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Engineering Activism

Corporate Diversity, Worker Organizing, and “Good” Tech in a Post-2020 Silicon Valley

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

by

Kelsey Cristina Kim

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Engineering Activism

Corporate Diversity, Worker Organizing, and “Good” Tech in a Post-2020 Silicon Valley

by

Kelsey Cristina Kim

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Kyeyoung Park, Chair

This dissertation explores the various methods tech workers employ to shape the industry according to their visions of justice and equality. While it is generally agreed upon in tech activist circles that their industry is sexist, racist, and exploitative, there is less consensus on *how* these inequalities are deployed, and even less consensus on how to solve them. But through the social justice movements of the 2020s, including Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and anti-fascism and anti-military movements, tech workers across the spectrum have called into question the romanticized notions of Silicon Valley as a diverse and benevolent high-tech industry that solved—not created—societal problems. Using ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews and participant-observation, I investigated a wide umbrella of progressive and left-leaning activism in the tech industry. I identified three main themes of their activism: 1) addressing workplace racial and gender diversity through empowerment

organizations and corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; 2) participating in grassroots labor organizing and social activism against industry practices they deem morally unjust; and 3) creating tech for “good” as alternatives to harmful Big Tech technologies. Through these themes, I explore activists’ different understandings of social change, and interrogate how tech workers across the spectrum—especially white-collar, skilled technologists—identify and use activism to reshape the industry.

The dissertation of Kelsey Cristina Kim is approved.

Mariko Tamanoi

Jessica Cattelino

Margaret Shih

Kyeyoung Park, Committee Chair

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2026

DEDICATION

To Mochi, the best research assistant I could have ever asked for.

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INTRODUCTION

It was the ideal weather for an outdoor coffee break when I met up with Grace Li, a UX designer whom I had initially met at an anti-Big Tech protest. Sitting under a shaded bench as we caught up, I listened intently as she told me about her recent involvement in socialist organizing circles. Born and raised in the heart of Silicon Valley, Grace was, from a young age, inundated with the virtues of the tech industry. However, the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and extra prompting from her partner made her question her role as a well-compensated tech worker within an industry perpetuating labor exploitation and harm. Now, Grace is actively involved in socialist organizing and attends tech-related protests outside of work. But when I asked if she's involved in any activism within and specific to her own workplace, she informed me that it's just not something she normally prioritizes. While acknowledging the struggles of organizing in a fully remote office, she adds that her company, an online employment-seeking platform, is “in terms of evil—the tech they're making is relatively low on the totem pole.”

Through my research, I got to know other tech activists like Grace, who participate in a wide range of activism addressing the various injustices and inequalities in the industry. Following a wave of social justice movements from when my project was first conceptualized in 2018 to the present day, my research explores the current social reckoning in the tech industry, led by the workers themselves. While I initially began this project as an exploration of the #MeToo movement's impact on sexism and misogyny in tech, I soon found myself caught up in how tech workers advocated and organized within the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, anti-technofascist movements surrounding military and surveillance projects, gig worker organizing, and many more examples, while simultaneously navigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These tech workers objected to structural racism and sexism: how racism

and sexism are embedded and ingrained in various policies and institutions, the lack of diversity in the workplace, and the industry's involvement in military and surveillance, amongst other issues. As they took part in institutional diversity initiatives, labor organizing, and building socially conscious tech, I wondered, why are tech workers—particularly well compensated, white-collar professionals—increasingly taking part in activism in their industry (see Tan et al. 2025)? What do they identify as inequalities or injustices in the industry, and how do they determine their methods to address these issues? What do they deem as social change? These questions guided my research during a pivotal time in the tech industry, as its contributions and simultaneous under-recognition of these systemic inequalities became the subject of public attention and scrutiny.

Given tech's ubiquity and the influence it has on our everyday lives, tech worker activism is all the more pertinent. While some argue that structural inequalities are prevalent in most (if not every) industry, the tech industry is extremely influential both politically and culturally, and their products have a far and wide reach. For instance, tech is often perceived as neutral and apolitical, yet influential tech companies contribute to major political decisions in the U.S. through lobbying campaigns or data misuse,¹ or through involvement in military projects. Additionally, how can tech be neutral when it's designed by people with their own beliefs, ideologies, and positionalities? Even when tech appears to be functioning autonomously, humans are often the ones behind the decision-making processes, from making censorship decisions on social media (Roberts 2019), to driving 'driverless' vehicles (Sims 2026). I argue that tech is

¹ One of the most famous examples was the 2016 Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which consulting firm Cambridge Analytica utilized Facebook data from public and private accounts without users' consent, to create targeted political ads to influence the results of the 2016 presidential election.

always imbued with qualities reflecting society and human biases, and therefore the structural inequalities of the industry cannot be limited to the confines of the office. From companies increasing diversity initiatives in 2020 to stripping them away in 2025, to worker organizing alongside growing fears of AI's impact on labor, Silicon Valley is innovative in more ways than one, as the industry reflects, produces, and influences ideologies and attitudes toward gender, race, colonialism, and labor.

As Grace elucidated, tech activism varies in its priorities, methods, and goals, and by examining their methods, I seek to understand how tech workers determine what and how meaningful change is created in the industry. Using activists' own definitions, I explore tech workers as a broad category of workers who uphold the industry through their labor—whether they're programmers or UX designers, support staff in a tech office, or gig workers and contract workers for tech companies. Although most of my dissertation focuses on the workers in white-collar technical and creative positions (a role commonly referred to as 'technologist'), I recognize that much of the industry's labor is invisible and exploited—from customer service representatives in India and the Philippines, to factory workers in Shenzhen, China.² Because this project examines tech activists' methods and standpoints, I also take a broad approach to what exactly tech activism entails. Through archival research, J.S. Tan, Natalia Luka, and Emily Mazo (2025) categorize tech activism into two types: labor activism that addresses worker exploitation in the industry, and social activism that addresses social justice issues not directly affecting employees' working conditions, such as military contracts. Slightly deviating from Tan et al.'s

² There are many other classes of exploited laborers within the tech supply chain, and while I recognize them as tech workers and acknowledge their own activist work (see Chan 2013 on Foxconn factory worker activism), the scope of my research focuses mostly on Silicon Valley and other U.S.-based workers that I had access to.

(2025) approach, I break tech activism down into two categories: activism and advocacy work that utilizes approved corporate channels like diversity initiatives, employee resource groups (ERGs), partnerships with non-profits and non-governmental organizations, and corporate social responsibility (CSR); and grassroots and labor organizing tactics, which include (but are not limited to) protests, walkouts, boycotts, and unionizing efforts. Of course, tech activism does not always fall neatly into one category, and many of my interlocutors expressed the need for and exercised both types. But I find this distinction useful nonetheless in understanding what methods and actions they deem best for their situation at hand as they navigate risks like job insecurity—which, as I later discuss, may also reveal their priorities in terms of the issues they deem most important to address. Their activism not only challenges preconceived notions about workers who are not typically thought of as activists within the public imaginary, but also lends greater insight into large scale social justice movements in adjacent white-collar occupations and industries. However, there is no universal agreement in how they identify inequalities to address, how they envision social change, or the activist methods best suited to the problems at hand. As such, this dissertation explores activism ethnographically to understand the subjectivities, motivations, and experiences (as they intersect with other structures and institutions like capitalism, workplace policies, and technology itself) which shape their activism.

This dissertation further explores how tech workers address systemic inequalities mapped onto ongoing U.S.-based social movements regarding gender, race, U.S. imperialism, and labor and ethical issues. My first two chapters focus on the increased advocacy efforts for

representation in professionalized and skilled technical roles in the industry,³ mainly through recent diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and other corporate and NGO efforts. I examine the narratives and perspectives they adopt when conducting their advocacy and activist work, and the limitations of corporate channels when addressing longstanding structural inequalities. My third chapter shifts gears to the grassroots organizing efforts in the industry, chronicling tech worker efforts to challenge labor issues like the exploitation of gig workers, and Big Tech's participation in surveillance and the military industrial complex. For these organizers, their identity and skillset as tech workers plays a role in their organizing views and strategies. And finally, my fourth chapter speculates on technology itself as a tool of activism when creating the future(s) that tech workers are fighting for. I found that tech activists sought to create "good" technology, but the good in question was not a fixed idea nor a universal concept. Rather, "good" and "bad" tech was constructed through existing global structures, experiences under capitalism and imperialism, narratives of empowerment, and *who* was determining its uses.

My dissertation covers a pivotal moment in the industry and contributes to burgeoning questions on social justice and equality in tech, as well as workplace activism during a rapidly changing landscape. Through increased labor organizing across industries, coinciding with institutionalized diversity precariously being built up and now scapegoated by the Trump administration, it chronologically follows waves of activism and politics in tech throughout the past five years post-2020, shaped and informed by tech workers themselves. I examine how

³ All labor requires skill, and the dichotomy between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' venerates one type of labor at the expense of the other. But I use these terms cautiously as a reflection of how the tech industry commonly categorizes labor, with 'skilled' work associated with white-collar, technical and creative full-time work, while 'unskilled' refers to gig labor, warehouse labor, and support roles in the industry (janitorial, cafeteria, shuttle drivers, etc.).

activists use both “inside” and “outside” pressure to influence change, and how they create the technology they wish to see in the world; in doing so, these tech workers identify inequalities and shape their own understandings of social change and social justice. As they turn to neoliberal initiatives, build collective worker power, and create their own tech ecosystems, I ask, what does it mean to do activism, and what does successful change look like in the industry?

Background Information: The “Humble” Makings of Silicon Valley

Silicon Valley’s Origins: From Fruit Valleys to High-Tech Hub

Silicon Valley, the high-tech hub of the U.S., is located within a roughly 45 square-mile area of unceded Ohlone land in the San Francisco Bay Area, California. It’s home to around fifteen thousand tech companies of all sizes (Climb the Ladder 2025), headquarters to three of the five largest and highest-grossing tech companies (Google, Apple, and Facebook/Meta),⁴ and employs hundreds of thousands of people locally. But before its transformation into its current iteration, it was once a thriving agricultural region. From the 1800s to the mid-twentieth century, the region was nicknamed the Valley of Heart’s Delight, known for its prunes, fruit valleys, and canneries (Todd 2022). The area only shifted to technological development after IBM and other semiconductor manufacturers established base in the region in the 1940s; these companies’ presence then shaped economic growth through lucrative contracts with the U.S. military, eventually turning Silicon Valley into what it is today. In fact, their dependence on military contracts—especially during the Cold War and Vietnam War eras—cannot be understated despite the development of Silicon Valley’s public image as a romanticized hub for tech

⁴ Often referred to as GAFAM or FAAMG, the Big Five tech companies are Google, Apple, Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft.

innovation and success. Keith A. Spencer (2019) argues that “the notion of Silicon Valley as the bootstrapped vision of a consortium of brilliant self-made men...is pure fantasy; the high-tech industry in Santa Clara Valley initially boomed because of defense contracts” (37). Christophe Lécuyer (2001) asserts that military projects “acted as a catalyst for technological change” as engineers developed innovations for weapons design (669). Military collaborations eventually gave way to common civilian technologies—the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) led to the first iteration of the internet, and military funding was responsible for the Global Positioning System (GPS) (Abbate 1999)—while Lockheed Martin and other companies brought in billions of dollars in federal defense money (Spencer 2019, 37). Likewise, Stanford University sought to capitalize on these contracts by bolstering its engineering department, encouraging students to work on military projects, and nurturing faculty relationships between tech companies and the military (Walker 2018). Frederick Terman, the engineering dean at Stanford from 1944 to 1958, was instrumental in keeping emerging tech talent in the Bay Area, even convincing alumni Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard to establish their company Hewlett-Packard in the newly built Stanford Industrial Park (Trampe 2025). Considering that the U.S. had several budding tech hubs in the mid-century like Boston’s Route 128, this specific iteration of industry, military contracts, and higher education fortified Silicon Valley into becoming the epicenter of technology.⁵

⁵ Historian Christophe Lécuyer (2001) diverges from this popular assertion and instead argues that Stanford’s contributions to the early stages of the industry were minimal compared to the work of microwave and silicon technologists and radio amateurs, who attracted other tech talent to the area. He also notes that Silicon Valley’s flat hierarchical structure and specialization in component engineering were major contributions to its growth in comparison to eastern U.S. tech hubs.

In the next few decades, Silicon Valley’s relationship with the military became less of a focus as the industry broke into new markets. At this point, “venture capital firms had replaced the military as the main source of financing” (Gershon 2014), although the interconnections of the military, higher education, and tech remain to this day (Cohen and Fields 1999). Intel’s innovation of the silicon chip microprocessor in 1971 had transformed computing power and firmly established the region’s notoriety as a high-tech enclave, which allowed it to attract even more semiconductor and microelectronics startups to the area. It was also around this time that the term ‘Silicon Valley’ first appeared in print in *Electronic News*, and the regional moniker stuck. The 1990s further strengthened Silicon Valley’s reputation as a fast-paced, meritocratic industry in the public imaginary through the proliferation of the World Wide Web. With the belief that anyone with the right ideas could flourish here, people invested in the internet companies popping up at the time—but this success would be cut short when the dot-com bubble burst in 2000. In part due to the speculative hype around internet companies, with many going public (or IPO’ing) and burning through funds before actually turning a profit, companies went bankrupt one after another, and tech workers were laid off en masse. However, the industry later recovered with the growth of tech conglomerates and innovations in consumer technologies like cell phones, mp3 players, and personal computers. In the 2010s to 2020s, social media platforms (and the advertising and user data collection that powers it), and later cryptocurrencies and artificial intelligence (AI), helped the industry regain even more momentum.⁶ As of 2026,

⁶ The development of internet technologies is sometimes broken down into three eras: Web1, Web2, and Web3. Broadly speaking, Web1 covers the era when basic websites first flourished, Web2 covers the shift to social media and mobile applications and platforms, and the current Web3 era covers decentralization through cryptocurrency and AI. I discuss Web3’s technologies and implications in more detail in Chapter 4.

Silicon Valley is a major economic powerhouse, with a GDP of \$336,515 per worker (Joint Venture Silicon Valley 2026).

Silicon Valley also has significant cultural influence. With lucrative tech jobs attracting skilled workers from around the globe, it is often romanticized in the public sphere as a high-tech, meritocratic, and multicultural utopia.⁷ Livia Gershon (2014) describes the Silicon Valley imaginary as “associated with self-made fortunes and pure free-market ambitions, a sort of mysterious, irreplicable culture in which smart, driven people attract like-minded people to one place.” Popular stories of college dropouts who created garage startups and ultimately became industry leaders (e.g., Steve Jobs of Apple, Bill Gates of Microsoft, or Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook/Meta) are abundant, albeit somewhat exaggerated, with anthropologist Jan English-Lueck (2011) elucidating that “the pervasive ‘garage myth’ suggests that a good invention or creative application, pursued with entrepreneurial zeal, can change the fate of any person” (90). English-Lueck (2017) further frames tech workers as colorblind through their shared love of technological advancement, which “minimizes the perception of [cultural] difference” (157). The Bay Area’s left-leaning politics and multicultural demographic also contribute to its public persona as one of the most progressive regions in the country, making Silicon Valley not only technologically advanced—but socially as well.

A New Wave of Tech Worker Activism: 2018 to Present

⁷ According to 2020 U.S. Census data, the Bay Area is 36 percent white, 28 percent Asian, 24 percent Hispanic or Latino, 6 percent Black, less than one percent American Indian, and 6 percent other or multiracial (Bay Area Census 2026).

Sentiments painting Silicon Valley as a benevolent industry and steward of social change ignore two things: the realities for marginalized workers along gender, race, and class,⁸ and the social impact of its products. Walker (2018) notes that “the political views espoused by most of the top-flight owners and executives are remarkably liberal on social issues such as race and gender. Nevertheless, on closer inspection the world the tech masters have made in their own backyard is decidedly illiberal: dominated by white men, lower pay, and glass ceilings for women and people of color” (143). In a survey conducted by *The New York Times*, half of the nearly 70 respondents felt that “tech was not inclusive to people from diverse backgrounds” and instead caters to white male hegemony, with one elucidating, “A single mom that didn’t go to college is seen as uneducated whereas a white college dropout is seen as a ‘genius’” (Bhuiyan et al. 2020). These narratives of meritocracy and self-made CEOs also ignore labor and social inequalities which have afforded the tech elite their extraordinary wealth and power in the first place. A UCLA Labor Center survey (Waheed et al. 2018), for instance, has found that nearly half of rideshare drivers use driving as their full-time work or their main source of income. Yet rideshare companies categorize drivers as independent contractors without healthcare or benefits under the guise of flexibility for workers, rather than exploitation. These instances and more point to how the tech industry’s practices and policies contribute to structural inequalities and exploitative working conditions.

⁸ In addition to its effect on workers, Silicon Valley has also impacted Bay Area residents at-large. The rapid growth of the tech industry has propelled gentrification and displacement of working-class neighborhoods, and has increased cost of living. The Bay Area is now home to some of the most expensive real estate in the country, and even well compensated tech workers have a difficult time finding housing. Private companies are also known to co-opt public spaces, for example by using public bus stops for their own employee shuttle stops.

But 2018 marked a new era of activism when The Google Walkout for Real Change exposed systemic sexism and misogyny on a global scale, shattering the public's perception of the tech industry as a progressive utopia. On November 1, 2018, more than 20,000 Google employees and contractors around the world staged a walkout to bring attention to their company's systemic sexism, racism, and abuse of power. Following the wave of the #MeToo movement, in which Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's numerous sexual assault allegations were brought to public attention by two exposés in 2017 (Kantor and Twohey 2017; Farrow 2017), workers everywhere began interrogating the structural sexism in their own workplaces and showing solidarity with survivors of sexual harassment and abuse on social media through the hashtag #metoo.⁹ As a result, powerful men were outed and resigned as news of their harassment came to light. At Google, the Global Walkout for Real Change addressed the company's "unaccountable decision-making" and lack of transparency when giving former senior vice president Andy Rubin a 90 million dollar resignation payout in 2014 after several sexual harassment claims were brought forward; it also addressed the company's involvement with a military initiative called Project Maven, and search engine prototype Dragonfly—which workers argued violated user privacy (Google Walkout for Real Change 2018; Gallagher and Fang 2018). The Walkout became the first large-scale organized protest of its kind at a major tech company, with participation from tech workers across campuses and roles worldwide. While Google eventually fired three of the lead organizers—allegedly in retaliation for their activism—tech workers would not be easily intimidated, and the industry would experience yet another

⁹ While the #MeToo movement started in 2017, the phrase “#metoo” is typically credited to activist Tarana Burke, who tweeted it as a show of solidarity for sexual assault survivors back in 2006.

social reckoning in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter movement.¹⁰ When protests swept the country after George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was killed by police over suspicion of the use of a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a convenience store, tech workers and members of the public were quick to point out the connections between Big Tech and surveillance software that contribute to the over-policing of Black and brown communities. As a direct result of these protests, Microsoft and Amazon announced they would put a moratorium on selling facial recognition technology to police departments, while IBM decided to forgo the development of facial recognition tech altogether (Greene 2020). The BLM movement spurred a rise in DEI initiatives across industries, and a number of tech companies followed through by releasing diversity statements and pledging funding for DEI programs.

Simultaneously, tech workers were also leading unionization efforts and pushing for ethical technology and corporate practices. Google workers once again broke with precedent when they became the first technologists at a major company to form a minority union in 2021, incorporating both full-time and temporary and contract workers into its ranks. Meanwhile, Amazon warehouse workers across the country pushed for unionization and better working conditions, while rideshare drivers and other gig workers fought for employment status and benefits after being reclassified as contract workers in 2020. Additionally, other technologist-led movements were calling into question how their labor was being utilized to exacerbate social harm. Technologists at Amazon launched the #WeWontBuildIt campaign in 2019 to petition against their company's collaboration with surveillance tech company Palantir, which had a 51

¹⁰ While Black Lives Matter can be traced back to 2013 after George Zimmerman's acquittal in the murder of Trayvon Martin, BLM protests gained renewed momentum after Floyd's murder.

million dollar contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to collect data on immigrant employment information. Amazon Employees for Climate Justice's actions had also just pressured the company into writing and committing to an environmental policy while holding their own Global Climate Strike. At Google, workers with the No Tech for Apartheid campaign exposed their company's complicity in apartheid through its cloud infrastructure contract with the Israeli government in 2021, and they are still pressuring Google to cut ties with Israeli and U.S. military projects to this day. Given how embroiled Big Tech companies are in providing the technological infrastructure for surveillance, war, and environmental destruction, it is the workers themselves who are leading the movement for ethical alternative tech ecosystems. As Big Tech ramps up to cut costs and create a precarious working class by replacing human labor and decision making with AI, tech workers are now confronting questions of how tech can and should be used for societal good amidst Big Tech's push to the right.

In a period of momentous upheaval in the tech industry and society at-large, workers are grappling with what it means to work conscientiously in tech and change the industry for the better—and it is through this diverse collection of activism from which my dissertation grew. In the next section, I explore the literature to better understand three of the themes I observed during my research.

