoting investment in 5G and fibreoptic technologies because we need reliable and fast connectivity for work, but also for play and romantic connection. And we see feminist and environmental campaigns incorporated in institutional and commercial publicity campaigns through social cause hashtags that adorn merchandise and corporate headquarters' windows. Interestingly enough, these examples illustrate how in different ways, digital infrastructures mediate the many promises for better and more humane urban futures. The digital order proposed in these cases does not displace humanity but rather recentres it. In fact, it produces a *popular humanism* – promising that technological pathways will guarantee, at the same time, ordered and open cities.

*Popular humanism*, powerful urban actors' celebratory promise of human-centric urban futures, tells us that humanity will be better off with technological solutions. Yet, it

decontextualises innovations from structural inequalities, ignoring the causes of urban pollution, divisions, and popular fears. For example, the Metropolitan Police announced a £1.6million investment in testing wearable police cameras in an effort [“to restore trust in force.”](#) Its faith in technological solutions however conceals the perpetual surveillance of everyday life, especially among marginalized and racialised urban populations. In essence, popular humanism mobilizes sociotechnical imaginaries of diversity and openness to reassure distrustful citizens that digital corporations and the state have people’s well-being, rights, and freedom at heart.

Surveillance has become ordinary, not only through policing, but also through the organisation of urban economies that seem to promote human autonomy through the ever-expanding choices we can make digitally. From online shopping to GPS navigations of urban nightlife, citizens as consumers can enjoy more individual control over the city, as long as they can afford this particular kind of autonomy and they can consent to their [data extraction](#). And so, the digital order reimagines the city as a post-neoliberal utopia where people thrive, when businesses and the state thrive.

But, is there no way out of ordered cities that ‘see’ humans and celebrate them, yet only selectively and only when they consume and consent to the digital order? The answer—or a possible one—lies in *critical humanism*.

There is much apprehension about using the word *humanism* since its origins are embedded in colonial trajectories and their brutality, that only selectively recognise certain humans and deny the humanity of many others. However, even as the term is wrought with its problems, we need to reappropriate it through decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches and position it against the ongoing streak of popular humanism.

*Critical humanism* offers an alternative to recognising urban humanity, not through division but through demands for justice and democratisation of cities. We see it emerging, for example, in [campaigns](#) against the predictive and AI-driven policing of racialised neighbourhoods. We also see it in important [intellectual conversations](#) that challenge the project of a unitary human and the notion of a single technologized future. Most importantly, we need a critical humanism that decouples the future of cities from the orthodoxy of technological solutionism, instead considering human autonomy and freedom together and through the lens of transformative justice. Sometimes with, sometimes beyond, and sometimes against the promises of technological change.

*Myria Georgiou's new book [Being Human in Digital Cities](#) will also be discussed in the event [Digital cities for humans or for profit?](#) taking place in person and online on Monday, March 18 2024. Register [here](#).*

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