

When Technology Fuels and Is Fueled by Precarity

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Technoprecarious

Precarity Lab

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made clear how precarity has become a fact of life for many of us within capitalism, as millions of already-precarious workers in the United States have lost their jobs and others have had to adapt to a new landscape where their job requirements put them at increased risk of infection. The authors of *Technoprecarious* acknowledge this reality in the preface, noting that the book was written shortly before the onset of the pandemic and offering a eulogy to the lives lost to COVID-19. Nearly four years into the pandemic, the arguments the authors make feel even more salient, revealing how deep these inequalities run in the global capitalist economy. *Technoprecarious* really could not be more timely.

Technoprecarious was published in November 2020, written collaboratively by a collective of academics called the Precarity Lab, including Cassius Adair, Iván Chaar López, Anna Watkins Fisher, Meryem Kamil, Cindy Lin, Silvia Lindtner, Lisa Nakamura, Cengiz Salman, Kalindi Vora, Jackie Wang, and McKenzie Wark. (For the sake of brevity, I refer to them collectively as “the authors.”) More a manifesto than a typical monograph, *Technoprecarious* sets out to define and elaborate on a growing form of precarity that is tied to the rise of digital capitalism. “Technoprecarity,” they write, “is the premature exposure to death and debility that working with or being subjected to digital technologies accelerates” (1). Precarity, of course, predates digital technologies, but this emergent form of precarity is one that is uniquely fueled by digital capitalism. Drawing on diverse scholarly and activist traditions, including but not limited to Black

and Indigenous feminist thought, disability justice, environmental racism, and Marxist theory, the authors set out to describe the many ways in which digital technologies have contributed to the disenfranchisement of marginalized groups, including women, Black and Indigenous peoples, immigrants, queer and trans people, and disabled people, by exploiting their labor and mining their resources.

The chapters are presented as a series of interconnected essays and case studies; indeed, the authors advise, “This manifesto need not be read in a linear fashion from front to back, following the numbered sequence of the chapters” (15). This is not to suggest that the chapters are disorganized; I would actually suggest reading in order first, as chapters build on each other, with a clear line of argumentation developing through each. The flow of chapters also underscores how pervasive technoprecarity is in so many spheres of life and in so many historical and international contexts. The bulk of these chapters detail specific manifestations of technoprecarity. “The Undergig” explores the emergence of the post-2008 gig economy, in which workers, including Amazon warehouse workers, Uber drivers, and social media content moderators, “perform the often invisible labor needed to create the conditions of digital life for everyone else” (17). In other words, their labor must be made invisible in order for these digital systems to function seamlessly. The following chapter, “Techno Toxic,” discusses how digital technologies physically and mentally debilitate workers, offering examples such as the mining of rare metals that are used in building digital devices, or the emotional trauma content moderators experience when screening for violent, sexually graphic, or abusive content. Taken together, these two chapters reveal the harms caused by digital technologies to precarious workers’ bodies and psyches.

In “The Widening Gyre of Precarity,” a term borrowed from a William Butler Yeats poem, the authors use the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, as a case study on the intersection of environmental racism and digital technology. Here they describe the city as a laboratory, one that seeks to “[solve] the problem’ of labor”—which, they remind us, “was always also the problem of race” (33). The Flint water crisis, the authors argue, illustrates how digital technologies that promise to reduce labor ultimately fail to do so and end up harming communities: the city of Flint used a machine-learning algorithm to predict which water pipes would need to be replaced. However, the algorithm was only accurate 70 percent of the time; moreover, this accuracy decreased as more and more pipes were replaced. The city’s experimental use of a digital technology that was intended to save the lives of its residents—and to save the city millions of dollars in labor—ultimately caused more harm to the majority-Black residents of the city, increasing their exposure to contaminants.

“Automating Abandonment” takes into consideration the “computerization of the welfare state” (38). Focusing particularly on the Public Service Loan

Forgiveness (PSLF) program and Medicaid, the authors examine how the use of algorithms to make decisions has resulted in more people being excluded from these programs on technicalities, producing “welfare programs without welfare recipients” (43). The chapter “Fantasies of Ability” draws on disability justice frameworks to explore how disability politics can be a “radical reordering of what types of bodies signify as human” (51). The authors offer the concept of “social safety *networks*” (55), contrasting with the failing safety nets of the welfare state described in the previous chapter, to show how interdependence allows communities to provide care for each other through, for example, crowdsourcing funds on GoFundMe.

In “Dispossession by Surveillance,” the authors trace the rise of surveillance capitalism and the use of surveillance technologies to control racially and ethnically subjugated groups across time and place, such as enslaved peoples in the American South, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, or undocumented immigrants at the US-Mexico border. “The Affronted Class” names an emerging class of people, predominantly white men, who are now finding themselves implicated into precarity when they previously thought themselves exempt. This newfound precarity, the authors argue, has resulted in a conservative backlash and a culture of nostalgia that is “fundamentally about recuperating masculine privilege and protection from . . . precarity” (68).

In the final two chapters, the authors offer hope for new ways of being that push back against technoprecarity. In “Restoring the Depleted World,” they discuss two case studies: the Detroit Digital Stewards Program, a program that installed mesh networks in predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods in Detroit, and Maps.me, a crowdsourced navigation app that was created to provide accurate maps of Palestine when Google Maps failed to do so. Finally, in “Covens of Care,” the authors use the metaphor of a witches’ coven to imagine alternative ways of providing care for one another that do not rely on institutions that fail to care for those who are most vulnerable. “We coven,” they write, “because our survival depends on it” (86).

Technoprecarious is not a trans studies book, although two of its authors (Adair and Wark) are trans studies scholars. However, trans people are one of many communities implicated in the precarity produced by digital capitalism. The concept of technoprecarity affords one framework with which we might understand how trans people—particularly trans women of color—inhabit spaces made precarious by uncaring institutions and how they might oppose the technologies of precarity. The authors give examples of trans resistance: Natalie Wynn, who uses her YouTube channel ContraPoints to “[persuade] those attracted to the language of affronted masculinity to think otherwise” (73); a hypothetical coven of care consisting of trans women who take care of each other when institutions fail

them; even the ethos of T4T (trans-for-trans), which they describe as another coven of care. I think of *Technoprecarious* as in conversation with other recent publications in trans studies, such as Hil Malatino's (2020) book *Trans Care*, and work on trans life and the US surveillance state by Toby Beauchamp (2019) and Mia Fischer (2019). *Technoprecarious*'s strength is in its interdisciplinarity, showing how insidious technoprecarity is in contemporary life, how widespread its reach. To this end, the authors effectively demonstrate that technoprecarity is a phenomenon that doesn't affect any singular population, but one that impacts us all.

Errique Zhang (they/she) is a PhD candidate in media, technology, and society in the School of Communication at Northwestern University. Their research draws on feminist media studies, Asian American Feminism, queer and trans of color critique, and fashion studies to interrogate how media representations of transgender women reproduce normative beauty ideals and how trans women and femmes of color navigate these norms in their everyday lives. They are a cofounder of the Center for Applied Transgender Studies, an editorial assistant of the *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies*, and an affiliate of the Center for Critical Race + Digital Studies. They hold a master of arts in visual culture: costume studies from New York University.

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