Literature Review: Institutional Diversity, Labor Organizing, and Ethical Technology

This literature review addresses diversity, labor and working conditions, and tech-as-product issues through the framework of tech activism. I divided this literature review into three subsections. The first subsection addresses institutional diversity in the tech industry, STEM fields, and other similarly structured institutions. As tech workers become more involved in DEI—and especially in an industry that prides itself on meritocracy—I examine how the

implementation of diversity initiatives impact gender and racial inequalities, as it intersects with class. Second, with tech worker organizing gaining momentum, I look to the scholarly literature on labor movements and collective workplace organizing in tech and similar industries to situate their movement. Finally, I consider the tech itself. As scholars have criticized the premise of neutral technology (Noble 2018, Daniels 2015), I explore the gender and racial implications of technology, how tech both reflects and reinforces structural inequalities, and finally, how technology is utilized in activism.

Gender, Race, and Institutionalized Diversity

Silicon Valley is often portrayed as a romanticized color- and gender-blind meritocracy by its executives and the general public, but scholars and activists have argued that the industry perpetuates both racism and sexism. Tech workers from marginalized backgrounds frequently experience discrimination impacting their hiring, promotion, and retention. Roughly 50 percent of women in the tech industry report experiencing gender discrimination at work (Daley 2020), and women and people of color are promoted at vastly slower rates than white men in the industry (Yan 1999; Shih 2006; D’Ignazio and Klein 2020). And yet, as Safiya Noble (2018) notes, “Silicon Valley executives...revel in their embrace of colorblindness as if it is an asset and not a proven liability” (168).

Discrimination against people of color and women is not a contemporary phenomenon, but rooted in historical exclusion. Race and gender have long been determining factors for who is perceived as embodying technical expertise. Christina Dunbar-Hester (2019) suggests that electronics tinkering became a hobby associated with white masculinity when computers shifted from being a symbol of dehumanizing bureaucracy to one of self-expression (35). Tinkering gave an outlet to suburban white men and boys as “a masculine space within the domesticity of

the home and training for white-collar technical professions” (Dunbar-Hester 2019, 36).

Meanwhile, Black and Latino men were not afforded the same privileges, and their tinkering was associated with laziness (looking for shortcuts) or criminality (lowrider cars). Programmer and activist Joan Greenbaum also acknowledged how tech work in the 1960s was stratified by race and class, with programmers being mainly white, middle-class men, and mainframe operators as mainly Black, working-class men (Gaillot 2018). Of course, only one of these was considered ‘real’ tech work.

Women’s technical work, on the other hand, was viewed as clerical, rote, and simultaneously skilled and unskilled. *Index Thomisticus*, an ambitious early computing project in the mid-century, was led by Italian Jesuit priest Father Roberto Busa in partnership with IBM—but the bulk of the labor was conducted by women. In an attempt to catalogue and index roughly 11 million words related to the works of author Thomas Aquinas (Terras and Nyhan 2016), Busa purposely sought out women to manually sort and punch cards encoding data as he believed they were more careful and reliable than men.¹¹ But despite their contributions, training, and expertise—they attended a training college, where they were tested for data-punching accuracy while blindfolded—women were largely overlooked for promotions to managerial positions,¹² and their contributions went underrecognized. Similarly, historian Mar Hicks (2017) highlights that women were integral to the foundations of the tech industry in Britain, but were

¹¹ Gendered assumptions of women’s suitability for data entry persist to this day. In the Caribbean, women are thought to be well suited for data entry positions because it requires meticulous work in a factory-like setting, in which they are also required to be careful and nimble (Freeman 2000).

¹² Terras and Nyhan (2016) note that two male computer scientists for *Index Thomisticus* recalled seeing women in intellectual and senior positions at the later stages of this project; the authors also recognize the complex and changing dynamics between gender, knowledge, and hierarchy throughout the life of *Index Thomisticus* and how class and religious factors might have played a role in promotions as well.

systematically pushed out of skilled, technical roles in attempts to modernize: following World War II, programming was considered unskilled feminized labor, but as the British Civil Services recognized the potential of computing and sought to elevate its perceived status to white-collar work, the very women who built the industry were cast aside in favor of men. Gendered and racialized ideologies toward women of color, particularly Latinas and Black women, had also been a major obstacle in crossing the threshold from lower-waged to well-compensated technical work. Lisa Nakamura (2014) states that Chinese, indigenous, and Latina women were perceived as having “inherently and biologically flexible labor” perfectly suited for “low skilled” electronics assembly work (929), while Black and Latina women working in telecommunications and information technology were relegated to invisibilized support roles with few opportunities for upward mobility, despite working at the same company for decades (Villa-Nicholas 2017; Green 2001). And to this day, women in the Global South are outsourced for data entry, factory work, and other forms of exploitable and invisible labor (Freeman 2000; Ong 1987; Roberts 2019).

As a continuation of their historical exclusion, the tech industry today is predominantly male and white, with a “smattering” of East and South Asian (Noble 2018). Furthermore, tech industry culture and workplace policies skew towards white male hegemony. Marginalized workers are reinforced as outliers through microaggressions, feelings of ostracism, and missed opportunities for advancement. In tech and similarly structured corporate fields (e.g., finance), women and people of color miss out on career opportunities and promotions due to their exclusion from informal networking centering white, male bonding activities (Ho 2009; Fisher 2012; Carrigan 2024). Sociologist Johanna Shih (2006) adds that Asian immigrant and women tech workers utilize ethnic- and gender-based networks to find less discriminatory workplaces

and circumvent workplace bias, or job hop every few years when they encounter glass ceilings. But in Catherine Riegler-Crumb and Barbara King's (2010) study on gender and racial disparities in STEM fields, the authors minimize the historical and social advantages of dominant groups altogether by looking solely at the representation of minorities present in an institution. And in the case of Ryan Light, Vincent Roscigno, and Alexandra Kaley's (2011) research, they found that supervisors invested in meritocratic policies often enact penalties differentially on employees of color, all while claiming a colorblind system (56). According to Joan Acker's (2006) 'inequality regimes,' institutional hierarchies along race, gender, and class are not only reinforced through policies and practices, but internalized mechanisms that maintain status quo: beliefs about who is more suited to childcare, or perceived biological differences between genders and racial groups, for instance, naturalize inequalities, while "[p]eople in dominant groups generally see inequality as existing somewhere else, not where they are" (452). In other cases, some inequalities may be recognized but at the expense of others—for example, advocating for gender equality at the expense of race and class. When former Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg wrote the best-selling book *Lean In* to address the tech industry's gender gap amongst skilled technical positions and leadership roles, she ignored the realities of working-class and women of color while highlighting the struggles of an unmarked, white, middle- or upper-class woman as the norm (see Nakano-Glenn 1992). In advising women to assert themselves in the office and home for greater equity, she frames the root cause of sexism as an individual and not a structural concern, while failing to recognize that the public and private spheres are not always two distinct categories for working-class and women of color. Some institutional diversity policies and measures rectify these issues by centering marginalized voices and experiences. Institutions with 'counter spaces' for underrepresented peoples have helped

challenge white male hegemony and ameliorate the affects microaggressions may have on their mental health and sense of belonging (Solorzano et al. 2000), highlighting the importance of institutionalized spaces for people of color. Practices and policies that decenter white, male epistemologies and knowledge production (Prescod-Weinstein 2020; Dotson 2014; Hammonds 1993), like adopting management strategies that recognize intersectional differences rather than expect conformity (Shih and Young 2015), have also helped transform and disentangle white and masculine ideologies from workplace culture (Lucht 2016).

However, some diversity policies in organizational settings may inadvertently reinforce dominant ideologies rather than dismantle them. Sara Ahmed (2012) asserts that diversity work revolves around producing a tolerant image for the institution rather than challenging hegemonic whiteness. Using terms such as inclusion and equity also lend the appearance of acceptance and tolerance without addressing inherent inequalities, while minorities within these institutions are expected to take on the extra labor of ‘doing diversity’ by heading committees or drafting new policies. Sharon Collins (1997) and Charles Mueller et. al (1989) have also documented that Black employees in corporate settings are often ushered and promoted into diversity-related positions against their wishes or intended career tracks. Other diversity measures perpetuate postracial and meritocratic beliefs and ideologies: at Indian institutes of technology with diversity quotas for underrepresented castes and tribes, it is a commonly held belief that successful applicants from privileged groups have earned their place through merit alone, while those from lower castes were accepted through quotas, ignoring how social and cultural capital have created advantages for privileged groups (Subramanian 2015). And Gloria Diaz et al. (2019) note that even within pro-diversity spaces, people of color are expected to conform to white, middle-class values of professionalism by adjusting their speech and mannerisms.

This pattern suggests that institutional diversity does not always directly benefit marginalized workers, but more often supports those in power. Michelle Munyikwa (2019) and Luzilda Carillo-Arciniega (2021) elucidate that institutional diversity is typically directed toward white men rather than those who are discriminated against—for example, through diversity training structured around helping them recognize their biases rather than focusing on the needs of women of color, who are often the targets of their discrimination. Cedric Herring (2009) makes the case for diversity in corporations by appealing to its financial incentives, arguing that diversity is ultimately more profitable for companies in generating more diverse ideas and capturing a wider customer base. Joan Acker (2006) adds that institutional diversity is a more palatable replacement for affirmative action for corporations as it tends to maintain status quo. She notes that diversity measures “lack the timetables, goals, and other proactive measures of affirmative action and may be more acceptable to management for that reason. But that may also be a reason that diversity training will not basically alter assumptions and actions that are rooted in the legitimization of systems of organizational power and reward that favor whites, particularly white men” (457). As these scholars demonstrate, diversity policies cannot create liberatory spaces within organizational settings if they do not take into account how power structures and inequalities are reproduced.

Activists have pointed out that there is a paradox between the perceived meritocracy of the industry and their experiences with discrimination; it is this paradox that structures their activism in representation and diversity work. The post-2020 diversity boom, followed almost immediately by President Trump ending federal funding for DEI in 2025 (see Chapter 2), marks a brief era of both optimism and exasperation for these diversity activists. While some were hopeful that DEI would create an inclusive environment in the workplace, companies also faced

backlash from other tech workers, politicians, and consumers over diversity ‘fatigue’ and what they perceived as initiatives antithetical to the industry’s meritocratic origins. I explore both the potential and the limitations of diversity initiatives, and situate DEI as a method for activists to foster diversity while working within the corporate constraints.

Tech Labor and Activism

While the influx of tech worker activism in the past few years may seem like a relatively new occurrence, tech workers in actuality have a history of taking part in organizing efforts aligned with global social justice movements. Two major technologist organizing campaigns, Computer People for Peace (CPP) and Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement (PRWM), paved the way for contemporary progressive tech industry organizing, addressing issues of imperialism, settler-colonialism, racism, sexism, and other structural inequalities. From 1968 to 1974, CPP organized against the tech industry’s involvement with military contracts during the Vietnam War, eventually expanding their causes to address, sexism, racism, class consciousness, and early iterations of data privacy rights. Their tactics included disrupting tech conferences to raise awareness of the industry’s contributions to the military industrial complex, raising mutual aid, and even urging Congress to pass legislation to protect people’s data against surveillance (Gaillot 2018). Their efforts overlapped with PRWM, which formed in 1970 to end their company’s involvement in apartheid South Africa’s infrastructure, as it had been providing the government cameras needed to make photo passbooks that restricted the freedom of movement of Black South Africans. PRWM called for an international boycott, testified at the UN on apartheid, and mobilized their colleagues and the public through educational leaflets on Polaroid’s complicity, eventually getting the company to divest in 1977 (Jones 2025).

Given their history of organizing, some scholars have questioned why today's tech workers—specifically technologists—have in general fallen short of industry-wide efforts to unionize or coalesce in other forms of labor activism. Laurie P. Milton (2003) theorizes that technologists perceive unionizing as antithetical to their idea of tech work as innovative and white-collar. In her research on attempts to organize temporary software workers in Seattle, she discovered that technologists “saw unions as anti-creative and opposed to the meritocracy system that anchors excellence in technology-based industries,” speculating that they will only unionize once it aligns with their occupational identity (41). On the other hand, J.S. Tan, et al. (2025) found that technologists have been increasingly involved in workplace activism within the past decade. By collecting and analyzing public records on tech worker activism between 2014 and 2022, they found that activism related to working conditions (e.g., unionizing, workers' rights, etc.), as well as activism related to social issues (e.g., anti-militarism, environmentalism) have increased, with participation in social activism outweighing labor activism. Tan et al. (2025) predict that tech workers' involvement in social activism will eventually lead to developing greater class consciousness and increased participation in labor activism.

Both Milton (2003) and Tan et al. (2025) highlight the importance of tech worker identity when it comes to activism. Technologists, according to Milton (2003), assume that unions are more likely to address blue-collar labor issues and are therefore irrelevant for high-tech office workers. Meanwhile, Tan et al. (2025) conclude that technologists' shared professional identity and values influence their decision to participate in activism. While recognizing that technologists often view themselves as well compensated and therefore less unlikely to unionize, they also share “a distinctive professional identity centered on using technology for societal benefit,” and participate in social activism “when employers undermine these idealistic values by

engaging with perceived bad actors” (3). And technologists’ relationship to their work goes beyond their willingness to organize—it also contributes to their identity. Carolyn Chen (2022) remarks that technologists “are more likely to claim that work gives them a sense of identity rather than something they do for a living,” even comparing their devotion to work with religion (22). Dorinne Kondo (1990) states that from the managerial perspective, menial tasks cultivate selfhood and work ethic, and in the workplace, gender is co-constructed through employee dynamics: “women all knew how to play our appropriate identities and thus we participated in the construction of our gender [and] facilitated our own subordination” (297). Carolyn Upadhyia (2016) adds that as the individual—rather than the corporation or the state— becomes increasingly responsible for skills acquisition, IT workers in India “seem to have internalized the concept of the worker-self as a ‘bundle of skills’, in which one’s very person is defined as a conglomerate of commodifiable pieces of knowledge and ability” (111). For technologists, identity and selfhood are co-constructed alongside their role in the industry.

But often overlooked in discussions on tech worker labor are the workers outside the technologist class. As Walker (2018) states, through outsourcing labor, it is believed that “Bay Area tech companies are freed up to focus on the front-end functions of research, design, and commercialization”—ignoring who upholds the bulk of the industry (33). Workers in the Global South, mainly women, are outsourced for data entry, factory work, content moderation, customer support, and other forms of exploitable labor (Freeman 2000; Ong 1987; Roberts 2019). Meanwhile, tech companies that rely on gig labor attract workers with prospects of entrepreneurship and flexibility, or as Brian Dolber (2023) refers to it as, the “‘Californian ideology,’ arguing that digital technology affords their workforce flexibility so they might ‘be their own boss’” (789). Dolber (2019) refers to these workers as part of the new ‘cybertariat’

class: proletariat in the digital age that lack benefits and labor protections, but whose labor is justified by the flexibility and independence of gig work (framed as entrepreneurship), thereby outsourcing both risk and cost to the worker (5). In addition, service jobs like janitorial work get subcontracted out to reduce labor costs; as Christian Zloniski (2003) notes during his research on a Silicon Valley tech conglomerate, this practice “maintained access to an abundant, cheap, and reliable source of Mexican immigrant labor without the economic costs and legal risks of directly employing them” (42). Subcontracting immigrant labor also allows management to exert more control over workers in an attempt to avoid unionizing; these findings are similar to Johanna Shih’s (2002) study on management preferring to hire immigrant Latinos as service workers due to perceived racialized qualities like strong work ethic and pliability.

Stratified isolation of the different classes of tech workers further discourages organizing. Milton (2003) hypothesizes that stratified workplaces coupled with the autonomous, independent style of tech work prevents coalition-building. Sarah T. Roberts (2019) observes how the office for contracted content moderators for a social media company were in a separate building on the far outskirts of campus, lessening their likelihood of interacting with full-time employees. Dolber (2019) meanwhile notes that “the atomization of gig workers, and the lack of shared spaces as one would find in a factory or an office, present additional challenges for gig worker organizing” (5). At the same time, high tech offices encourage longer working hours by blurring the boundaries between work and home (Walker 2018, 42-3). By providing perks and amenities like laundry, daycare, and free meals, tech companies create incentives to work longer hours by centralizing all domestic tasks to the office—a model Chen (2022) argues is a form of corporate maternalism, where companies “monetize the nonproductive parts of life” by “provid[ing] for the personal care of their employees to make them happy, healthy, and (therefore) productive” (81).

In cases where collective organizing would prove difficult, scholars recognize the ways tech workers of all positions enact individual forms of resistance to push back on power structures. The “first ethical hacker,” French bureaucrat René Carmille, utilized IBM’s electronic tabulating machine to purposefully mislabel demographic data in order to stall Nazis from obtaining information on Jewish residents (Wills 2017). At a multinational computer chip factory in Malaysia, women factory workers have pushed back on their exploitation by capitalizing on gendered beliefs, culture, and religion. Because women are believed to be emotionally unstable and susceptible to male power, they’ve taken to hysterically falling onto the factory floor, crying, and deliberately being careless; they’ve also fallen into spiritual possession, and have excused themselves for impromptu prayer breaks in order to slow down the pace of production, in protest of management’s intolerable demands (Ong 1987). And at tech expos meant to show off and market the latest technologies, “booth babes”—female promotional models who market, sell, and educate potential customers on the products—have asserted their technical expertise to male clients who condescendingly test their knowledge. In a role in which they’re both hyper-visible yet undervalued, booth babes cultivate a “managed eroticism” by balancing sexuality and intelligence (Cornfeld 2018). While these examples are not formal or collective organizing, informal individual acts of resistance nonetheless serve an important role in inspiring action and possibly igniting collective action down the line.

The post-2020 period in the tech industry has been characterized by an influx of worker-led movements, from unionizing efforts to social justice movements. With California passing Proposition 22 in 2020—which reclassifies rideshare drivers as independent contractors rather than employees—and news of tech companies contributing cloud infrastructure and AI to ICE, the Department of Defense, and the Israeli government, some technologists are now

acknowledging that their work is not only political, but contributing to the exploitation of other tech workers and people across the globe. As scholars have shown, tech workers have successfully organized before, and by expanding the umbrella of who counts as a tech worker, they're building greater worker power to take direct action against their companies.

Science and Technology Studies (STS): Ethical Technology and Tech for Liberation

Technology is not and has never been a neutral entity. As a social artifact, it embodies certain cultural values; it reflects, co-produces, and makes inequalities of its own; but it can also be used to rectify harm. For example, scholars point to the gendered and racialized implications of how technology is designed and for whom. Colonial, racist, and sexist terminologies—master and slave disk (Daniels 2015), or male output and female input connector plugs—represent the hegemonic worldview of those who designed it. Lana Rakow (1988) states that “although women are active creators and users of technologies, men have been in a position to create technologies that dominate and that serve certain masculine values and purposes” (66), and as a result, “[t]echnology is a site where social practices are embedded and express and extend the construction of two asymmetrical genders” (57). For example, robots and virtual assistants carry out traditional gender roles when it comes to mental tasks, secretarial work, and other feminized labor. Anna Dobrosovestnova, Glenda Hannibal, and Tim Reinboth (2022) find that “affective labor is closely related to discussions of how gender is represented in the design of social service robots” (489), and Sean Zdenek (2007) further argues that virtual customer service assistants “enact familiar scripts about women’s work...invoke service to others as the primary context for women’s work (at the expense of other ways of inscribing social practice and human labor), and objectify women [as] fetishized instruments to be used in the service of accomplishing users’ goals” (398). Thao Phan (2019) and Miriam E. Sweeney and Melissa Villa-Nicholas (2022) also

highlight how race and gender are aesthetically coded in digital and virtual assistants (for example, through speech) as white women domestic servants and hardworking Latinas, respectively.

But technology has the appearance of being unbiased, and consequently is used to make ‘neutral’ decisions that generally reinforce current systems of power. Take algorithms, for example. Safiya Noble (2018) argues that Google pushes sexualized search results of women, especially Black women, which “perpetuate particular narratives that reflect historically uneven distributions of power in society” (71) by “privileg[ing] the male, pornographic gaze and marginaliz[ing] women as objects” (58). Virginia Eubanks (2018) studies the role algorithms play in determining risk assessments for parolees or allocating benefits; similarly, Ruha Benjamin (2019) outlines how predictive policing disproportionately targets and surveils Black and brown communities. In both of these cases, algorithms were trained on previously collected data sets—for example, predictive policing software uses historical crime data that was collected when police were already disproportionately surveilling communities of color. Therefore, technology is not fixing discrimination, but reinforcing it while being “perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era” (Benjamin 2019, 6). Cathy O’Neil (2016) and Meredith Broussard (2018) additionally note the dangers of over relying on technology to make decisions, with O’Neil (2016) cautioning against creating a “pernicious feedback loop” in already impoverished or under-resourced communities, while Broussard (2018) warns against technochauvinism, or “the belief that tech is always the solution,” which leads to people deferring to tech to provide the correct answers (7). It is for this reason that Nick Seaver (2018) states, “social architectures, software architectures, and physical

architectures echo each other...algorithms are not autonomous technical objects, but complex sociotechnical systems” (376-8).

Yet activists have also reimagined how technology can be transformed to empower marginalized communities or dismantle structures of power, particularly when it comes to data. Tech conglomerates often treat data as an unclaimed resource for them to claim, extract, and exploit for their own financial gains: through data colonialism, they collect data under the guise of ‘charitable’ outreach in vulnerable communities in the U.S. and the Global South (Couldry and Mejia 2018). Instead, Sasha Constanza-Chock (2020) argues for technology that’s designed by marginalized communities to address their needs through collective liberation and ecological survival. Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein (2020) similarly argue for an intersectional feminist approach to data, which acknowledges the invisible labor in technological production, recognizes the power structures and unequal social relations in creating technology, and embraces multiple epistemologies or sources of knowledge. Christina Dunbar-Hester (2019) additionally observes how women and people of color hackers—open source coders who “hack” or create code for others to adapt—seek to create liberatory, open source coding projects for socially progressive causes.

