HUMANITY CENTERED ROBOTICS INITIATIVE

BROWN

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"Human(oid) Robot Reconfigurations"

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12:00 – 1:30 pm
Barus and Holley Room 190

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This talk builds upon scholarship in the field of science and technology studies (STS) to question the project of designing humanlike machines. I start with some assumptions regarding the human that inform that project, as evident in technology demonstrations and media representations of humanoid robots. These demonstrations and representations suggest a conception of the agency of humans, and of humanlike robots, as an attribute inherent in the individual. One consequence, I argue, is that prevailing representations of humanoid robots effectively obscure relations between developers and their robots, as well as the material practices on which the capacities for action and perceived humanlike properties of robots depend. Those relations and practices, made evident, challenge traditional humanist assumptions regarding agency as a property of individual persons. And they suggest, in turn, some ways in which both human and robot agencies might be reconceptualised, and what that might mean for reconfiguring human-robot relations.

Lucy Suchman is Professor of Anthropology of Science and Technology in the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University, and Co-Director of Lancaster's Centre for Science Studies. Before taking up her present post she was a Principal Scientist at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center, where she spent twenty years as a researcher. Her research has involved ethnographic studies of practices of technology design and use, and critical engagement with projects in the design of humanlike machines, informed by feminist science and technology studies. Her current research extends her longstanding engagement with the field of human-computer interaction to the domain of contemporary war fighting, including the figurations that animate military training and simulation, and problems of 'situational awareness' in remotely-controlled weapon systems. She has written for both social and information sciences audiences, and is the author of Human-Machine Reconfigurations (2007) and Plans and Situated Actions: the problem of human-machine communication (1984), both published by Cambridge University Press. In 2002 she received the Benjamin Franklin Medal in Computer and Cognitive Sciences, and in 2010 the ACM SIGCHI Lifetime Research Award.