Activists have further utilized technology as a tool of activism when it comes to mobilizing organizers and spreading awareness of social causes. Through social media, they’ve been able to enhance organizing and publicizing efforts, although Charlton McIlwain (2019) forewarns this feature as a double-edged sword for Black activists, as the same tech used to organize and create engagement can be also used for their surveillance and oppression. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) also points to another double-edged sword in activism through tech, citing the effectiveness of social media in quickly mobilizing protestors remotely, but simultaneously

feeding into a “slacktivist” mentality of scrolling through social media-based causes with little follow-through or commitment, making movements more difficult to sustain. Constanza-Chock (2014) argues that immigrant rights activists have effectively utilized what she terms ‘transmedia organizing’—digitally based organizing across geographic locations—while drawing attention to causes previously ignored by traditional forms of media. Jing Wang (2019) on the other hand compares the use of social media activism in Western liberal societies with “nonconfrontational activism” in China, which utilizes social media to call for incremental reform rather than widespread structural changes. As these examples show, using technology for social justice, activism, or even a general sense of ‘good’ is a contested process.

Adding to this tension is the tech for good movement, which seeks to create and implement technology to solve various societal problems or better humanity. For instance, civic tech aspires to utilize technology for greater civic engagement and transparency while strengthening political accountability—yet some scholars point out the discrepancies between the intention and the results of these projects. According to Stefan Baack (2018), civic tech offers a “‘horizon of *possibility*’...what data enables civic technologists to do does not solely depend on the properties of the data they collect or re-use, or on the applications they are able to develop with it; it also depends on how civic technologists themselves understand and perceive how data can serve their agenda” (45-6). Karina Rider (2022) adds that civic tech’s goals “are largely aspirational, reflecting more what civic technologists hope to accomplish rather than what they do in practice” (5006). And while Kersti Ruth Wissenbach (2019) advocates for civic tech activism outside of Western solutions, in doing so she recognizes that civic tech often replicates existing global power structures, and that the movement as a whole needs to “counteract

remaining ethnocentrism [and] embrace ‘an analytical perspective that reflects a de-centred, dynamic, contemporary world’” (552).

With AI now encroaching on all aspects of life, from conducting seemingly mundane tasks to President Trump pushing to end human oversight in military AI in 2026, science and technology studies (STS) scholars have remained steadfast that technology is not a neutral nor unbiased tool, but one that is regularly imbued with the same social architectures as the world we inhabit. As a result, our own structural inequalities are often replicated and reinforced in and through technology itself. This realization is important when reexamining how technology can be used as a tool for social change. With tech workers facing mass layoffs due to AI, and questions of how tech should be implemented for the benefit of workers rather than the elite, I highlight the need for scholarship on AI’s impact on the future of ethical technology and tech work. Nonetheless, the scholarly literature shows the potential for tech’s implementation in activism and deconstructs what it means exactly for technology to be used as a social good.

Methods

The majority of my fieldwork was conducted between 2021-2023, with follow-ups in 2024. Much of the initial research occurred during COVID restrictions when in-person activities were limited; as such, I approached this project with flexibility, utilizing remote methods when possible. Yet I do not consider remote fieldwork secondary to the in-person methods traditionally conducted in anthropology, especially as the precautions brought about by COVID created a “new normal” for scholars and activists alike.¹³ For one, many tech activists had already been

¹³ I found that even when COVID restrictions were lifted, many of the organizers and people I worked and spoke with kept up with these precautions, preferring remote meetings and masking in-person. They were especially aware

using these technologies to increase remote and hybrid participation for accessibility reasons and to broaden outreach and engagement. Although these technologies come with their own critiques, particularly when it comes to surveillance, utilizing the very same technologies my interlocutors helped create and work with on a daily basis has provided insight into navigating a new reality in which remote participation (and understanding its precautions) has become increasingly necessary in a post-COVID world. I therefore approach remote fieldwork as a contemporary mode of capturing life “outside the traditional spatial and temporal boundaries”, through “digitally mediated encounters that are not amenable to ocular observation” (Akemu and Abdelnour 2020, 317; 297).

As mentioned previously, my project is Silicon Valley-based, but also conceptualizes the region beyond its typical geographical boundaries. With Silicon Valley workers spread out across the globe, and with other U.S. tech hubs taking inspiration from Silicon Valley’s financial success and work culture, Silicon Valley is as much an ideology as it is a physical location—therefore I did not limit my fieldwork exclusively to Bay Area interlocutors. COVID further complicated tech workers’ relationship to Silicon Valley as a location. Most employees transitioned to working from home and some even relocated out of state to more affordable areas, while a handful of tech offices shuttered down and switched to remote work altogether. My project is mainly focused on the Bay Area, but takes into consideration that the boundaries of Silicon Valley are not limited to a single physical location.

of chronic illness and long COVID in part because their activism was disability justice-oriented, but also because COVID’s lasting impact had been publicly minimized in order to return to the status quo.

In doing the preliminary work necessary to shape my fieldwork, I confronted several issues early regarding the parameters of my study, quickly realizing that the definition of tech work can be both ambiguous and contentious. While having a conversation with a retired technologist who had worked in the industry in the 1980s, she cautioned me that some tech workers may take offense to my definition of ‘tech work’ including support and service work, and gig work. While I stand firm in my decision to define tech work as all labor that upholds the industry, I also give room for interlocutors to self-define their own position and work—be it as a tech worker, a person who works in tech, or any level of specificity they choose. I also acknowledge that ‘tech worker’ is a somewhat new term that, for some, disrupts their self-perceived identity as innovators, entrepreneurs, or professionals (Tan et al. 2025).¹⁴ And while I often use ‘activist’ as a catch-all term, I discovered along the way that some of my interlocutors shied away from using the term for themselves, either because they felt like they haven’t earned the right to call themselves an activist, or because they preferred other terms like organizer or advocate. When possible, I use their preferred labels, but as a general rule I identify tech activists as any tech worker who recognizes and seeks to address structural inequalities—e.g., institutionalized sexism and racism—in the industry, not necessarily affiliated with any organizing group, non-profit, or non-governmental organization.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with forty-five tech worker activists, advocates, and organizers. As someone who grew up in Silicon Valley, I tapped into personal connections to find some interlocutors and from there, used snowball sampling. I also met interlocutors through participant observation at events I attended, and by volunteering with tech advocacy

¹⁴ For a greater discussion on the class ambiguity of tech workers, see Chapter 3.

and organizing groups. Interlocutors' job titles included programmers, UX designers, marketing specialists, gig workers, engineers, public relations specialists, chief financial officers, and more. They work for Big Five tech companies, other Fortune 500 companies, startups, and hold positions at universities, to name a few. Interviews were thirty minutes to two hours in duration, with the average being around one hour. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, anonymized, then qualitatively coded for thematic similarities.

Participant observation was a large component of my fieldwork. As a hallmark method of anthropology, it lends insight into the interlocutors' perspective and pushes the researcher to be more engaged with their field site and interlocutors. I attended webinars, teach-ins, conferences, protests, organizer meetings, learning sessions, and other related events geared towards tech advocacy and organizing. I also joined tech activist organizations, contributing labor and time to planning and publicizing events. This included being on the planning committee for teach-ins and conferences, in which I co-created workshop and panel themes, ran logistics, and worked as security and tech support. Rather than position myself as a neutral observer, I saw myself as someone who was dedicated to the same causes and who wanted to put in the work towards structural change in the tech industry. By attending and participating in these events, I was also able to meet tech activists and engage and deepen my understanding of their concerns and experiences. This helped me gain their trust, as being a researcher in these spaces can sometimes lead to suspicion about one's intentions and commitment to a shared goal.

Since most of the advocacy and activist organizations have a strong online presence on X (Twitter) and Instagram, social media played a huge role in connecting with organizations and interlocutors. Social media is not just a product of the industry I study; it's a digital archive of

information, and a medium to witness interpersonal interactions. Activists have utilized social media to educate the public, disseminate information, publicize events, and collectively and remotely challenge authorities and institutions. It's also used as a tool for organizing and resisting creatively, for example by creating memes that bring public attention to issues or call out systems of power. Through social media, I was able to observe interactions in a different way: how they interact with followers via comments, or how they present an issue through images, captions, etc. It's also how I was updated on events, or public stances or statements that organizations took. In many ways, I consider social media as an extension of participant observation, and found it to be the most influential tool at my disposal for remote fieldwork.

Lastly, as someone from Silicon Valley, my positionality as an anthropologist doing research in my own community shaped how I approached my project. I viewed myself as both an insider and an outsider: while not a tech worker myself, growing up in Silicon Valley made me familiar with the industry's culture and tech work in general. Most of my peers in school had parents who worked in tech, or they aspired to work in tech themselves—but these conversations (and sometimes, idolatry) were only directed toward the white-collar, professionalized side of the industry. As such, the issue of what the tech industry is like, and for whom, was a central question as I formulated my research. I also recognize that the tech industry impacts all Silicon Valley residents through cost of living, city planning decisions, and housing issues, and that part of my interest in inequality stems from witnessing the socioeconomic divide in the Bay Area grow over time. Lastly, my connection to the area helped me network with interlocutors, and also put them at ease as a fellow member of the community.

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is comprised of four body chapters that explore different aspects of tech activism. It interrogates how tech workers address structural issues in their industry, specifically through the lens of gender, race, and labor related struggles.

My Introduction chapter outlines the research questions, historical and literature overview, and methods and field site.

Chapter 1 examines the methods tech non-profit organizations employ to encourage women in technical, creative, and leadership roles in the industry. Following the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and other recent social justice movements, Tech Girl Boss (TGB), a nonprofit that offers technical courses and networking opportunities to aspiring and current women tech workers, sought to create a much-needed safe and inclusive environment to foster community with them. Throughout the conference, panelists repeatedly told attendees they belong in the tech space, specifically highlighting women's skills as empathetic leaders. I explore TGB's employment of affective labor as both a marketable skill and source of women's empowerment in the tech sector. Affective labor, an immaterial form of labor that deals with regulating others' emotions, is often associated with women's unpaid labor within the home. By appealing to women's assumed skills at affective labor, they reproduce the structural gender inequalities and traditional gender roles they seek to dismantle. I argue that their use of affective labor and gender essentialism as a source of women's empowerment reinforces gender inequalities and normative femininity by using feminist language and promises of lucrative positions and individual success in order to advance particular corporate goals, all while confining women to care work in the tech industry. I further explore how these gender dynamics are mirrored in AI virtual assistants, drawing connections between the labor women as tech

workers are expected to provide in the industry, with the feminized labor virtual assistants are expected to provide.

Chapter 2 similarly explores corporate-led initiatives for gender and racial diversity in the tech industry, and how tech activists navigate these initiatives to enact incremental change. Following the wave of Black Lives Matter protests—and facing criticism for working on surveillance and facial recognition software with law enforcement—tech companies swiftly course-corrected by encouraging the representation of marginalized tech workers and championing diversity causes through corporate social responsibility (CSR); diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); and employee resource groups (ERGs). While these initiatives appear progressive at best and innocuous at worst, I argue that they’ve limited actual structural change from taking place by encouraging neoliberal feminism and anti-racism, characterized by its emphasis on individual success and corporate measures of social good. These efforts encourage self-censorship, surveillance, and respectability politics against worker dissent, all while tech companies publicize their corporate diversity efforts in order to deflect from their more harmful capitalist and imperialist projects. However, many tech activists acknowledge the limitations of neoliberal diversity initiatives but take part in them nonetheless, navigating corporate politics to incrementally influence change, and employing strategies that challenge existing hierarchies—for example, by holding companies accountable to their own CSR statements. This chapter explores the impact of corporate diversity policies on marginalized workers, and asks what it means for tech workers to “do” activism” within corporate spaces, and its constraints.

While my first two chapters focus on corporate-backed methods of advocacy through diversity initiatives, my third chapter transitions to examine tech worker organizing methods which seek systemic change in ways that disrupt capital and public image by acknowledging

industry harm. When tech workers have exhausted the “appropriate” channels of activism, what methods of action are left at their disposal? By interrupting corporate events, holding walkouts, boycotts, and sit-ins, etc., tech organizers—especially technologists in white-collar, full-time technical positions—risk job security by challenging capitalist systems of oppression within their industry. For tech workers who view themselves as integral to the harm the industry perpetuates—as architects of the infrastructure needed for surveillance, labor exploitation, military tech, and exacerbating climate change—how do they use organizing to challenge mainstream narratives about Silicon Valley while navigating conflicting moral dilemmas? How do they view and leverage their position as technologists to work towards collective action and change? I examine their organizing strategies and cross solidarity efforts in order to understand how activism is used to redefine the workplace and occupational duties as they strive towards their own visions of a just tech industry.

As tech organizers and activists oppose their industry’s harms through its various projects—from surveillance, weapons development, environmental degradation, and the top-down push for AI, to name a few—workers and members of the general public alike are justifiably concerned for what consumer participation in Big Tech’s services and products entails. Chapter 4 examines how some tech workers have, in response, sought to create products and build ecosystems aligned with their own beliefs in how technology should be utilized. But what is the process of making ‘good’ technology, and how are these visions contested and enacted? While, in the previous chapters, I discussed how tech workers use activism to address structural inequalities and government collaborations that further imperialist and colonial goals, in this chapter I consider how these inequalities and harms shape tech worker conceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ tech. I ask: what does tech—for ‘good,’ for social justice, for community-

building—look like beyond the current products, systems, and infrastructures? While this chapter gives an overview of some of the movements striving towards better tech and their sometimes conflicting views and frameworks, I also speculate on how it also shapes technological possibilities and the future of the industry.

Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the four body chapters' arguments, while questioning the future direction of the tech industry and tech activism, given the U.S.'s political shift further to the right.

With tech workers at the forefront of calling out their industry's harm, my dissertation offers insight into this particular moment of social change. It seeks to provide clarity for future actions in the wake of these political changes, and lends greater insight into similar struggles as they grapple with their technology's impact on society, participate in vertical solidarity movements, and navigate their position as both workers and activists within a broader capitalist system.

CHAPTER 1: EXPECTING EMPATHY? GENDER AND AFFECTIVE LABOR IN WOMEN- IN-TECH EMPOWERMENT SPACES

Introduction

I exhaled a deep, meditative breath as a wellness expert led us through a yoga exercise via Zoom. Whispered instructions to “slowly exhale, through your nose,” disrupted by occasionally spotty Wi-Fi reception, filled the familiar silences of the virtual format we all became accustomed to during COVID. After taking a one-year hiatus due to the pandemic, Tech Girl Boss (TGB), a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering women as tech workers and leaders, decided to hold its annual conference remotely, after canceling the previous year’s conference due to COVID. Like its previous iterations, this year’s conference sought to encourage aspiring female tech workers and women currently in the industry to reach new heights and help them succeed in a male-dominated industry. As hundreds of virtual attendees flooded in, the energy in the room became infectious, the chat box overflowing with introductions and encouraging messages. Logging in from the Bay Area, I halfheartedly participated in the yoga session, too self-conscious of my inflexibility to even attempt her stretches in the confines of my room. Shortly after, the TGB board members gave their opening remarks and shouted in unison, “You belong in the tech space!” With that, we were ushered into the conference, excited for the day to come.

TGB’s conference came on the heels of a tumultuous year for the tech industry and U.S. society at-large. Compounded by the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement in May 2020, the industry faced backlash from its own workers and the public for the role technology plays in over-policing Black and brown people through surveillance. Prior to May 2020, Microsoft and Amazon had been working on facial recognition for predictive policing software; after Floyd’s murder and the ensuing pushback, Microsoft announced it would be

cancelling its project on facial recognition software (Greene 2020), while Amazon promised to put their facial recognition project, Rekognition, on a one year moratorium (Amazon 2020). Because the industry had already faced pushback during the 2018 #MeToo movement—most notably at a worldwide Google walkout in which workers called out tech’s deep-rooted sexism and misogyny in the workforce—tech companies embraced Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives as a reactive course correction for its longstanding structural inequalities. Thus, TGB and similar tech advocacy organizations now found a wide and eager audience for creating appealing, corporate-friendly avenues to increase diversity and representation amongst its workforce.

Throughout the conference, female tech leaders shared their experiences and struggles of breaking into the industry, while assuring other women that there too was a place for them. I went from panel to panel, noting how speakers specifically avoided telling women to conform to the hegemonic Silicon Valley “bro culture” by assimilating into white, heteromasculine ideals. Instead, they encouraged women to come as they are, even if that meant embodying traditional, normative femininity. This was most evident in their continued emphasis on women having more empathy in the workplace than men. Throughout the day, “empathy” and “compassion” were used as an explanation for why women would not only belong, but thrive in the tech industry: from checking in on others during COVID, to having greater compassion for their peers in stressful situations, they constantly reiterated women’s potential to become “empathetic leaders” would save the industry from its current toxic workplace culture. This assumption, made independently by speakers and panelists across the board, lingered with me for weeks after the conference ended. Intentionally or not, by embracing traditional femininity as a form of

empowerment in a male-dominated workplace, the pendulum seemed to swing the other way as women were encouraged to embrace gendered labor in the form of care work.

In this chapter, I explore how TGB implored care work and other forms of feminized labor to empower women tech workers into skilled and lucrative positions in the industry.¹⁵ Although TGB and like-minded organizations are full of well-meaning people seeking gender and other forms of equality within their industry, their efforts both challenge and maintain gender inequalities by placing expectations on women to perform feminized labor and care work in the workplace. After all, if the industry desperately needs more women, shouldn't femininity, as well as feminized labor, be a source of empowerment? But by enticing women with possibilities of leadership while confining them to traditional gendered labor in the tech industry, they reproduce the very inequalities and gender roles they seek to dismantle. The burden of care work also becomes a further strain on women, given that they bore the brunt of caregiving duties during the past few years of COVID. Drawing on participant-observation of TGB's conference and comparable events, as well as interviews with tech workers in similar advocacy positions and organizations within the tech industry, I argue that TGB's use of affective and feminized labor as women's empowerment reinforces normative gender roles and ideals, all while confining women to care work in the tech industry.

This issue contributes to a problem far greater than TGB and its methods for gender equality. By making the assumption that women tech workers will inherently be more empathetic than men, they naturalize care work and other feminized labor as intrinsic to women, separating

¹⁵ TGB, like most tech advocacy organizations, focus specifically on white-collar, "skilled" positions in tech. This leaves out a large sector of the workforce throughout the supply chain, including service workers, gig workers, factory workers, and most TVCs (temps, vendors, and contractors).

the division of labor from the historical and social processes which shaped it. But labor expectations for women as *workers* in the tech industry do not stay within the confines of the office walls. Safiya Noble (2018), in her study on embedded racism in search engine algorithms, points out that “some of the very people who are developing search algorithms and architecture are willing to promote sexist and racist attitudes openly at work and beyond, while we are supposed to believe that these same employees are developing ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ decision-making tools” (2). While I don’t believe TGB’s use of care work is intentionally sexist or malicious, I bring attention to how ideas about gender are reproduced through a particular product: AI virtual assistants. AI virtual assistants were developed to provide affective, cognitive, and other forms of labor typically associated with women’s unpaid labor within the home. I argue that in the process of creating virtual assistants—which are overwhelmingly socially coded as feminine—gender roles and ideals, as they intersect with race and class, appear natural and organic, not unlike the ways TGB uncritically reproduces gendered labor. In other words, without reflecting on *who* is expected to do *which* work, these inequalities can become embedded in the tech itself. Overall, this chapter looks critically at tech non-profit and non-government organizations’ (NGO) diversity measures and strategies, and how their initiatives are mirrored in the technology the industry brings to life.

Tech Girl Boss: A Place For Women To Find Their Community

TGB was founded in 2007 in the San Francisco Bay Area, during the height of the tech boom at the turn of the twenty-first century.¹⁶ With more than 100,000 due-paying members in

¹⁶ This tech boom correlates with the meteoric rise of the Big Five tech companies and other social media companies. Facebook was founded in 2004, YouTube (then an independent company from Google) was launched in 2005, and Twitter (now X) in 2006. TGB’s founding in 2007 also coincides with the launch of the first iPhone.

thirty-five chapters around the globe, this non-profit organization sought to become a place to foster the technical skills and networking relationships for aspiring women in tech, with the goal of increasing gender inclusivity in the tech industry. Early on in the conference, the CEO and founder stepped onto the virtual stage to share her inspiration for TGB after facing sexual harassment and struggling to find community nearly twenty years ago as a young woman in the burgeoning industry:

I quickly learned that women weren't as welcomed or as comfortable in this industry as men are. I felt alone and isolated; I needed to find my female community...I founded TGB to be accessible to all women, despite their level of experience or financial situation. I wanted to build that community I so desperately needed in my early career. And I quickly found that other women wanted this too.

Fifteen years later, TGB has become the space she had strived for in the beginning of her career. It now holds hackathons, networking events, and conferences; its website posts job opportunities and hosts its own podcasts and blogs with posts titled, "We shouldn't have to write this, but how to be taken seriously at work." Its website also features friendly and inviting pictures of its members from all around the world, juxtaposed with stylish drawings of racially diverse women dressed in business-casual. Both online and in-person, TGB depicts itself as a warm and inviting safe space for future tech girl bosses.

Although the conference lasted an entire workday, enthusiasm and engagement never waned as we hopped from one event to the next. Colorfully accented Zoom backgrounds filled our screens as we chatted with one another during short networking breaks, or typed our bravos into the chat forum for the panelists. TGB's impressive lineup of speakers included women representing a diverse set of roles in the industry, from finance to marketing to HR to engineering, and half were women of color. Throughout the day, we continued to hear motivational speeches and advice based on personal journeys of breaking into a male-dominated

industry. Several mentioned needing “grit” to shatter through the glass ceiling, and detailed the microaggressions, harassment, and other barriers they persevered through. However, many more emphasized the need for vulnerability, compassion, and empathy to be a successful leader in tech. In a panel on creating a “blueprint for success,” three women discussed the roadblocks and the wins they’ve had as leaders at the same Big Five tech company. One speaker, a leader of the company’s education initiative, explained why empathy and compassion were needed during COVID: “Connectivity and compassion I think for me was extremely important, because it was a tough time for all of us...Having compassion for my team made them see that I had the same challenges and I didn’t need to give them permission” to turn off their camera or hold their child during Zoom meetings. While struggling herself to keep on top of her children’s schooling, her job, and maintaining her home, she recounted calling her employees every day during the pandemic—not to discuss work but to check in on their well-being. Another panelist, a manager of a DEI program at her company, emphasized that “making connections with the people you’re working with is more important than what you actually know.” As the moderator wrapped up the segment by asking each panelist to give advice to the audience, they were all in agreement about one thing: “empathetic leadership is core.”

Using supportive language and inviting diverse panelists and speakers helped TGB ensure their commitment to diversity was apparent and visible at every level, with many speakers even connecting empathy to racial diversity issues. In a short presentation by an automobile executive, she reminded the audience that “mutual empathy” between minority workers and “majority” (i.e. white, male) leaders was needed to get to a place of better understanding. She emphatically stated, “Senior leaders in these industries are taking accountability to address diversity, inclusion, and the pipeline for underrepresented minorities, from entry-level to senior

leadership roles. Because we all win when we are in a state of *mutual empathy*. We all win when everyone feels they belong.” Meanwhile, in a talk on balancing perfectionism with risk-taking, a developer relations (DevRel) strategist spoke of the importance of walking a mile in one another’s shoes and recognizing common humanity amongst us all, regardless of geography or skin color. Out of the full day’s lineup, roughly one-fifth of the speakers and panelists spoke at length about the importance of empathy and compassion, and that women (specifically, women of color) were best suited for the job.

After the George Floyd uprisings and subsequent public backlash towards the tech industry, many companies released statements of solidarity, donated to racial justice organizations, and pledged to increase Black representation at senior levels. Some companies even changed their corporate profile pictures to show support for BLM, and in the case of Google, Apple, and Amazon, programmed their virtual AI assistants to express solidarity with the Black community when prompted (Lerman 2020).¹⁷ And these criticisms were not solely directed at tech *companies*. Other tech advocacy NGOs and non-profits with similar missions to TGB also faced backlash for their handling of systemic racism within their ranks.¹⁸ Girl Develop It, a non-profit that provides technical classes and networking opportunities for women and nonbinary people in tech, drew controversy when several people came forward with racism allegations from their local chapters and headquarters, with members alleging a lack of

¹⁷ For example, when asked if Black lives matter, Amazon’s Alexa responds, “Black lives matter. I believe in racial equality...I stand in solidarity with the black community in the fight against systemic racism and injustice” (Lerman 2020).

¹⁸ While not specifically related to race, Black Girls Code, a non-profit dedicated to helping Black girls learn coding and other technical skills, faced controversy in 2021 for a lawsuit in which several former employees alleged that the Founder/CEO ran a toxic work environment through intimidation and fear. This was particularly distracting and harmful to the NGO’s reputation, as Black Girls Code was one of the first tech advocacy groups specifically for Black girls.

understanding of the intersectionality between race and gender. Given this climate, it's understandable that TGB leaned into inclusivity, compassion and understanding, celebrating every person as they are. But in doing so—in the midst of a global pandemic and several racial justice movements—what labor expectations were they placing on women specifically? And how does their constant reiteration of empathetic female leadership factor into how they imagine the average woman tech worker? With each mention of empathy, I was left wondering what empathy actually entailed and for whom it was a requirement.

Expectations of Empathy? Performing Affective Labor in the Workplace

TGB framed empathy as a state of mind or characteristic synonymous with compassion or acceptance, but stopped short of referring to empathy as labor, or an added burden to women's workload. Yet every so often, the speakers revealed a hint of the mental toll that being a source of empathy took on their wellbeing. Chantel Mills, the chief information security officer at a cloud software company, spoke of her struggle finding the right balance of empathy as a manager. She lost her father, a Vietnam War veteran whose memorial flag sat proudly on the shelf in her living room, a mere few days before the conference, but decided to keep her commitment to TGB to honor her father's convictions in gender equality and female empowerment. Calling herself a "one-percenter" as one of the few Black women in STEM in a leadership role, she recalled a difficult yet pivotal moment in her career, breaking down at work and crying with her staff after having to lay off an entire team abruptly before the holidays. After being called too empathetic by some and not empathetic enough by others, she eventually found the right balance "in both head and heart," while no longer caring if everyone liked her. She also noted the racialized gender dynamics in her office that helped her come to terms with how she's

perceived: “as a Black woman in STEM,” she added, “I’m not going to be liked no matter what I do anyway.”

Being attuned to others’ emotional needs, managing and regulating others’ emotions—TGB speakers effortlessly described (without naming) this work as affective labor. Affective labor is, broadly, an immaterial form of labor that produces the “right” feelings in others. Often an integral part of women’s labor inside and outside the home, especially for working-class, racialized, and/or immigrant women, affective labor modifies and regulates others’ emotional experiences (Federici 2012; Hardt and Negri 2000). Women’s labor is traditionally considered part of the private sphere—domestic labor, reproductive labor in the form of raising children, and other types of unpaid labor within the home—while men’s labor is typically considered part of the public sphere—civics, paid employment, and other activities outside the home. But this categorization is overly simplistic and overlooks how women’s labor actually plays out—especially when it comes to affective labor. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) notes that “emotion work, feeling rules, and social exchange have been removed from the private domain and placed in a public one, where they are processed, standardized, and subjected to hierarchical control” (153). Looking to the feminized industries of service and hospitality, she observes how affective labor “transmutes” from home life to commercial services. Flight attendants are “encouraged to think of passengers as guests or as children,” expanding their private sphere labor to their paid labor outside the home (Hochschild 1983, 141). Yet domestic workers such as nannies and caregivers navigate their paid labor within other families’ private spheres. For instance, live-in nannies cannot easily separate their public life from their private life, as conducting reproductive labor for others’ families means being available throughout the day, like when soothing children in the middle of the night (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007). This comes at the

expense of their own families since domestic workers, many of whom are from the Global South, are geographically separated and cannot be physically present for their own families' emotional wellbeing (Parreñas 2008). Ironically, their employment as care workers may take them “outside the private sphere,” but it “usually places them back inside the private sphere”—this time, in someone else's home (Parreñas 2008, 8).

Scholars have also observed the growing international market for affective laborers and the subsequent effect it's had on workers' sense of time, physical body, mental health, and overall wellbeing. Anthropologists Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta (2016; 2019) note how the use of new telecommunications technologies enabled the geographical separation of labor within a corporation, meaning call center workers from India could conduct affective labor to their customer bases in U.S. and UK time zones.¹⁹ This caused changes within their bodies and sense of time, taking a toll on their physical and mental health. For example, the job requires them to work from evenings until early mornings—shifting their circadian rhythms and menstrual cycles—and learn Western mannerisms and styles of speech.²⁰ The nonnormative work schedule also led to feelings of isolation from family and friends. Their affective labor, which required them to establish friendly relations with customers and learn intimate details about their lives, also opened them up to sexual harassment from customers, or to becoming emotionally anguished by constantly serving as customers' emotional support. Gabriela Lukacs (2020) similarly found that women entering the tech industry during the 2000s recession in Japan

¹⁹ While I simplify by using the term ‘call center,’ Mankekar and Gupta (2019) refer to it as ‘business process outsourcing,’ or BPO.

²⁰ See Sarah T. Roberts (2019) on how similar work in the Philippines created special economic zones for BPO workers with nonnormative schedules. For example, some BPOs within technology parks have food vendors that work the same nonnormative hours to serve call center workers.

were subject to emotional burnout from affective labor. Women's affective labor was critical to the success of early Japanese social media and digital technologies. Lured into the new digital economy as bloggers, cell phone novelists,²¹ photographers, and amateur stock traders, these women sought creative yet precarious careers with the promise that they could eventually transition into more lucrative technical and creative opportunities. Yet they often ended up performing affective labor instead by cultivating time-consuming, personalized relationships with their followers to grow their fanbases, which in turn promoted the social media companies over individual creators. In other words, their labor resulted in popularizing new digital platforms and websites without ever receiving proper financial compensation in return. Meanwhile, middle-class women in the Caribbean sought to capitalize on the “growing economy of emotion” by providing entrepreneurial affective labor services (Freeman 2014, 134). By commodifying affective services—providing team-building services, or providing on-call emotional support to their clients through exceptional customer service—entrepreneurship presented itself as an exciting new career path for women to gain financial stability and middle-class respectability.

By reiterating empathy as a much-needed trait in the industry, I sensed that TGB panelists were modeling that they too could be successful while not abandoning seemingly feminine traits like empathy. After all, in male-dominated industries like tech, it's more commonplace for women to assimilate into the heteromasculine workplace culture than it is for the hegemonic culture to make space for them. Margaret Shih and Maia J Young (2016) write, “Women and minorities may be implicitly or explicitly expected to assimilate to [dominant]

²¹ A similar platform in the U.S. today would be Wattpad, a digital platform for people to publish original stories.

norms to advance in the organization...Female employees may be expected to adopt behaviors that may not come naturally to women, such as bonding over ‘beer and sports’” (262). In anthropologist Coleen Carrigan’s (2024) own experience working in the tech industry, she noted how her job at a Big Five company, which had very few women, produced an office culture skewing towards toxic masculinity: regularly occurring sexual and gender-based harassment, and microaggressions towards women and people of color. Framing empathy as an asset rather than a hindrance therefore allows women to embody traditionally feminine qualities instead of conforming to stereotypically masculine leadership traits—a turn of events which some may have found refreshing or empowering. Also important to highlight is how the tech industry’s hegemonic masculine culture is interlinked with logic-based “neutrality,” seemingly devoid of emotion. Gender studies scholar Carol Cohn (1987) observed that male intellectuals in the “defense” industry spoke of weapons’ destructive power with cool-headed technostrategic language that obscured the reality of potential human suffering, but women who pushed back on this framework to highlight loss of life were labeled irrational and emotional. In addition, delegating decisions to black box algorithms lend the appearance of neutrality, despite said algorithms being trained on biased datasets (O’Neil 2016; Noble 2018). For many in the industry, tech is supposed to be neutral, even devoid of emotions. But by acknowledging empathy in the workplace, TGB attempts to reframe empathy—a trait commonly associated with women—as an invaluable leadership trait.

However, I take two issues with TGB’s approach. For one, by making women responsible for emotional caregiving, they further place the burden of affective labor on them during a time when women’s emotional and caregiving duties were at an all-time high. Women had overwhelmingly taken on the majority of care work and domestic duties in 2020 due to

COVID (Nagy et al. 2023), while also facing greater loss of income from COVID-related layoffs and reduced work hours (Urwin 2023). These struggles were amplified for women of color and working-class women, many who worked in hospitality and service sectors or paid domestic work (Fins 2020; UC Davis Environmental Health Center 2021), had intergenerational caregiving duties, or were emotionally impacted by the murder of George Floyd and the rise in Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) hate crimes. Interestingly, many of the people I met at TGB’s conference and similar events were women looking to make the transition from teaching to tech. Teaching is a feminized and underpaid career historically deemed suitable for women based on gendered ideals of femininity—nurturing, patience, kindness—and their supposed ability to perform affective labor; between 2020-21, 77 percent of U.S. public school teachers were women (Schaeffer 2024). During COVID, teachers faced an immense amount of pressure to give adequate care to their students: to teach effectively in an online format while giving individual attention to each student; to return to the physical classroom to nurture students in-person, or to remain online to protect everyone’s health; to teach or not to teach critical race theory²²—these are just a few examples of the current landscape of public school education in the U.S., which likely contributed to the teacher shortage in 2022 (Schmitt and deCourcy 2022). Hannah Miller, a former public school teacher and aspiring tech worker I met at several TGB events, recounted her breaking point of being trained to treat gunshot wounds in preparation for school shootings rather than address any of the root causes of gun violence. Unlike teaching,

²² After George Floyd’s murder, some schools began teaching students about structural racism baked into everyday aspects of society: segregation of neighborhoods through redlining, policing, the underfunding of public schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods, healthcare disparities by race, etc. The fear of children learning Critical Race Theory and becoming “indoctrinated” to hate white people became a point of contention for conservative media, until DEI became their next lightning rod. I discuss the DEI “culture wars” in Chapter 2.

white-collar tech work is not a traditionally feminized career path, but still calls for the affective labor of women that, quite frankly, many seem tired of performing. Even by framing empathy as a sought-after skill in tech, it nevertheless draws on a form of labor that women are already expected to perform.

Additionally, TGB's appeals to women as affective laborers relies on assumptions of inherently feminine qualities—in this case empathy—that they should be able to expertly wield in the workforce. Rather than taking the burden of affective labor off of women, or sending a message that all workers despite gender should have empathy, TGB leaned into gendered norms, reframing affective labor as a superpower only they could bring to the table. Despite their good intentions, TGB perpetuated gendered division of labor by reframing emotional care work as a natural skill, rather than a historical and structural expectation for women. This does little to challenge gender inequalities as a whole.

Some women tech workers even pointed out the irony of affective and other feminized labor being valued when it contributed to production, but disparaged when workers needed to conduct such labor in the home. Lena Lyall, a tech worker for an educational technologies company, is a mother of two elementary school-aged children. It was clear how much Lena cares about the positive impact of her work and the welfare of children in general, especially as she detailed her sense of fulfillment when her products helped children who were struggling to learn remotely during COVID. As someone who wants to use technology to help children, who works for a company geared towards children's education, and as someone with children of her own, she felt the discomfort and irony that the only discrimination she feels from her coworkers is towards her being a mother:

I think that to this day, there's still a lot of discrimination for working parents in general. I just noticed it more because I have small kids, but you definitely see that even in fairly liberal working environments, like schools and non-profits and even to some degree, tech places. But in some ways, I see it as kind of unfair, because there's this weird expectation that people are working after 5pm, and are using tech to bring their laptop home and clock-in and clock-out at 10pm or something. But I feel like it's just as valid that a twenty-something-year-old can also go home and get a drink with a friend, you know? But for whatever reason, it seems like parents get the most airtime [for not bringing work home].

Despite working at the intersections of education (a feminized industry) and technology, Lena's caregiving duties are frowned upon as a hindrance to her ability to work overtime. While Lena noticed this stigma even before the pandemic, COVID further blurred the lines and created tension between work and home, and other tech workers like Alice Yap noted the ways working parents attempted to recalibrate balance. Alice is a UX researcher at a Big Five tech company and no stranger to long days and fast-paced research; having recently transitioned from academic to corporate, her only request was that I interviewed her with her camera off, remarking, "my eyes need a break!"

While Alice is not a parent herself, she had observed working parents blocking off time for childcare on their team calendars to reclaim more of a work-life balance:

On calendars, sometimes my manager or my coworkers, they'll put childcare on their calendar invites to not schedule a meeting during this time. So that work of raising a child or caring for a child becomes more visible on the calendar itself, which is slightly different from if people were in the office where the child is at home. Because there's a lot of invisible labor around making sure that there's childcare stuff—I do not have a child, so I don't know what [laughs]—but someone to take care of the child. That's the invisible labor that we don't [usually] see happening behind the scenes, but since it's on the calendar right now and because it's more visible, we're like, Oh, they're parents, they have a child to take care of now.

During COVID, Lily Rodel (2025) found that London-based startup workers faced difficulty in achieving the work-life balance they had hoped for while doing remote work. Women in particular felt guilt over how time was spent during regular work hours, which "led workers into

moral quandaries about what counts as ‘actual’ work, revealing the previously invisible social dynamics” that shaped gendered stigma for requesting flexibility for childcare and family reasons (2). On a related note, during the “blueprint for success” panel at TGB, one of the panelists commented, “I hear people say, ‘what working moms need is X kind of flexibility.’ No, actually what I need is more money so I can hire someone to do this other thing [in the home] for me!”²³ These examples show the dilemma working parents face when reproductive labor for their own families is on the table. Women have not broken free from patriarchy and gender inequalities simply by working outside the home, and even as high earners, they consistently shoulder the burden of domestic labor, childcare, and cognitive labor (England 2020; Bianchi et al. 2012; Daminger 2019). Despite being in a lucrative and progressive industry, this remains true for women in tech as well. Although TGB claims that tech companies desperately need empathetic workers, women still face gendered constraints, especially if companies cannot support the very labor which makes them desirable.

Gender Essentialism and Normative Femininity: Pink is Power?

“Find your fearless in your twenties, thirties, forties, and beyond,” a public relations specialist exclaimed during her pre-recorded TGB session. Chock-full of pop culture references, her hot pink pantsuit matched the energy of her speech as she enthusiastically divulged the secrets of building your dream career in the early and formative parts of one’s occupational journey. From analyzing the life lessons of the film *Legally Blonde* (“be yourself, don’t dim your light!”), to praising Hillary Clinton’s colorful array of pantsuits (“finding a look that works for

²³ For more on the “chain of care,” in which working-class, immigrant, and/or racialized women liberate middle- and upper-middle class women from domestic and reproductive labor to reenter the workforce, see Parreñas (2008), Hondagneu Sotelo (2001), and Ehrenreich and Hochschild, eds. (2004).

you!”), she listed off a well-rehearsed set of points as she encouraged the audience to embrace individual interests even if they were outside the hegemonic masculinity of Silicon Valley.

“Whether that’s liking BTS” (a popular Korean boy band) or “wearing pink,” she told us to “get rid of the negative people in your life, the naysayers, the basic Bs,” and show up as your authentically girly self.

With TGB already promoting affective labor as empowerment, I wasn’t surprised that they continued to uphold gendered norms and ideals through “wearing pink” or “liking BTS.” To be clear, this is not a critique of people or characteristics that fall within traditional or normative femininity, which I define as labor or traits corresponding to traditional binary gender roles in a Western context. I argue, however, that with TGB encouraging women to embrace authenticity—both through affective labor *and* traditionally feminine interests—they leave little room for varying definitions of femininity beyond the normative, which is ultimately detrimental to their goal of women’s empowerment and inclusion. In agreement are Linda Chiodo and Romana Morda (2023), who through their investigation of women’s empowerment spaces find that “notions of ideal femininity ‘often obscures the intersectional social relations which constitute gender by misrepresenting white, middle-class, heterosexual and westernized femininity as the norm’” (2; Budgeon 2015, 309). This construction of normative femininity and gendered social norms is rooted in Victorian values and historically forced onto colonized peoples, with women who eschewed these norms considered outside the bounds of proper femininity (Parreñas 2008). By promoting normative femininity as their authentic selves, TGB is upholding gender essentialisms—that is, attributing traditional, stereotypical attributes to their corresponding genders—further sequestering women into normative gender roles.

As previously discussed, conforming to the hegemonic, heteromasculine workplace is a common tactic and advice for women in STEM fields, so TGB's framing of normative femininity as empowerment counters the notion that women and other marginalized workers need to conform in order to gain the respect of their colleagues. Many of my interlocutors confirmed feeling pressure to conform to the hegemonic work culture, and cited the misogynistic culture as one of the most difficult things about working in tech: being seen as lacking just for being a woman, or incapable of doing technical work, and other microaggressions led to them feeling a sense of hopelessness and frustration with their field. Some of my interlocutors discussed how conforming felt like their only option in the beginning of their careers. Lizzie Fordham, a retired electrical engineering professor, recalled the time she reluctantly joined her male colleagues at a strip club outing during a business trip. It was only when her friend convinced her that "it's okay to be girly" that Lizzie realized that she shouldn't have to conform.²⁴ But given the immense pressure to assimilate to the hegemonic heteromasculine culture, promoting normative femininity may comfort women who are apprehensive about the industry, or make them feel visible in a predominantly male workplace. Sociologist Wendy Faulkner (2009) writes, "Although women engineers are highly visible as women, they must also learn to, in some sense, become invisible as women" (179). She uses the term "in/visibility paradox" to describe their situation of being hyper visible in the tech industry as women, but invisible and overlooked as engineers. Scholars such as Lauren Alfrey and France Winddance

²⁴ Of course, many women feel the need to conform, as networking opportunities and promotions tend to come up during recreational activities. As programmer Augustus "Auggie" Wyndham summarized to me, marginalized workers might feel out of place because "the industry is a boys' club...Advancements come from peer recommendations, so you'll be better off if they like you, which means hanging out after work doing rock climbing, tabletop games, or video games." Women would not necessarily be welcomed into these circles, and even if they were, they may not be perceived positively. See Ho (2009), Fernandez (1998), and McGee (2018).

Twine (2017) have similarly found that white and Asian nonbinary, femme, and/or queer women in tech downplay markers of traditional femininity to gain greater acceptance through closer proximity to masculinity and thus the appearance of competence, although this strategy did not work for Black and brown tech workers, who were more likely to be perceived as incompetent regardless of gender identity and sexuality. Therefore, some may argue that TGB challenges gender norms by encouraging normative femininity in defiance of a heteromasculine workplace culture.

Rather than thinking beyond the restrictions of the gender binary, this approach counters the hegemonic masculinity of the workplace by relying on essentialist arguments about femininity. In TGB's case, this resulted in pigeonholing women into office mother roles (see Faulkner 2009), or making assumptions about their interests. Even with good intentions, gender essentialism is a common occurrence amongst women-in-tech advocacy spaces, with Christina Dunbar-Hester (2019) observing similar situations within feminist, libre/open-source software (FLOSS) communities, colloquially known as hackers. As Dunbar-Hester (2019) finds, some diversity advocates unintentionally promote gender essentialism in their attempts for more gender representation by using traditionally feminine, heteronormative depictions of women to indicate feminist or women's hacker groups (198). In one meeting, she witnessed a hacker organization attempt to redesign their mascot to indicate that it was the feminist off-shoot of a larger, more generalized hacker group. While the larger hacker group's mascot was a bull-like creature with giant horns and a goatee, one member suggested: ““If we took the picture...[and] added lipstick, eye shadow, and mascara, replace the beard by a string of pearls, and replaced the horns by a feminine hat, with a flower sticking up from the hat, I think that would convey the idea”” that it was the feminist group's mascot (194). Other members quickly shot down the idea

for reproducing normative femininity, especially when most of the members did not dress in such a traditionally feminine style themselves. As Dunbar-Hester (2019) summarizes, “[o]ne major stumbling point, which seemed all but impossible to resolve, was how to challenge normative masculinity as a cultural default without invoking normative femininity as its opposite” (194). She elaborates that this challenge requires diversity advocates to queer normative masculinity rather than “feminizing” it, or to “decenter masculinity without replacing it with normative femininity” (Dunbar-Hester 2019, 202).

I first met Zee Wang, a product manager who works transnationally in both Canada and Hong Kong, through a mutual contact in an “LGBTQ in tech” advocacy group. When we sat down to discuss their experiences in the industry, they described the difficulties of conforming to normative femininity within their office workplace culture. Zee is nonbinary and pansexual, and navigates wanting to represent their queer identity through their style while not being outed. They do so by presenting themselves as a countercultural, “cool girl”; they also turn their camera off during Zoom meetings to avoid unwanted scrutiny or prying questions about their gender identity. They told me:

It's not really common to find lesbians or queers in tech in Hong Kong. A lot of the queers in Asia are more the creators, so they work in film, they work in marketing, designing, or whatever. But it's very seldom that you could find an engineer who is [openly] queer, at least not from what I learned. So it's a little bit hard at first, and at the same time, it's also like the social norms where you wouldn't really present yourself as very queer. Like, guys wouldn't be wearing a dress at work. So for girls it is easier. But still, people would be like, ‘Oh, you should wear a decent dress to this cocktail party,’ something like that. And I was always trying to break these rules, but it's also kind of hard for me. So I just try to hide it in a way that people will think that I'm a cool girl, but does not associate me with the queer identity.

Zee demonstrates the difficulties of negotiating and performing gender identities in the tech industry within the permissibility of their workplace culture. Despite the way gender is presented as monolithic and static at TGB, gender in reality is situational and fluid, though

reinforced in subtle ways that negatively affect marginalized people outside the bounds of normative femininity. By juxtaposing Zee's story with the "pink is power" session at TGB, I attempt to show the constraints of gender essentialism when it comes to empowerment. While some women, femme, queer, and nonbinary tech workers may benefit from gender ambiguity in the tech industry (Alfrey and Twine 2017), TGB and similar organizations show how women's empowerment spaces are used to negotiate, challenge, and in some cases, reinforce essentialist ways of 'doing' gender. Faulkner (2009) notes "how particular femininities and masculinities are actively constituted through everyday interactions and social institutions" (170), and that through these interactions, women engineers "tend to get pigeon-holed by their colleagues into certain stereotypically feminine identities – most commonly as (hetero)sexually available or as mother" (177). Chiodo and Morda's (2023) fieldwork at an all girls' school found that students were enculturated into an idealized femininity based on white, middle-class ideals and Western notions of femininity, which emphasized neoliberal individualism, personal achievement, and self-surveillance.²⁵ While these girls were encouraged to excel in traditionally masculine fields like STEM, they were also ultimately pushed into traditionally feminine careers like nursing; further, girls who strayed from the idealized femininity (particularly in classroom behavior) were disciplined into ascribing to social norms.

TGB's approach to gender representation in tech likely has farther reach than they intended. Catharina Landstrom (2007) has argued that gender essentialisms do not stay confined to the workplace, but "can be expected to operate in, and influence, technological environments"

²⁵ I further discuss themes of neoliberal feminism and empowerment through individual achievement, and self-surveillance, in Chapter 2.

(11). According to Joan Acker (1990) and Alfrey and Twine (2017, 31), gender ideologies structure how work is conceptualized and organized. Although the tech industry often congratulates itself for its ability to break the mold and think outside the box, it nonetheless subscribes to the rigidity of normative gender—even within empowerment spaces like TGB, which end up reifying the status quo rather than challenging it (Cockayne and Richardson 2017, 1643). But because tech has such wide-reaching capacities, its global influence should be even more cause for caution than celebration. If the industry does not realize the way it reproduces inequalities, it runs the risk of perpetuating them through its products and policies. What happens when these inequalities are reproduced through technology itself, and how are these inequalities then naturalized through tech?

Automated Labor, Invisible Housekeeping, and AI Assistants

I sat in Emily Burns' Oakland apartment on a bright spring morning, sipping on extra-caFFEinated black tea while taking intermittent bites of an assortment of cookies. With sunlight peeking through her large living room windows, we chatted nonchalantly, despite me taking notes the entire time. As we discussed her job in inclusive design at a well-known software company, we came upon the topic of gender in relationship to labor in her workplace. While many of her coworkers are women, most of them are in UX research or other design roles. After a thoughtful pause, she remarked how occupational roles had also mapped onto gendered expectations of labor at the office:

If a member of the design team is meeting with a programmer, they're [the design team members] the ones who are doing the scheduling or notetaking—the tasks you assume would be automated. There are a lot more women in design in general, and so whenever the company has a chunk of money to spend, it's assumed that it'll go to the people doing the 'real' work, like programming.

Women in tech have historically performed the invisible, rote labor that upholds the industry. From nimble-fingered women in the Global South working in silicon chip factories (Ong 1985), to data entry workers (Freeman 2000), employers have long favored women for low-wage positions for their assumed obedience and docility.²⁶ But as Emily astutely observes, even in white-collar occupations, women have been relegated to doing the feminized organizational housekeeping, which the programmers perceived as being automated.²⁷

The labor hierarchy amongst tech workers—with programming being perceived as superior and more difficult than design work—is inseparable from a gendered labor hierarchy. Following Joan Acker’s (1990, 2006) idea of inequality regimes, structural gender inequalities are not only reproduced through relationships between men and women, but through other means such as occupational hierarchy. Because programming is predominantly male, technical, and highly compensated, while design departments tend to be predominantly women (or at least have more women than other departments) and creatively driven, the assumption that the extra funds should go to the ‘real’ work of programming highlight the assumed importance of men’s work and the devaluation of women’s work. Despite the women on Emily’s team being senior to the programmers, they were nevertheless expected to do the ‘automated’ labor of scheduling meetings and notetaking. Further, by describing the design team’s labor as appearing to be

²⁶ The assumed obedience and docility of women in the Global South is rooted in neoliberal and colonial justifications for outsourcing labor to more easily exploitable workers in order to maximize profits. This does not mean that women comply with these labor expectations or surveillance. See Ong (1987) for an example of gendered factory worker resistance.

²⁷ Ethel Mickey (2019) has found that when tech start-ups restructure before going public (issuing an initial public offering, or IPO, of their stock on a major stock exchange), the bureaucratization process creates rigid labor hierarchies, with women relegated to low-status, invisible tasks they hadn’t previously held.

automated, Emily notes the invisible, rote nature of the technological ‘housekeeping’ that women are expected to perform.

Emily’s coworkers’ perception of gendered labor as automated or rote is reminiscent of one of the industry’s most visible and well-known technologies: AI virtual assistants. Amazon’s Alexa or Apple’s Siri are technological hallmarks of their respective companies, but since the 2000s there have also been countless lesser known virtual assistants for specific businesses and websites, tasked with enhancing user experience, helping users navigate functions, or assisting in answering questions, setting timers, or scheduling appointments by voice or chat command (Zdenek 2007). Hierarchical ideas about gender, race, and class shape the design and expected functions of what these virtual assistants do, and how they should “act” and sound. It’s therefore important to consider which people virtual assistants are emulating, how they emulate them, and what labor is expected of them. AI virtual assistants are typically designed as feminine, selfless, polite, and devoted to pleasing the user; their tasks are secretarial and routine support work that align with feminized labor in the public and private spheres.²⁸ As Sean Zdenek (2007) notes, users do not *use* virtual assistants but rather *interact* with them as social actors. Through their feminized designs, virtual assistant programmers and designers “enact familiar scripts about women’s work, circumscribe the range of possible roles and personalities for women, [and] invoke service to others as the primary context for women’s work (at the expense of other ways

²⁸ Sean Zdenek (2007) writes extensively about the sexualization and infantilization of feminized virtual assistants. He finds virtual humans to be “hyperfeminized [and] objectified along multiple axes: as women, as racial Others, as technologies, as commodities, and/or as children” (Zdenek 2007, 422). They are designed as women seeking to be mastered and controlled, or as emotional and childlike in order to quell quick-tempered users.

of inscribing social practice and human labor)” (Zdenek 2007, 398). In turn, women’s labor—vis-à-vis virtual assistants—appear objective and natural, far removed from the social and hierarchical relationships that shaped it (Zdenek 2007; Sweeney and Villa-Nicholas 2022). Through Emily’s workplace experiences, I found that the labor expected of women in the tech industry as *workers* is inseparable from the labor expected from women in the form of AI virtual assistants.

Through analyses of advertisements and promotional material, feminist STS scholars have unveiled how virtual assistants are socially coded to portray and fulfill feminized, racialized, and class-based labor. Using a 1957 *Mechanix Illustrated* article speculating on the future of technology, Ruha Benjamin (2019) reflects on how our relationship with tech is a mirror to how we view and experience racial hierarchies. The article’s illustration portrays a robot putting a jacket onto a white man; the caption reads: “In 1863, Abe Lincoln freed the slaves. But in 1965, slavery will be back! We’ll all have personal slaves again, only this time we won’t fight a Civil War over them. Slavery will be here to stay. Don’t be alarmed. We mean robot ‘slaves’” (Benjamin 2019, 57). This imagined future of technological assistants, which harkens back to the ‘good ole days’ of slavery, has an intended audience in mind: the robot slave was meant to serve a white master, who sought the benefits of slave labor without the ‘pesky’ illegality or ethical dilemmas. As this illustration demonstrates, race and technology are coproduced, embedded with desires that implicate who the intended users are, and who the technology is modeled after.

Similar to Benjamin (2019), Thao Phan (2019) found that advertisements and product reviews for Echo, Amazon’s voice-activated digital assistant, highlight the gendered, racial, and class dimensions of virtual assistant labor. She examines how “mainstream discourse on smart

homes...weave together radically new technologies with deeply conservative principles” (Phan 2019, 9). In particular, she reveals how digital domestic assistants fulfill women’s domestic labor and emulate maternal, housewife, and most notably, domestic servant roles. In these advertisements, heteronormative nuclear families and heterosexual couples utilize the Echo to conduct cognitive, reproductive, and other domestic labor in the household: making grocery lists, ordering supplies, setting reminders for a wedding anniversary, and even reading children bedtime stories. Rather than the Echo solely invoking the image of a wife or mother, Phan argues it instead emulates the master/domestic servant relationship of nineteenth-to-twentieth century American households. For example, the Echo assists working women with domestic tasks, allowing her to concentrate on her paid labor outside the home; it also only speaks when spoken to. However, the Echo’s voice is linguistically coded as an educated, white, middle-class woman, far removed from the historical reality of immigrant and/or women of color domestic workers: “The Echo romanticizes the relations of servitude in a way that denies the pain and historic context of that relation”, while “eras[ing] the bourgeois middle-class home as a site of exploitation, especially for women of color” (Phan 2019, 4). In the U.S., more than half of caregivers and domestic workers are Black, Latina, or Asian women, and roughly 35 percent are immigrants (Wolfe et al. 2020). Parreñas (2008) writes that the Philippines’ colonial history shaped expectations of Filipino servitude, from Filipino men working as domestic servants in colonial American households and the U.S. Navy, to Filipino women immigrating to the U.S. to work as nurses and caregivers (5). Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) notes that most Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles have no such work experience from their countries of origin, but became domestic workers due to limited work opportunities or English skills, or other such barriers. In addition, Jennifer Jihye Chun and Cynthia Crawford (2018) noticed an increase in

Chinese immigrant women working in homecare after diminishing opportunities in low-wage manufacturing jobs. Despite the colonial and social forces that shape domestic and care work as immigrant and women of color labor, Amazon's Echo obscures these uncomfortable patterns and instead presents a palatable, socially coded middle-class white woman digital assistant for middle-class (and above) families.

The virtual assistant also represents the ideal worker in a capitalist society: it is never off the clock, never gets sick, and never takes time off (Zdenek 2007, 420). As Miriam Sweeney and Melissa Villa-Nicholas (2022) illustrate, Latina-coded virtual assistants are specifically in accordance with colonial-capitalist models that portray the ideal Latina worker and citizen. Using two examples of Latina AI virtual assistants—AVA, which helps travelers navigate airports; and EMMA, the virtual assistant for the United States Citizen and Immigration Services—they find that Latina virtual assistants “offer an alternative extraction of labor that leverages superficial markers of cultural identity without extending labor opportunities to actual Latina information service workers within US borders. The ‘cost-effective’ Latina...circumvents the ‘problem’ of actual Latina workers” (156). This is best illustrated in AVA's sales pitch: “Works 24 hours, 7 days a week and never takes a break! No background check required!” (Sweeney and Villa-Nicholas 2022, 153). These examples demonstrate how AI virtual assistants disassociate people from their labor. Virtual assistants like AVA or EMMA offer Latina labor “without the economic and legal obligations of paying workers fair wages, overtime, or offering health care and leave benefits, and perhaps, most important, without the always present question about the citizenship status of those employees” (Sweeney and Villa-Nicholas 2022, 152). In other words, they provide the labor without the “problems” of actual Latina workers, amplifying or obscuring social scripts around gender, race, and labor.

But how do feminine-coded virtual assistants relate back to tech workers like the designers on Emily's team, who were expected to do the notetaking or scheduling for male programmers? Women, particularly racialized women, have historically been confined to domestic and care work, or service and support roles, and what we see from feminized virtual assistants is no different in this regard. Put simply, representations of women as virtual assistants uphold gender, race, and class hierarchies. Consequently, virtual assistants dehumanize feminized and racialized labor, separating the actual people and their labor from their social and historical constructions. While Emily didn't remark on any open hostility or malicious intent from her coworkers' actions, I question whether male programmers' mundane assumptions can be separated from the tech they create—especially if these products are made to replicate or offload labor traditionally assigned to women. If men are assuming their female colleagues and superiors will handle the office “housekeeping” tasks, and if even women's advocacy organizations are encouraging women to perform affective labor at work, who's to say these attitudes don't seep into the ways we conceptualize how tech should serve us?

Conclusion

A year after the conference, I received an email from TGB with the subject line: “BIG News.” Citing the systemic sexism and pervasive “bro culture” of Silicon Valley, TGB decided to relocate its headquarters away from the “ivory towers of San Francisco,” to a metropolitan area in the South not known for having a thriving tech hub. From this move, they hoped to create more opportunities for women and to establish a new tech culture based on “creativity and mutual respect.” This made it even more of a shock, when a little more than a year after their move, TGB shuttered its doors for good.

In a solemn farewell letter, TGB cited a lack of sufficient funding as the reason for its closure. And though I did not fully agree with their approach to gender equality, I still felt a tinge of sadness for the large community they cultivated that undoubtedly felt this loss. Despite DEI's quick ascension as a post-George Floyd buzzword, with industries even beyond tech hoping to capitalize off of it, DEI had just as many critics and detractors. Within the U.S. political context, DEI (and at the time of the TGB conference, critical race theory) had become part of a culture war, with critics arguing that it allows for undeserving individuals to take positions and opportunities away from people—meaning white people, and specifically white men—who have 'actually' earned them. And although some of the most established tech companies had initially embraced DEI initiatives, several prominent tech executives have argued that DEI is antithetical to the industry's initial meritocratic values. Alexander Wang, the founder of ScaleAI, posted on X (formerly Twitter): "Today we've formalized an important hiring policy at Scale. We hire for MEI: merit, excellence, and intelligence." His tweet was applauded by Elon Musk, of SpaceX, Tesla, and X; Palmer Luckey, founder of Oculus VR; and Brian Armstrong, CEO of the cryptocurrency company Coinbase (Davis and Wiggers 2024). For these tech executives, the impending destruction laid bare by DEI can only be combatted with meritocracy.

Several of my interlocutors also mentioned the backlash and disinterest many of their colleagues had toward DEI initiatives. August "Auggie" Wyndham, a programmer for an employment-finding online platform, referred to the DEI culture wars within the industry and his eventual apathy towards it, born from defeat. While on a phone call with me as he walked his dog after work, he told me through an audible sigh, "There are still a lot of 'skull measurement morons' in tech. The type of people who say, 'This [DEI] is why tech companies are failing.' It's a typical lazy analysis, like they don't like DEI because they don't want to go to more meetings,

that anything that's a minor inconvenience to them must be stupid." Here, Auggie is referring to the racist theory that skull size correlates to intelligence and race, with white Europeans having the largest cranial capacity and thus the highest intelligence, and Black and indigenous peoples having the smallest cranial capacity and therefore lowest intelligence. Franz Boas (1912) and other scholars have since debunked these claims, yet this theory is still popular within some pro-eugenics, right-wing, and white supremacist circles. These 'skull measurement morons' are also becoming increasingly vocal in the tech sector, with eugenic beliefs coinciding with a rise in pronatalist views in tech—that is, that the moral panic over population decline can be solved by white Christian procreation, with Elon Musk as their poster child (Geiger 2026). Because of these experiences, Auggie—who is a biracial Black man—relayed a sense of apathy to the tech industry's perceived inability to change on a structural level. He surmised that most tech workers "lack the willingness to engage critically with the dynamics of the industry," and thought it best for tech workers to just "get yours and get out" while they still can. Similarly, Emily Burns told me about the response her coworkers had to an inclusive design summit that took place one week after George Floyd's murder: "The operations team who was behind the scenes, staging all of this, *really* absorbed those messages. I don't know that the message went that much further, though. I heard from the operations team that there was a lot of feedback that people didn't want to hear that [DEI] shit. And they were kind of sick of it, or that people were not necessarily open to it."

For those who resonate with DEI and its values, it can be difficult to bring forth valid critiques of its initiatives and methods when it has rapidly become the scapegoat for so many societal issues, maligned publicly by politicians and CEOs alike, and even being hurdled as a

slur towards Black Americans in high positions.²⁹ Tech, which lauds itself as an accepting and multicultural industry based on merit—is not immune to these issues.

I recognize that TGB leadership and conference panelists had a sincere desire for gender equality in tech, but emphasizing feminized labor and other forms of normative femininity inadvertently naturalized gender hierarchies. As Carrigan (2024) states, “there is still a pressing need to transform a culture that keeps technologists from imagining their women peers in roles other than those traditionally associated with providing goods and caring labor” (3). However, it’s equally frustrating that gender is rarely a central theme of mainstream tech conferences. In the dozens and dozens of tech events I’ve attended, not one promoted empathy as a desirable trait for male tech leaders. The devaluation of women’s contributions and labor was not lost on my interlocutors, who largely disagreed with TGB’s approach but saw the importance in reframing how we view feminized labor as a society nonetheless. Lizzie Fordham, the retired electrical and computer engineering professor, reminded me of the careful balance between valuing feminized labor while recognizing the social context. After growing frustrated with a friend for their misperceptions of electrical engineering, she told me she eventually wrote out a long and thoughtful Facebook post arguing how women’s traditional labor is essentially a form of engineering that goes unappreciated. Lizzie grew up in the 1960s and was taught “girl tasks” like sewing, cooking, and embroidery.³⁰ These tasks involve specific timing and measurements,

²⁹ One timely example of DEI being used as a slur against African Americans was when Brandon Scott, the Mayor of Baltimore, was called the “DEI Mayor” in right-wing circles after the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed in March 2024 (Williams IV 2024). The slur implies that Scott was a diversity hire, despite being democratically voted by a city with a 70 percent Black population.

³⁰ While Katie mentions her upbringing in the 1960s to explain the gendered division of labor she was raised in, studies have shown that in contemporary U.S. households, gendered division of labor still structures how household chores are doled out, despite men proclaiming more feminist values than they had in the past (Brenan 2020).

complex processes that must be completed in a certain order, and constant tinkering to create a more usable item or better product. “Girl tasks,” she argues, “are not inferior to or irrelevant to engineering.” While she thinks it’s great that girls and young people in general are learning about engineering through robotics (which, she adds, is just a small part of what engineering is), she wants young women to know that their time spent doing traditional women’s work is also engineering experience. Lizzie’s approach homes in on the historical construction of women’s labor. Rather than frame women as naturally skilled cooks or embroiderers, she highlights the conditioning under a gendered division of labor to learn domestic tasks like cooking or sewing. In contrast, without examining why gendered labor appears naturalized, TGB inadvertently reinforces inequalities and create expectations for women to perform feminized and affective labor in the workplace. The tech industry in particular has the added dilemma of creating commonly used products and services that obscure these inequalities, and both women and virtual assistants are expected to happily provide cognitive, affective, and other forms of feminized labor for their employers or users, with little thought towards why the technology is designed the way it is. Therefore, we cannot expect our technology to advance gender and racial equalities when they’re naturalizing said inequalities in the workplace.

This chapter only just begins to explore advocacy and DEI initiatives within the tech industry. There are many other strategies tech workers engage with to promote gender and race-based initiatives in their industry, often working against the structure and goals of their own companies. In the next chapter, I turn to these strategies that tech worker advocates employ when facing the language and methods of corporate social responsibility (CSR), other DEI initiatives, and employee resource groups (ERGs).

CHAPTER 2: “I USED TO BE BRIGHT-EYED AND BUSHY-TAILED”: WORKER EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING CORPORATE ACTIVISM

Introduction

Before Ariel Koren was abruptly fired from Google in 2021, she had gone through all the “proper” channels to try to enact change in the workplace.³¹ The former product marketing manager had noticed that Project Nimbus, a 1.2 billion dollar cloud software service contract between Google, Amazon, and the Israeli government, launched fairly quietly, with very little fanfare for such a major project. As someone who was knowledgeable about Israel’s surveillance technologies and testing of military weapons on the Palestinian population (Lowenstein 2023), Koren grew concerned and circulated a petition at work and sent it to leadership. Shortly after, she was abruptly given the ultimatum of transferring to the Brazil office with no clear explanation why—especially peculiar given that Google’s offices were remote at the time due to COVID. Although she was given two weeks to decide, after the first week—and before Koren had made any decision—her boss had already declared to the rest of her team that Koren had resigned.

As an anti-Zionist Jew, Koren had previously taken issue with the way Judaism and Zionism were conflated at Google, but her voice was silenced by corporate activist groups. For instance in 2020, Google had donated \$200,000 to its “Black At Google” employee resource group, or ERG. Akin to official workplace interest or affinity groups, ERGs open up opportunities for employees to meet, network, socialize, or simply join chat groups around certain issues, although many address identity and social justice issues. Black At Google redistributed the donation to other Black social justice organizations, including Movement 4

³¹ All names have been changed unless—as in the case of Koren—their statements were made publicly.

Black Lives, an anti-capitalist, abolitionist coalition that had expressed solidarity with Palestinians in the past. When the Jewish ERG at Google (called “Jewglers”) caught wind of this, they accused Google of supporting antisemitic groups; in response, Google apologized and donated \$400,000 to Jewglers, which they then redistributed to organizations that upheld and supported Israeli apartheid, illegal settlements, and the Israeli Occupational Forces. When Koren and other anti-Zionist Jewish colleagues emailed leadership to address their concerns, they were ignored and banned from discussing the issue on the Jewgler mailing list, despite the ERG supposedly representing all Jewish voices.

During the early months of the genocide in Gaza, I attended a teach-in on workplace organizing on Palestine led by No Tech for Apartheid (NOTA), an anti-imperial, anti-military tech worker coalition co-founded by Koren after her firing. Throughout her ordeal, she ascertained that Google was hiding behind its corporate diversity efforts like its ERGs and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to promote or allow harmful imperialist and capitalist ideologies to continue. While the ERGs are presented to make the company appear diverse and well-meaning, she asserted, “in practice, this group is systemically functioning as an outlet to drive forward right-wing ideologies under the guise of promoting diversity...[and] silence the voices of Googlers who support Palestinian freedom. Google leadership relies on this structure to avoid the actual work of listening and responding to its employees who are seeking to hold Google accountable for its relationship with the Israeli government and military” (Koren 2022).

In Chapter 1, I introduced (in all its complexities) how tech workers explore diversity and representation through women’s empowerment non-profits and non-governmental organizations. This chapter expands on this discussion by exploring activism within the corporation itself, through company-approved channels often but not limited to addressing gender and racial

diversity in the tech industry. Through a larger umbrella of corporate social responsibility (CSR), tech companies encourage the hiring and support of underrepresented workers and their social causes through DEI and ERGs. While these initiatives appear beneficial on the surface, I follow Koren's argument that in reality they largely prevent institutional change, and are used to stymie more radical movements from taking hold. By encouraging neoliberal feminism and anti-racism, which I identify through its emphasis on individual success and corporate measures of social good, tech companies publicize their corporate diversity efforts in order to deflect from their harmful capitalist and imperialist projects, while simultaneously encouraging self-censorship and surveillance against worker dissent.

In the twenty-first century, CSR has become a corporate tool for both crafting a benevolent public image and industry self-regulation. With neoliberal policies that deregulate and privatize state social provisions (Harvey 2005, 42), the rise of CSR inversely follows a decline of state regulations in the private sector, with regulatory responsibilities informally transferring from the government to the corporations themselves. This is reflected in a shift in the goal and targets of CSR in recent years. While it was originally aimed at contributing to a broad sense of social welfare—similar to Microsoft founder Bill Gates' Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which provides healthcare globally as well as scholarships to underprivileged children in the US—the function of CSR has transformed to one that addresses the companies' own shortcomings, usually related to its environmentally and socially responsible behavior, as a way of outlining their ethical standards. The new CSR shows that companies are “actively promoting social and environmental standards that regulate or alter their core practices, often in an attempt to show they are ahead of their competitors” (Auld et al. 2008, 415).

As I've highlighted in Chapter 1, George Floyd's murder sparked larger discussions on the role the tech industry plays—vis-à-vis surveillance and facial recognition technology—in the over-policing of Black and brown bodies. In swift reaction to this backlash, tech companies “quickly threw diversity into their mission statements,” as one tech worker interlocutor put it, by starting or amplifying CSR and DEI initiatives to publicly reaffirm their commitment to racial equality: pledging to hire more diverse candidates, supporting minority-led projects, and providing more opportunities for advancement for women and people of color. But in practice, how does one “do” diversity in a corporate setting, and who does DEI stand to benefit?

Many tech worker activists argue that these initiatives are superficial at best, as their internal policies often contradict their CSR work and public image. For instance, in 2021, Lyft was praised for offering to cover legal expenses for drivers if they were sued for taking women to abortion clinics after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned (Rana 2022), yet still denied these very same drivers employee status and healthcare benefits (Dolber 2023). Most of the tech workers I spoke with did not have faith in their companies to actually work toward social good on their own accord, nor did they necessarily believe that CSR and DEI would be the way to achieve it. But within corporate and capitalist constraints, they negotiated what it means for them to “do activism,” especially when it came to incrementally mitigating harm that the tech industry participates in. In this way, tech activists have learned to navigate the “appropriate” channels—as laid out by the company—in order to make strides toward achievable goals.

Between 2020-2024, DEI quickly gained traction while concurrently attracting the ire of conservative policymakers and corporate leaders who consider DEI anti-white male discrimination. DEI has since become a convenient tool to deride social justice movements, and as of 2025, many of the companies that initiated programs post-Floyd are now getting rid of

them altogether. For tech workers wary of corporate diversity efforts yet staunchly against the right-wing, anti-DEI accusations, how do they view their work for and within institutional diversity? I discuss the tensions of doing institutional diversity work during the exponential growth and precarity of DEI, as well as the challenges tech workers face when navigating corporate barriers to social justice and equality.

‘The Language of Leadership’ and the Financial Incentives for Diversity

It was nearly ten minutes past our scheduled interview time before Lauren Chow, a business-to-business (B2B) tech worker based in San Francisco, frantically popped into our video call.³² “Sorry I’m late, I was finishing another meeting,” she apologized earnestly. I’ve known Lauren since elementary school, and while I was nothing but appreciative she took time out of her busy workday for our interview, I chuckled internally that she had felt like her tardiness was out of the ordinary and necessitated an explanation. After briefly catching up, she transitioned effortlessly from our small talk to her issues with the tech industry, almost singlehandedly carrying the conversation.

Growing up, Lauren admitted she hadn’t been very politically active, nor was she particularly vocal or proud of her Chinese heritage. When I complimented her stunning lavender jade bangle, she replied, “Thanks, you know I used to avoid wearing jade because I just felt it was—it was too Chinese, you know? But now, I’m like, whatever, I *am* Chinese.” This was definitely a shift for Lauren, which I had noticed over the past few months as she began to step more and more into activism: social media posts on protests she attended against the U.S.

³² Business-to-business companies, or B2B companies, create and sell products geared towards other businesses, rather than the general consumer public.

military presence in the Asia Pacific, writing op-ed articles about microaggressions towards Asian American women—these are just a few of the avenues she took to “stand for something” after “waking up” to the systemic racism against Asian Americans.

In 2021, Asian American activists led the Stop AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) Hate movement after increased instances of xenophobia and discrimination,³³ including a string of violent attacks toward mainly Asian women and elders during the pandemic (Zhou and Banh 2026), exacerbated by sensationalist COVID headlines placing blame on Asians for the “Kung flu.” In 2021, Robert Aaron Long, a white male gunman, killed eight people at two Asian-owned spas he frequented in the Atlanta area; six of the victims were Asian women who worked at the spas (BBC 2021). Long stated that he was motivated to eradicate “temptations” due to his sex addiction (Fausset et al. 2021), parroting Orientalist tropes that hypersexualize Asian women while portraying them as passive, docile, and subservient to white Western men (Parreñas Shimizu 2007). Like many others in the Asian American community, this act of violence deeply resonated with Lauren and caused her to ruminate on her own experiences of racialized trauma.³⁴ As she recalled,

I definitely cried. And I felt like that impacted me very personally, which was surprising to me. Because growing up in the U.S., we just see devastating news, shootings all the time. And I feel like you become so numb to it, that it doesn't really impact you that much personally, and that's kind of been my experience. But what led to the spa shootings, when I found out it was Asian women...that really impacted me. I started just like reliving all these microaggressions from throughout my whole life, and thinking about all my experiences in the past, with racial microaggressions at work...And, it was hard to want to work. I found there's a term for it called 'racial trauma' where a big

³³ The movement is also alternatively referred to as “Stop Asian Hate.”

³⁴ Lauren is one of many Asian Americans processing race-based trauma after COVID. As Stacey Diane A. Litam (2020) observed, “AAPIs are facing greater rates of racial discrimination, harassment, violence, sinophobic attitudes, and racial slurs because of fears related to COVID-19 and the current sociopolitical climate” (51).

triggering event like the spa shooting, it can force people who've undergone microaggressions, and things throughout their whole life to relive it. So I did empathize with that.

Once Lauren processed her trauma, she decided to take action by convincing her company to support Asian American charities and social justice organizations. After all, her company had just emphasized the importance of diversity and racial justice issues after Floyd's murder and had even donated thousands of dollars to Black racial justice organizations. But she found their response—a “fluffy” social media statement saying they support the Asian American community during this difficult time, posted a week after the shooting—disappointing and performative. She grew frustrated with the lackluster response, telling me,

They just said they stand with the Asian American community at this time, it was very brief, no donations, nothing... With diversity being, I think, a more important topic in the business world [these days], a lot of companies should be responding to this externally and internally well, but it took a while—I think it was even a full week before I saw anything from my company. And I was really going through a hard time. And so I actually ended up bringing it up to my manager and saying, you know, it's a really hard week for Asian Americans, and I want to know what the company's doing to respond to this. And because my department [works on PR] and is responsible for how the company communicates and responds externally to things like this...she [my manager] was very sympathetic, and then actually went to talk to the different people on leadership about getting a message out.

Although she continued to feel frustrated by their response and wait time, she also added that the company has made incremental improvements, including supporting her request to form a social-justice-oriented ERG for Asian American issues. However, Lauren also confided in me that she received a quicker, more effective response from her supervisors through another method: creating fake social media accounts and publicly criticizing her company online for not doing enough to support AAPI issues. “I know this is kind of bad,” she confessed sheepishly, “but I wrote [social media comments] like, ‘What are you doing for the AAPI community? Why haven’t you donated? Didn’t you say you care about diversity?’ They actually said it wasn't until

they saw those comments—which obviously, they didn't know it was me because it was anonymous—that they weren't even planning to respond until they saw that. So I felt kind of proud that I did it.” Knowing her company’s fear of negative publicity and how it would affect their public image and bottom line, Lauren utilized social media to manipulate a quicker response and create her desired outcome. In the end, her company donated a significant amount of money to AAPI-related charities and organizations—which they publicized, of course.

Despite believing that executives at her company truly care about fostering diversity, Lauren also recognized the limitations of their corporate DEI support, and quickly realized she needed to force their hand through publicity to highlight the potential financial risk of not contributing to racial justice causes. In a similar fashion, Mario Zanetti, a tech worker in the burgeoning cannabis tech industry,³⁵ was able to convince his company to start a social equity program for Black business owners by highlighting the financial incentives of supporting marginalized communities. Based in Seattle and calling in on Zoom, Mario was equal parts chaotic and welcoming; between talking to his dogs who were barking in the background, and taking short breaks to receive packages, he easily disarmed my nerves with his radiant, kind energy. As a white trans man, Mario expressed wanting to use whatever privilege he has to help others through his work. In the U.S., marijuana regulation differs from state-to-state, but many states that have legalized marijuana have also instituted social equity programs to support Black and brown potential business owners who are often the targets of cannabis criminalization. Mario spoke passionately about the importance of social equity programs, detailing the structural

³⁵ Cannabis tech is a relatively new and growing sector of the tech industry that focuses on software, cloud services, and other technologies used to streamline the business operations of running marijuana dispensaries.

violence against Black and brown communities when it comes to the over-policing and over-criminalization of marijuana; he therefore firmly believed Black and brown people should now be the ones to benefit from the cannabis industry. When he realized his current company didn't have any social equity programs of their own to support these business owners, he and his team created one, which included business coaching webinars, and a cost-reduction plan to "set them up for success." This was a program that Mario was passionate about from a social justice standpoint, but when presenting it to his supervisor, he made sure to highlight the financial incentives of expanding their consumer base, as well as the good publicity it would give their company. He recalled, "[The higher-ups] care in the sense—if we're being honest—that by doing this, it's going to get them more business. I wouldn't say that they were sitting there like, 'Let's help these people that are in marginalized communities and who need our help.'" He continued:

And I came in and I'm like, why don't we have this? And I got the support right off the bat, because they're like, 'Oh, well, if you're going to handle it, you have our support. We give you our permission to do it, you set everything up, and then we'll give the approval.' Because at the end of the day, it's a business opportunity for us to bring on more customers, right? So I don't necessarily know that their thought process behind the support was really what I would hope but at the end of the day, as long as there's someone at the company like myself who does care, and does want to roll these things out, and I'm getting the support from the company—that's really all that matters to me.

Both Lauren and Mario rationalized social justice and equity initiatives to their employers through their potential financial impact, even if they felt the importance of these initiatives transcended economic interests. In Luzilda C. Arciniega's (2021) research on corporate diversity, she finds that diversity professionals often frame their work around capitalist and market logics in order to satisfy their companies' financial objectives, thus repackaging diversity work as profitable. In other words, they are "aware that working toward achieving their personal and social desires (i.e., racial equity) entails working through the structural constraints of their work"—even if that entails deemphasizing the social justice aspects of diversity and inclusion

(Arciniega 2021, 353). Sara Ahmed (2007) similarly finds that diversity workers “might use the business case model when appealing to senior managers, [although] they also tend to define diversity with a social justice framework for themselves” (241). Neither Lauren nor Mario expressed any personal interest in the financial benefits of racial justice work, but both knew that money was the “language of leadership” in which they needed to speak. Alice Yap, a UX researcher at a Big Five tech company, had similarly noticed the importance of speaking the “language of leadership” when trying to enact systemic change at the office. As a queer, immigrant, woman of color, she’s passionate about addressing racial inequalities in tech, as well as reducing her company’s environmental impact. However, she also has concerns about how effective she would be, telling me,

BIPOC individuals, and specifically Black and indigenous people—that is one thing that I care about, and I think from an environmental standpoint—I want to push for it. But at the same time, I mean, capitalism doesn't bode well with environmental justice [laughs]. So we'll see. It's also tricky because like, I can care about all these things. But if I'm not speaking in a language that the leadership cares about, then there wouldn't necessarily be any change that happens. And so that's the conundrum: is what I'm doing going to be worthwhile? And I think that for now, it will be...[but] at the same time [I] to try to make sure that I'm being effective.

For tech worker activists like Lauren and Mario, whose activist methods work “within the system” at their workplaces, they recognize that corporate diversity requires a strategy which focuses on their companies’ public commitment to diversity and inclusion, inextricably linked to its potential financial gains and losses. As Alice notes, speaking this language is important—and for them, trumps their desire to frame and justify their activist efforts around morals or social justice. In other words, using financial incentives and publicity as the language of leadership acted as the vehicle to get the work of activism done.

‘The Purpose You Serve Isn’t to Change Shit’: Performative Actions and Apathy in Corporate Diversity Work

The day after George Floyd's murder made national headlines, Kwame Johnson, a data analyst for a tech conglomerate, was called into a last-minute meeting alongside other Black employees to discuss implementing funding and redistribution efforts for racial justice initiatives. Since his company was one of many that had written a statement condemning Floyd's murder—and given the company's ubiquity and amassed wealth—it quickly initiated other efforts to fund and support Black social justice organizations, content, and projects. Although he left the company a few years later, he contemplated what the outcome of those initiatives were. Wondering aloud, he said, “I don't know if it's because I was on the business side of it, but I noticed a gradual shift in the focus of their efforts—from over-policing and surveillance, to more of celebrating Black culture.”

In the months following Floyd's murder, tech companies initially addressed anti-surveillance and over-policing in tech by donating funds and ramping up diversity and inclusion initiatives; but because these efforts mapped onto existing neoliberal logics, they quickly became opportunities to create good publicity, upholding their companies as purveyors of an enlightened, “conscious” capitalism. This neoliberal shift shows how institutions “do” institutional diversity in practice. According to George Monbiot (2017), neoliberalism is distinguished by its philosophy that “human society should be run in every respect as if it were a business, its social relations reimaged as commercial transactions, people redesignated as human capital. The aim and purpose of society is to maximize profits” (30; see also Stolte 2023). Gaye Tuchman (2009) distinguishes neoliberal institutional diversity through its attention to shared benchmarks of accountability, while also using it as opportunities for branding. Sara Ahmed (2007; see also 2012) makes the argument that institutionalized diversity does not equate to anti-racism, but is instead a business model to promote the university's public image and ‘commitment’ to

multiculturalism as a celebration of difference. And Chenyu Wang and Chaise LaDousa (2024) further argue that institutionalized DEI initiatives “illustrate how a neoliberal form of agency—through which workers craft their value according to what they imagine themselves to bring to a company—enables depoliticized and uncritical representations on political issues” (14). As these scholars note, corporate DEI utilizes celebrations of multiculturalism and individual empowerment and achievement to bolster their company’s public image. Meanwhile, the actual work of “doing” diversity is put upon women, people of color, and other underrepresented workers.

Performative corporate diversity—endless presentations on inclusivity; statements of solidarity with no follow-through; and a shift in attention from critiquing white supremacy, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy, to celebrating multiculturalism—did not go unnoticed by my interlocutors, and quickly became a source of fatigue for them when they were pressured into doing the work for the institution. When Emily Burns, a tech worker in inclusive design, recounted the endless number of inclusive design presentations she was asked to give post-Floyd, she came to the conclusion that “tech activism is so easy to be commercialized, and then you just make this company look really good. And that's the purpose that you actually serve. The purpose that you serve isn't to change shit.” Emily was officially hired by her company in 2020 at the height of its inclusivity craze. One of her first tasks—as a disabled woman who uses a wheelchair—was assigned matter-of-factly by her boss: “I want you to go around [the building] and write down everything that isn’t wheelchair accessible.” Although she had only worked in tech for less than a year at that point, she recalled being pulled into meeting after meeting to give presentations on inclusive design:

I gave so many presentations [on accessibility], because I don't know if it was the pandemic or the murder of George Floyd, the rise of the reckoning in tech around racial disparity, but there was a very big appetite for talks about inclusion...and people were like, 'Come talk to us, come talk to us.' And anyway, so I was a researcher, and sometimes it felt like I was sort of a consultant, who would just give talks all the time. I gave so many talks.

Emily grew exhausted from the number of talks she gave day after day and her de-facto role as a consultant, and after facing both consumer and colleague backlash for her accessibility work, became disillusioned with tech activism as a whole. When she ran surveys with her company's consumer base, she found herself navigating the right-wing, anti-DEI crowd who "were just really pissed that they had to listen to somebody talk about inclusion...it just pissed strangers off who were like, 'Stupid tech trying to be woke.' It's just this sort of polarizing thing of wokeness." She also realized that from the employee side, "The structures [like who receives feedback and who actually makes the decisions] don't enable them to do better with their products, so it's hard for the employees to do things differently. Because they're not incentivized to." She eventually quit her job for several reasons—one being burnout—and felt relieved to take up a job at a different tech company that wasn't centered on inclusive design:

I was actually very excited to have a role that wasn't centering inclusive design anymore, because I just felt completely lost. And I felt like I was spinning way too many plates, and I didn't think it was very fair. So that's partly just trying to get into a different environment to see if I could be happier, and also intentionally trying not to focus on inclusion anymore, because it felt so draining to care so much about my work. Because I was working with disabled people, and I would talk to them and listen to them, day after day, tell me how hard it was to use this fucking product because it's not accessible. And how frustrated they were that there were jobs that were like [mine], because the tools that people build for these careers, like aren't accessible. So I just became so aware and so close to that reality. It was a lot of energy. And I don't think I want to do that.

Emily's work in DEI weighed heavily on her to the point where it affected both her physical and emotional health, causing her to take an extended leave of absence before she quit. After feeling

like her inclusive efforts were in vain (very few of her recommendations ever got picked up), she realized she was part of a system she couldn't change, and the mental burden became too much.

Although programmer August “Auggie” Wyndham hadn't worked in corporate diversity before, he too was frustrated with the performative “business consulting” iteration of DEI. As a biracial Black man who graduated from a top liberal arts college, Auggie considers himself an “engaged global citizen” over an activist. Well-read and soft-spoken, he shared with me his gripes with the tech industry: from tech workers' cult-like reverence for tech idols, to the boom and bust cycles held up by the Department of Defense, he informed me with heavy-handed apathy that he doesn't “feel any awe for the industry.” In fact, Auggie has little optimism for tech workers' willingness to engage critically with the “dynamics of the industry,” observing that any talk of diversity tended to “piss a lot of people off.” Having previously worked in healthcare before earning his master's degree in computer science, he said,

Even when I worked in healthcare, the engineers [I worked with] were incredibly skeptical of DEI, even if they understood how race impacted health inequity. When it [diversity work] was framed as quality improvement, they were okay with it, they got it. But when it was framed as DEI, suddenly they weren't okay with it...And if you look at women's tech NGOs pre-DEI, there wasn't as much pushback as you see now. But now that DEI's being sold and pushed as consulting—it's more of a PR (public relations) exercise than it is about improving outcomes.

Auggie also expressed concern for how tech workers newly entering the industry will develop as people: “I fear for young people walking into the tech industry now—what they'll prioritize, and how they'll develop...tech bros these days have such a narrow focus on aesthetic things, getting ripped...there's an extreme emphasis on improving the self [aesthetically], but not on becoming a better person.”

Institutions incentivize DEI efforts as a mutually beneficial exchange—employees receive improved benefits while the company gets more satisfied and productive workers, as well

as the good publicity that public-facing DEI initiatives create for the company. But both Emily and Auggie view DEI as a publicity façade, and held little hope that it would create change in their workplaces or incentivize care amongst their colleagues and consumers. As Emily stated (and as Auggie hinted), their colleagues are simply not incentivized to care, and this created mental duress for Emily and apathy for Auggie.

Mary Holsworth, a professor of engineering at a technical institute, told me our interview “was like therapy” for her. Even with her illustrious academic career in STEM and steering several of her university’s diversity efforts, she wanted to make sure I knew she “had never worked in industry” before interviewing her. Yet her career and experience working within STEM’s institutional diversity are nonetheless illustrative of the issues at hand in the tech industry. Mary had dedicated much of her career to creating programs to help the advancement of women in STEM, and her university proudly publicized her achievements on their website. But behind the scenes, her diversity work was undervalued and underpaid. Her diversity initiatives took up a lot of her time, with no financial compensation or alleviation from her teaching duties, and after bureaucratic restructures, her position at the university became tenuous. With palpable frustration, she explained to me, “They talk diversity, but it’s all performative. I brought in millions in diversity funding, but they were saying I wasn’t successful as an *engineering* professor.”

In Chapter 1, I discussed how women were encouraged to perform undervalued, feminized labor in the office. Missing from these conversations is the unevenness of this exchange: why are women the ones encouraged to do this labor, who benefits, and who potentially receives the brunt of the backlash when these efforts fail? Mary highlights how diversity work is undervalued, feminized (and racialized) labor. As a white woman doing DEI,

her university tried to undermine her contributions to academia, even arguing that her diversity work got in the way of her “actual” work as an engineering professor (all while publicizing her diversity awards on its website and promotional material). The fatigue from educating others varied amongst my other interlocutors. Mario Zanetti didn’t seem to mind the burden of extra labor; as a self-described open book, he encouraged others to ask him any questions they had about his experience as a trans man no matter how offensive:

if something’s inappropriate, I’ll let you know. But I’m still going to answer [the question] because I’m an open book. Just don’t ask the next [trans] person that because it’s probably inappropriate—but they wouldn’t have known that unless they had that conversation with me. And I think that’s the best way to spread the word and get people on the same wavelength, as far as making change—getting the right information out there and talking to the right people.

But for Lauren Chow, she found the work of educating others—in this case, an executive at her company—“triggering” and “inappropriate.” She recounted a company training meeting on allyship, during which an executive who sympathized with the recent attacks on Asian elders,

cracks a smile, and he goes, ‘And I have to admit, I also love the diversity of the Asian American cuisine.’ And I just thought that was so inappropriate, because when you’re talking about social inequities, and hate crimes, to bring in food, which is like, generally Asian Americans are stereotyped about their food... And so I just thought that was very inappropriate. But he has learned a lot, and that’s been good. But I personally think when you’re going through that racial trauma, education shouldn’t be part of the burden.

Diversity and organizational studies scholars have long upheld that people of color, women, and other marginalized workers are the ones responsible for doing organizational diversity work, including the labor of educating others, which comes at the expense of their own career advancement and mental health (Ahmed 2012; Spencer 2025). These examples further demonstrate how diversity work reproduces structural inequalities by putting the burden of that work back on marginalized and discriminated employees: they were the ones expected to point out the problems and come up with the solutions. And in Lauren’s case, the white male executive who made the inappropriate comment later became one of the executive sponsors of the Asian

American ERG she co-founded. She acknowledges, “There's research, apparently, that has found that people outside of a group are more effective at advocating for that group than people in that group. I definitely can understand, right? Like a white man advocating for a group saying, We need to do this—I can kind of see how that can be more effective than [it coming from] someone who is Asian American.” Despite being the one doing the actual diversity work, Lauren’s ERG still needed the legitimacy of a white, male executive.

With that being said, both Lauren and Mary reveled in doing diversity work because they truly felt their work’s impact made a difference. But in Emily’s case, she felt her efforts were wasted when nothing she suggested was ever taken up. Her team had initiated a DEI program to recruit Black and Latino college students to apply for internships at the company, but it was ultimately unsuccessful when the hiring team refused to consider applicants from less ‘elite’ educational backgrounds:

I worked with some folks to put together a talk for some universities in the Bay Area, and they weren’t ‘elite’ universities. And we had students reaching out about internships and none of them got internships, because that wasn't what the research team was actually looking for, [because] the candidates were not ‘competitive-looking’ enough ...And diversity for them does tend to mean ethnic diversity only—instead of class diversity, or being open to people who don't have PhDs.

Elena Jakowski, a sales executive for a civic tech startup in the Midwest,³⁶ noticed how her company strove to rectify racial disparities in their majority white workforce by hiring more Black tech workers, but still only considered Black candidates from elite educational backgrounds. Elena is a self-described organizer: a white woman from a working-class background (her father was a welder and proud union activist), she’s done organizing work for

³⁶ Civic tech is a sector of the tech industry that works to improve civil society, usually regarding issues around voting and governance. I discuss civic tech more in-depth in Chapter 4.

animal rights and environmental justice issues, and has canvassed for Democratic Socialist candidates. Regarding her company's push to diversify the hiring process, she reported to me, "My hunch is—and it's fine that this was their main priority to a certain point, to hire more people of color, especially because we're starting off from a place where we were so white. But I think that there is still this level of like, 'Oh, these people are just like me, they got their MBA right after college.' There's some level of bias in the way we see certain candidates over others," adding that she wished they would also consider racially diverse candidates of different educational backgrounds and neurodiversity.

Company-led DEI initiatives also have the added effect of overemphasizing the individual's efforts and deemphasizing the structure, promoting diversity work through individualized empowerment. I observed some tech activists who boasted of their personal achievements and how they succeeded despite the glass ceiling, leading to some awkward moments when they seemed unaware or uninterested in larger structural issues within their own workplaces. In a conversation with a Chief Technology Officer and board member of Tech Girl Boss, she proudly proclaimed she was the only Democrat and one of the few women working on a military project during Trump's first term, with little thought into what the project was and who it might be harming. At another event, a senior director who had previously worked on Azure cloud software at Microsoft spoke poetically of how accommodating Microsoft was for working mothers and women in general, seemingly unaware that a few months ago, several of its employees were fired after speaking out against Azure's implementation in the genocide against

Palestinians.³⁷ Simultaneously, tech workers who've benefited from corporate DEI efforts were careful to toe the line, self-censoring to adhere to corporate values when they slipped into recognizing the harms in which the industry contributes. Upon meeting Tiffany Sedgwick, a Tech Girl Boss board member I met at their annual conference, she expressed enthusiasm about my research and was eager to learn more. Having received funding to write for Forbes and other mainstream media outlets on women's representation in tech, she asked if I wanted to co-write an article on my research. During our follow-up Zoom meeting, she intently typed notes with scribe-like dedication as I delved into my research pitch on gender, race, and labor in tech, including my interest in recent organizing and unionizing effort at several high-profile companies. But as soon as I mentioned the latter, the swift clacking of her keyboard fell silent. No sooner had I finished my sentence, she cut in with awkward abruptness, "As much as I would like to write about [tech organizing efforts], because my writing is funded by [the companies tech workers are organizing at], I just can't." This self-censorship was also evident at empowerment events sponsored by tech conglomerates—one telling moment in particular was at a Black-in-tech panel, where a critique of Big Tech was cut short by the speaker herself, quickly followed by a "but we love you, [tech conglomerate sponsor]!" and an exchange of knowing glances and laughs between the panelists. According to Ilana Gershon (2011), the neoliberal ideology requires "convincing others that everyone should enact corporate form of agency, produced by consciously using a means-ends calculus that balances alliances, responsibility and risk" (539). Dinah Rajak (2018) finds that collaborators with the most to lose are understandably

³⁷ Microsoft's contract with the Israeli military allowed their cyber warfare agency to use Azure cloud services to store surveillance data on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, which was then used to plan airstrikes (Abraham 2025).

reluctant to transgress in fear of losing the benefits of the collaboration: “Clearly, what appears as a process of mutual collaboration depends on the capacity of such forums to impose consensus through silencing dissent” (41). Far from innocuous, corporate-backed diversity initiatives have a silencing effect; with these limitations in mind, tech workers self-discipline to stay in line with corporate definitions of activism and empowerment. This is not a critique of any individual’s achievements, nor is it necessary to know every controversy one’s company or technology is entangled with. Rather, it is an example of how neoliberal diversity operates: individual success and empowerment become markers of social progress, ignoring capitalism and the corporation’s own role in creating unequal conditions.

Tech companies instead present themselves as purveyors of a worldly, conscious capitalism that has its workers in mind. Kim Turcot DiFruscia (2012) notes the shift “in the mid-19th century, [in which] U.S. welfare capitalists began to think that industrialists caring for their workers ‘as persons’ could serve as a productive, effective, and moral means of controlling labor, even though this *care* remained essentially centered around aspects of workers’ lives that could be relevant to the workplace” (Turcot DiFruscia 2012, 95). This was not lost on many of the tech worker activists I spoke to, who were all too familiar with the ways neoliberal diversity operates within their industry. Nonetheless, many helped to construct and institutionalize corporate diversity initiatives anyway, seeing it as their best option—or at least, one of the most effective ways—to work towards change in the workplace. Through employee resource groups and corporate social responsibility, workers proliferate neoliberal diversity, using it as a tool to produce short-term change in a quietly violent system.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Right away, I could sense Michelle Rodgers' exasperation. She restlessly walked through her backyard, navigating grassy pathways to get to her garage as she spoke to me, the Zoom call picking up slight interference as she rustled around. Having been introduced to each other by a friend of a friend, I wondered deep down if her willingness to help me was causing an imposition. After all, no one wants to spend their after-work hours on yet another Zoom call, especially on the beautiful sunny day we happened to schedule our interview.

Michelle had been a product manager at an online employment-seeking platform for more than five years at the time of our interview. She knew our mutual friend from doing reproductive rights activism together, and so I had already known she was a passionate organizer outside of tech industry issues. Yet when I asked her questions on tech activism, a wave of exasperation fell over her. Although my guilt and embarrassment for asking might not have been visible, she spoke in calm detachment as she told me how her approach to activism has changed over time:

You know, I used to be a lot more involved. I'm less involved now and also, I think I used to be a lot more bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and a lot more optimistic, like I can change things, I can make things better. But then, all of these companies are so huge, this industry is so huge, it's so much money. Like, maybe I can change some policies and make it better for the people who work here. But obviously, I'm not going to like, drive a revolution from my MacBook Pro. Unfortunately, over time I've come to accept the situation of life and that I have to earn a paycheck. And I do use my spare time to improve things in the community that I can and improve things for workers that I can, but I also, unfortunately realize that there's only so much I can do.

By remarking on the powerlessness she felt as an individual worker, Michelle highlights the structural violence through the realities of living in capitalism and precarity. After countless conversations with tech worker activists burnt out by corporate diversity, I found that many still chose to work within the industry's acceptable parameters of activism as a means to create some change when they otherwise felt powerless. Within the constraints of the corporation, tech

worker activists utilize company-sanctioned channels, balancing feelings of powerlessness and despair, resignation, and optimism in working from within. Mario, who had exuded cheerful optimism during our interview, recognized the value of doing organizing work outside the company, but also viewed institutionalized diversity initiatives as giving him the opportunity to have one-on-one conversations with people in power who can change the corporate structure. As he explained to me:

Something that I've learned along the way is that I'm sure the best way for other people to make change is to go around and be active and do things. But for me, the way I've seen change is to get people to listen to me and have a conversation about it...Some people are just not going to listen. But for every ten people you talk to, if you have one person with open ears, who's willing to empathize and understand things from a different perspective, what do you think they're going to do? They're going to talk to people about it, who otherwise would have had a different perspective. And even if they're just changing one person at a time, knowledge is power...And it's amazing, because that's how literally the social equity program started, right? I got one person to listen to me. And they were like, 'You're totally right, I see that as something we need to talk about. Maybe we should put this in front of someone else [higher up].' I don't think change happens with those people who *aren't* going out and, you know, getting petitions signed, or taking action to make the change...But I think the best way to spread the word and get people on the same wavelength, as far as thinking or making change, is getting the right information out there and talking to the right people.

Mario believed in the validity of all forms of activism, but felt he could do his part in changing institutional policies by having one-on-one conversations with open-minded people. His perspective stood out as one of the few optimistic ones. During my interview with Emily Burns, she gestured to her apartment window overlooking her quiet Oakland street as she contemplated what corporate activism could actually achieve given the negative impact the tech industry has had in her neighborhood: exacerbated class disparities, gentrification, and increased housing displacement. With some level of resignation, she confessed,

I feel like my presence didn't change anything. And so it felt too hypocritical to call myself [an activist]. And now when I think of activism, I think of it much more low-key like, I think there are so many opportunities for me to encourage people to have a better

understanding [of issues], but not the people who hold the purse strings. [A lot of people] are embedded in the structure. And so I think there are so many opportunities to raise awareness of those structural power dynamics that create that, and to raise awareness of like, the people within those structures, but I do not consider myself an activist. I got so tired doing that. Because you can't be an activist in capitalism! I just felt like, you can't.

Meanwhile, Michelle Rodgers is still a socially conscientious person, but her efforts at changing the tech industry are now focused on institutionalized efforts like ERGs, which have the potential to make quality-of-life improvements for marginalized workers:

I think ultimately, the power of the ERG is that it can—you know, tech unions are not strong. So worker power is key to me. I am very highly paid, I'm very well treated. But that's not true for many other roles. So I think one challenge in technology is, we don't have a lot of unions, we don't have a lot of ways for workers to align in their demands. But I think ERGs can be a way of doing that. They can be a way of advocating for better policies or advocating for better benefits. So that's something I liked...advocating for better benefits. Like, let's make sure our needs are covered, especially transitioning [as in gender reaffirming healthcare] is very expensive. Like, make sure everything is covered, make sure you don't have to reveal all this information to some random person in HR—make it comfortable. So I think in general, I'm very interested in policy and benefits, and making it a good place for workers. And I think that is why when these groups work together, when we work with outside non-profits, or we work with other energies in the company, I think that can be really powerful.

Since its inception, ERGs have been used as a vehicle for employees to collectively address workplace issues. As Michelle explained, they can be a powerful, corporate-approved tool in improving policies and benefits. The first workplace affinity groups (now widely referred to as ERGs) originated at tech companies like IBM and Xerox in the 1960s to address racial issues in response to the civil rights movement (Arciniega 2021; Stolte 2023). Now, ERGs “bring policy changes, changes in organizational culture, and ultimately improve employee-employer relations” through informational meetings and discussions, awareness campaigns, and its lobbying power with executives; their work has also made advancements for queer employees, for example by successfully advocating for domestic partnership benefits for same-

sex partners (Githens 2009, 18). Within progressive and radical tech organizer circles, some have criticized ERGs for ignoring social justice issues in favor of performative diversity actions that celebrate multicultural diversity in the office. Cass Adair, a media, tech, and communications scholar, has observed in his forthcoming research a shift in the way trans ERGs prioritize their goals within the industry. In a personal communication to me, he noted how trans-in-tech ERGs that had previously pushed for healthcare and other benefits have now turned to smaller, innocuous actions and celebratory events due to the recent wave of layoffs and increasing precarity in the industry. With few options to push back at employers, others have accepted that ERGs are one of the few viable options to address social justice issues in the workplace, given—as Michelle mentioned—the lack of strong labor unions for white-collar tech workers.

After pressuring her company to support Asian American causes, Lauren Chow created an Asian American ERG with a likeminded coworker who was aligned with her vision to address social issues and promote racial awareness at their company, rather than one that—as she puts it—was there to coordinate annual Lunar New Year potlucks. Lauren viewed the ERG as a way to challenge the racist and conservative culture at her office:

I think the company was founded like thirty or forty years ago, headquartered in a Midwestern city in a state with very low diversity, and very conservative. Just to give an example, we had gotten emails reprimanding employees—around the peak of Black Lives Matter—who had Confederate flags [on their cars] in the company parking lot. So there's a weird dynamic of having some very conservative white people here who do have racist views. And also, part of it is that it's not a company like Facebook or Google where you probably have a high proportion of young Asian American employees who might be thinking about social justice issues. So it's been interesting, because I think right now we have a couple hundred members [in the ERG], but generally, it is hard when we're having discussions, so we try to have different discussions about things like model minority myth, or disparities amongst Asian Americans that ignore that within the AAPI group as a whole, there's a lot of differences. It's very hard to get people who are passionate enough to weigh-in on these issues and have a perspective, I think, because a lot of the employees tend to be older Asian immigrants, who just aren't going to be as tapped into social justice issues.

Through ERGs, workers like Lauren and Michelle strive to bring about cultural awareness and policy changes for others who might have fewer protections in the workplace.

But ERGs are not the only form of corporate-sanctioned activism workers can utilize or exploit. Tech companies also implement corporate social responsibility to address concerns over their negative environmental or social impact by creating programs or pledging commitment to reduce harm, and other ‘philanthropic’ endeavors, like Amazon’s environmental programs or the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s global immunization initiatives. As anthropologists Catherine Dolan and Dinah Rajak (2018) state, through these methods, “[t]he discourse and practice of CSR attempts to standardize, categorize, measure and routinize different forms of value (economic, ethical, legal) in a supposedly ‘win-win’ marriage of social and commercial objectives that works for all parties involved, even those with apparently conflicting interests” (19). In Leigh M. Campoamor’s (2019) ethnographic study of the Spanish telecommunications company Telefónica’s CSR efforts in Colombia, she notes that “the value of Telefónica’s CSR did not derive from concrete evidence about what it did for the communities in which it operated but rather from the company’s ability to position itself as an innovator within an emergent economy of digital activism” (670). Through a short-lived mobile app that allowed consumers to report possible child labor law violations by submitting geotagged photo evidence, Telefónica used their CSR efforts to promote their own technology and establish the company’s moral legitimacy (672), all while encouraging surveillance as a means of humanitarian action. Although Dinah Rajak (2018) recognizes that corporate social responsibility efforts act as a lucrative way to promote diversity and philanthropic efforts, more importantly, she argues that it shapes the framework of the good corporation and conscious capitalism, ostracizing any

organizations and individuals that fall outside its model. Through narratives of empowerment and collaboration, CSR privileges some actors and agendas and marginalizes others through a “hegemonic conception of the ‘perfect partner,’ one that accords with dominant corporate interests, norms, and ideologies,” and masking possible conflicting interests between the corporation and the advocates or activists (Rajak 2018, 18). As Rajak (2018) further summarizes, the “performative and ritualistic dimensions of CSR practice serve not only to celebrate corporations as agents of social improvement, but also to establish the rules of participation in this realm of global governance” (45).

Because tech companies uphold CSR as one of the few legitimate pathways to change the industry, some activists have utilized its language and policies to hold their own companies accountable to the values and standards they set. In 2024, Microsoft held its annual Give Back Week, an annual event that allows workers to promote charities and social causes from a preapproved list—and from which Microsoft pledges to match any employee donations made that week. A small group of workers held an intimate vigil for Palestinian tech workers killed in Israel’s assault on Gaza, which they used to promote a Palestinian charity approved by Microsoft; a week later, several of the organizers were fired for “disrupting the peace,” with Microsoft falsely claiming they used a bullhorn and obstructed pathways, and for “creating an environment which made employees feel unsafe or uncomfortable.”

During a livestreamed press conference on the streaming platform Twitch, the two fired Microsoft employees, joined by several tech workers from other major companies who were similarly fired for protesting the genocide in Gaza over the past year, addressed the conditions that led to their firing, and how their companies utilized the language of DEI and respectability politics to justify reprimanding and silencing them. For example, in 2022, Hossam made a post

on the company Slack channel about Microsoft’s double standard in supporting Ukrainian or Uyghur rights for self-determination but not Palestinians’, and was reprimanded by HR within two hours for not “respecting Microsoft’s expectations of workplace conduct.” As members of the group spoke one-by-one, they urged Microsoft to uphold its own human rights statement, international business statement on corporate conduct, and international law. In a separate webinar, Sophia Filipe, who works at Cisco, explained how she co-created an open letter urging the company to uphold its own Code of Business Conduct and Human Rights Policy by divesting from Israeli military and surveillance technology. In response, Cisco created expression guidelines to limit what employees could talk about and how they could talk within their company channels, despite encouraging employee advocacy for other causes in the past. “It’s truly comical how hard they twist the rules or get us to stop pushing, or apply policies with obvious double standards, all to uphold the Israeli contracts,” she said, adding that their actions “go against the very morals they tout” through their CSR.

These tech workers demonstrate the hypocrisy of their companies’ own CSR. As Tariq, a former Apple employee summed it up, “These companies tried to show they’re moral and just [through their CSR], but genocide has proved it’s nothing more than marketing tactics. If they care about making the world a better place, they would address their own role in making the world a violent and racist one.” By selectively applying workplace codes of conduct while making up new policies to target activists,³⁸ and by simultaneously policing the language and methods activists use while ignoring their own ethics statements, it is the tech companies—not

³⁸ In Breanna Marie Spencer’s (2025) qualitative study, she interviewed one Black woman tech worker who recalled similar tactics being used on Black employees speaking out about Black Lives Matter in 2020.

the activists—that decide the acceptable modes of participation in working towards social justice. The use of CSR obscures the power imbalance between companies and activists: far from a mutual and equal relationship, “the power of CSR lies not simply in its capacity to sideline critical voices, but to *colonize* the language” of activism, advocacy, and philanthropy (Rajak 2018, 43). But when activists pressure companies to hold themselves accountable to their CSR, they exploit the double standard and call attention to its performative nature. Whether or not tech workers actually believe the company’s own convictions towards its CSR is irrelevant. As corporations are the ones to set the stage and define the rules of governance, calling attention to their hypocrisy is one of the few methods activists can utilize to hold companies accountable to their own stated ideals. For the fired Microsoft workers, partial justice came a year later when mounting pressure from their activism and journalist exposés led to Microsoft revoking part of the Israeli military’s access to its cloud software services (Abraham 2025).

Conclusion

With the commercialization of feminism, anti-racism, and other social justice and diversity efforts within the tech industry, many activists have resigned to or even embraced the acceptable channels of activism—as determined by the company—in working towards social change. While acquiescing to corporate structures, activists frame institutionalized diversity as a financially lucrative opportunity for the company—but what is lost when diversity becomes motivated by good publicity and economic gains? Neoliberal initiatives sell the labor of workers from marginalized identities to do the work of fixing longstanding structural inequalities, and in turn use this work to promote the industry as setting new social and ethical standards. But by deemphasizing the social justice and morality aspect of institutional diversity, activists placate white resistance, and appeal to economic incentives that white male audiences understand as

amoral and rational—in other words, fostering corporate diversity by indulging white, male perspectives of rationality and objectivity. However, feminist scholars have long questioned the notion of true objectivity, void of any historical and colonial understandings of the knowledge production and epistemologies of marginalized peoples (Collins 2006, Harding 1991). Within STEM, Chandra Prescod-Weinstein (2020) finds that “only white people (particularly white men) are read as having a fundamental capacity for objectivity and Black people (particularly Black women) are produced as an ontological other” (421). Carol Cohn (1987) similarly finds that in the world of nuclear strategists, the hegemony of rationality and objectivity relies on technostrategic language, deemphasizing emotions even when discussing the possibility of nuclear destruction and cost of human life. And yet, she contemplates that “if we [women and marginalized peoples] refuse to learn the language, we are virtually guaranteed that our voices will remain outside the ‘politically relevant’ spectrum of opinion” (716). Thus, for diversity workers in corporate STEM settings, the process of appealing to white, male “objectivity” involves a racialized and gendered performance of moral detachment from these issues—an added layer to the time and emotional labor they put into changing the workplace (Carrillo Arciniega 2020).

Framing diversity through white, male perspectives of rationality and morality is particularly troubling for the tech industry, where tech is already assumed to be neutral or unbiased. And by solely focusing social justice and diversity efforts on personal achievements and what underrepresented white-collar workers could achieve as full-time employees in the Global North, some tech activists ignore the structural inequalities and colonial underpinnings of tech, specifically how the technology they’re developing is employed in other countries and in the most marginalized communities. As Catherine Dolan and Dinah Rajak (2018) state, “the

promise of inclusion for some almost invariably comes at the cost of exclusion, precarity or disempowerment for others,” as tech workers navigate what it means to do diversity work and for whom (4). But because those who stray from the “appropriate” channels for activism are fired or at least severely reprimanded, many reluctantly resign themselves to working for and within the institution, even censoring themselves and their mission to adhere to the corporate goals of diversity. And yet, there are also activists who have learned to exploit the hypocrisies of corporate diversity by calling attention to their companies’ moral and humanitarian obligations as laid out in their own CSR.

Tech activists burnt out by corporate DEI are also acutely aware of the growing sentiment of right-wing, pronatalist and eugenics movements in Silicon Valley (Del Valle 2024), and have been put in a difficult position as they face backlash and frustration from both sides of the political spectrum. With the overturning of affirmative action by the Supreme Court, and President Trump’s withholding of federal funding for institutions with DEI programs (Cuts to Woke Programs 2026), tech companies are now phasing out their DEI programs altogether—whether they want to or not. Meta, despite being a trillion-dollar company, had a round of layoffs in 2023—in which the majority of laid off workers were recent hires from its diversity programs³⁹—and then ended its diversity programs outright (Nix 2023; Gibson and Lyons 2025). In a follow-up with Lauren Chow, she informed me that her company had also complied with DEI cuts in order to receive federal funding, though management retained some of its DEI

³⁹ Tech companies tend to lay off workers in order of seniority, which meant that most of the recent hires from DEI initiatives were the ones to go first. This illustrates a problem with DEI in tech—it’s not just about hiring diverse candidates but creating a system which retains them.

initiatives under different names to avoid scrutiny. Lauren views this move as another way to “fight the system” and preserve diversity despite the attacks from the political right.

With the precarity of these DEI programs—they were quick to establish and just as quick to dismantle—one might question why tech activists don’t turn to other methods like grassroots organizing. It is important to note, however, that organizing in the tech industry is difficult by design. The physical and social isolation of the industry has left tech activists with few good options, and those who choose to organize outside the “proper” channels risk their job security (which I further discuss in Chapter 3). Nonetheless, the past few years have ushered in a resurgence of labor organizing movements, and tech has been no different. With tech workers representing every aspect of the industry—from gig workers to Amazon drivers to white-collar programmers—they challenge the industry’s isolation-by-design, and redefine the narrow boundaries of who counts as a tech worker as they organize in vertical solidarity. In the next chapter, I explore their work, methods, and reasons for organizing, and how they view their privilege and perspectives as tech workers being uniquely situated to address broader social concerns.

CHAPTER 3: CROSS SOLIDARITY, CLASS AMBIGUITY, AND TECHNOLOGIST IDENTITY-MAKING IN ORGANIZING

Introduction

It was a sweltering July afternoon in San Francisco when I arrived at the Proposition 22 (Prop 22) protest, across from Lyft headquarters. I walked up to the group of more than fifty rideshare drivers, allied tech workers, and other progressive organizers, all who had coalesced on this day in opposition to the California initiative that reclassified gig workers—a term which encompasses rideshare drivers and other platform-based, on-demand workers—as independent contractors rather than employees. After it had passed with roughly fifty-nine percent of the votes, hundreds of thousands of rideshare drivers’ employee benefits and healthcare were put in jeopardy in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kerr 2020; Dolber 2023). While we prepared for the day’s march from Lyft to Uber headquarters, applying sunscreen and changing into our free neon-green T-shirts, I helped pass out handwritten “Say No to Gig Greed” signs, even taping them onto the bicycle frames of our bike marshals. After a quick minute to practice our chants, we began our one-mile walk through the city, which felt unusually strenuous with the summer sun directly over our heads. As the bike marshals heralded traffic, several drivers waved and honked their horns in solidarity. We approached Uber headquarters, where we noticed a couple of employees peering at us with curiosity from their third-story floor-to-ceiling glass windows—a near-perfect visualization of the stratified hierarchy between the technologists above and the gig workers below. Someone in our group directed a chorus of jeers and boos at them, with one person shouting, “Quit your jobs and join us!”

There, we congregated at the front entrance along with media and other observers and supporters, as former and current rideshare drivers took turns sharing their experiences working for Uber and Lyft. From lack of wage transparency, to uncompensated car maintenance

expenses, to supplying their own personal protective equipment (PPE) during COVID, rideshare drivers reiterated that despite their relegation to contract workers, it was *their* labor that powered the company and fueled its profits. Amongst the group of speakers was Brett Chen, a former engineer for a rideshare company, who had abruptly quit during the height of COVID when he had the sudden realization that he was part of the problem as someone who was “making the tech that exploits rideshare drivers.” He has since joined rideshare organizing groups in an effort to fortify cross solidarity between white-collar technologists and more precarious tech workers. The rally was otherwise a mix of frustration at Prop 22 and renewed optimism for worker power; after passing around a dozen pizzas and listening to casual discussions of potentially building a rideshare network co-op, we ended the rally and went on our way.

In 2023, *Los Angeles Times* declared it a “hot labor summer,” with strike activity quadrupling from the previous year (Dean 2023). Following the pandemic, alongside rising cost of living despite growing corporate profits, unionizing efforts increased across industries—from Starbucks baristas, to Trader Joe’s workers, and even Medieval Times performers (Rosalsky 2023). Yet scholars, journalists, and tech industry leaders alike have been particularly puzzled over the growing participation of *technologists* in tech industry organizing. While tech workers in precarious positions have long organized and attempted unionizing to varying degrees of success (including janitorial staff, cafeteria workers, shuttle drivers, and other service workers in the industry), technologists, on the other hand, are relatively well compensated as full-time employees in skilled technical positions and thus have less incentive to organize. But in recent efforts, technologists have coalesced to challenge capitalist systems of oppression through grassroots organizing. They’ve disrupted their companies’ well-crafted public corporate images by protesting at conferences, holding walkouts, boycotts, and sit-ins; they’ve risked job security

by collectively pushing back against unfair labor conditions, environmental degradation, contracts with the U.S. military, police, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and other issues antithetical to their own moral obligations as tech creators and innovators. While the “hot labor summer” may have narrowed in on unionizing and contract negotiations, in the tech industry, technologists have proven they’re willing to collectively organize for both social justice causes and exploitative working conditions.

Several of my interlocutors firmly believe that agitation both inside and outside corporate channels is necessary to create change in the industry, and that is not something I take for granted nor seek to minimize. But the tech workers in this chapter go beyond corporate-approved representation and diversity initiatives, often after exhausting these “appropriate” channels of HR meetings, or working within DEI and CSR policies. By framing their organizing around their workplace identities, skillsets, and obligations, I argue that technologist organizers view, justify, and utilize their organizing as an extension of their workplace identity and responsibilities. To put it differently, they organize not only as a basic moral obligation, but as a duty to uphold their profession’s ideals and how they view themselves as technologists. This marks a shift in how technologists have often approached their work in the past—from taking a “neutral,” apolitical stance to viewing organizing as an extension of their occupational duties. Additionally, I interrogate how they view their class and occupational status within the industry vis-à-vis other tech workers, and how it influences their perspective and goals for organizing work. How do they build collective power in an industry that is conversely known for monopolizing power and quelling dissent, as well as creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, and innovation? And as people who’ve had a hand in building these systems, why do they feel they’re best suited to dismantle them? While also recognizing tech worker organizers in gig work and other precarious positions

who have long provided the blueprint to organizing in the industry, I examine the ways in which technologists channel their occupational identity into organizing and collective action, leveraging their position as technologists to hold their industry accountable.

A Contemporary Overview of Tech Worker Organizing

As previously discussed, two notable movements in the industry had broken ground by bridging solidarity between all tech workers and amongst interconnected struggles. Computer People for Peace (CPP), which operated from 1968 to 1974, pioneered tech worker organizing by challenging imperialism during the Vietnam War, although they later expanded to address issues “from racism and sexism through rights of privacy, tenant rights, and concerns about surveillance and worker rights” (Greenbaum 2020). The coalition objected to tech companies’ development of military technology and targeted IBM, Litton, and Honeywell by disrupting the Association for Computing Machinery’s (ACM) Joint Computer Conference “to call attention to Honeywell’s contracts with the Department of Defense and their deep involvements in Vietnam” (Tech Workers for Palestine Chicago 2024). In 1972, CPP addressed Congress to urge them to pass legislation regarding people’s right to privacy and the potential misuse of technology for surveillance and data collection. Joan Greenbaum, an IBM programmer and one of the steering committee members of CPP, noted the difficulties of raising class consciousness and building cross solidarity amongst tech workers. At IBM, tech work was stratified by race and class: programmers were overwhelmingly white, middle-class men, and operators were largely Black, working-class men. She found that programmers were more reluctant to organize and unionize than their operator counterparts (Mainframe 2019). CPP nonetheless worked to raise collective consciousness in other ways, like raising \$50,000 in bail money for detained Black Panther Party member and fellow tech worker Clark Squire (now known as Sundiata Acoli). Although they

formally disbanded in 1974, the group had laid the groundwork for organizing in the tech industry. By building class consciousness and expanding the definition of “tech worker,” rejecting the industry’s involvement with the military, and objecting to police surveillance and early iterations of data colonialism (Gaillot 2018), their organizing work influenced the next movements to come.

A small group of Polaroid Corporation employees marked the next major wave of tech organizing when they formed the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement (PRWM) in 1970. Led by Caroline Hunter and Ken Williams, they urged their company to cut business ties with the South African government, which had been supplying the cameras needed to create photo passbooks used to identify, surveil, and restrict the freedom of movement of Black South Africans. Although Hunter reports that there were never more than a few workers taking part in their actions, they mounted pressure on their company by disrupting corporate events and conferences, educating and organizing workers, and eventually calling for a global boycott of Polaroid when their concerns weren’t properly addressed by their company. One year later, Hunter and Williams testified against Polaroid at the United Nations Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid.

While both Hunter and Williams were later fired in retaliation for their activism, they continued their efforts to mobilize their former colleagues and the broader public. Because Polaroid had the reputation of being a liberal company and apartheid stood in opposition to their perceived liberalism, PRWM produced and distributed leaflets detailing their involvement in apartheid to call out their company’s hypocrisy. Modeled after Polaroid’s own advertisements, these leaflets showed real Polaroid photos of apartheid in action: white men stopping Black South Africans, checking for their passbooks—these leaflets highlighted “the everyday structural

violence that the passbooks imposed on Black South Africans” (Jones 2025). Through PWRM’s efforts to leverage their identity as workers invested in their company’s ethical obligations, Polaroid eventually coalesced to pressure and divested in 1977.

And while these progressive groups lay the groundwork for technologist and cross-solidarity organizing in the tech industry, service workers’ and other precarious workers’ contributions to labor organizing cannot be understated. From 1991-1992, janitors at Apple, who were contracted by the janitorial company Shine, fought for their right to unionize under Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Because organizers alleged that Shine was using intimidation tactics to dissuade workers from voting to unionize, they adopted a bigger-picture strategy to persuade Apple to hire union contractors, as “Apple, with its reputation as a progressive employer, was seen as especially vulnerable to public pressure over charges that its contractor was violating labor laws” (Levander 1991). They launched a hunger strike on Apple’s front lawn for better wages and working conditions, disrupted an international computer show during Apple CEO John Sculley’s speech to call for unionization, placed an ad in the *New York Times* for a letter writing campaign in support of the janitors, and even called for an international boycott (Levander 1992). One year later, they finally won the right to unionize, and some tech worker organizers point to these efforts as one of the most successful tech industry campaigns and the blueprint for creative strategizing in contemporary tech worker movements.

Even before the climax of 2023’s “hot labor summer,” tech worker organizing had already been steadily gaining momentum over the past ten years, with various organizing groups and campaigns addressing social and labor issues at every level. For instance, Tech Workers Coalition (TWC), which formed in 2014 in Silicon Valley, made waves in the industry for striving to unify cafeteria workers and engineers by addressing worker solidarity issues, as well

as supporting the labor and social justice campaigns of allied groups (Weigel 2017). Then in 2018, in one of the first significant international solidarity movements in the industry, Google workers of all positions staged a global walkout to protest the mishandling of sexual harassment cases, including allegations against former executive Andy Rubin, who received a \$90 million payout in exchange for his immediate resignation (Wakabayashi 2018). In line with the #MeToo movement, they demanded more transparency in the handling of sexual harassment cases, and “a commitment to end pay and opportunity inequity” (Google Walkout for Real Change 2018). Google workers made headlines yet again in 2021 when they formed Alphabet Workers Union, a minority union and the first of the Big Five tech companies to unionize technologists (Konger 2021).⁴⁰ In 2019, Amazon employees coalesced as the group Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, demanding that the company release its carbon emissions data and provide a clear environmental policy; in 2023, they held a walkout “demanding a flexible remote work policy and renewed commitments to reducing carbon emissions to zero” (O’Donovan 2023). In 2022, Amazon warehouse workers in Staten Island were the first in the company to unionize in an effort to push back against inhumane working conditions—high injury and heatstroke risk, work speedup causing workers to skip bathroom breaks, and unjust firings, among other grievances (Zahn 2024; Chua 2021). Also in 2022, *The New York Times* tech workers voted to unionize, making it the largest major tech union in the U.S. (Robertson 2022). Meanwhile, organizing groups like Gig Workers Rising and Rideshare Drivers United have pushed for fair wages and

⁴⁰ As a minority union, membership in Alphabet Workers Union is voluntary, and does not have collective bargaining rights. It has roughly 800 members—including temps, vendors, and contractors (TVCs)—and is not officially recognized by the National Labor Relations Board (Konger 2021). It is also worth noting that as of 2019, Google TVCs now outnumber its full-time employees, creating a two-tier labor system between employees and precarious workers (Wakabayashi 2019).

better working conditions for rideshare drivers and other gig workers, especially at the height of COVID. And as previously addressed in Chapter 2, campaigns centered around divesting from surveillance tech for ICE (like the #WeWon'tBuildIt campaign), or the Israeli military (like No Tech for Apartheid at Google, and its counterparts No Meta for Apartheid, No Azure for Apartheid at Microsoft, and Apples Against Apartheid), have held vigils, sit-ins, boycotts, and have disrupted public events to draw attention to their causes and create public pressure for divestment. As their expansive efforts show, tech workers are not solely organizing for better working conditions and compensation. They are also pushing their industry to ideologically align with their morals and ideas of how the tech industry “should” be.

The breadth and diversity of tech worker organizing also highlights the collective power of workers, in addition to their vulnerability. In many of these cases, tech companies have dissuaded worker organizing through intimidation tactics: the lead organizers of Google Walkout for Real Change and No Tech for Apartheid (as well as its counterparts at Apple and Microsoft) were allegedly fired in retaliation, while Google, Amazon, and Meta have been accused of either spying on and surveilling worker organizers, hiring anti-union consultants, or illegally barring them from organizing (Schiffer 2020; Koren 2022; O'Donovan 2024; Yeo 2024). While Microsoft has been the exception amongst the Big Five tech companies for accepting unions (Scheiber 2024),⁴¹ the industry as a whole has discouraged activism outside of DEI and CSR, contradicting the laidback public image and open work culture it had established for itself at the

⁴¹ While Microsoft has accepted the unionization of employees at Activision, a video game company it recently acquired, Scheiber (2024) questions why Microsoft ultimately accepted unionization in contrast to other tech companies. He speculates it could have been a strategic move to ward off further calls for regulating the industry, or perhaps a show of corporate paternalism.

turn of the twenty-first century.⁴² But then the question remains: given the risks, especially amidst the precarity of layoffs in the industry, coupled with the rising cost of living, why do tech workers choose to organize outside of corporate-sanctioned methods? After all, as Michelle Rodgers, the product manager I introduced in Chapter 2, noted, unions in the tech industry are still far and few between in comparison to corporate diversity measures and policies. As she firmly states,

You know, tech unions are not strong. So worker power is key to me. I am very highly paid, I'm very well treated. But that's not true for many other roles. So I think one challenge in technology is, we don't have a lot of unions, we don't have a lot of ways for workers to align in their demands. But I think ERGs can be a way of doing that. They can be a way of advocating for better policies or advocating for better benefits.

In this case, Michelle draws attention to the somewhat privileged position technologists occupy in the industry in comparison to other workers. Because the tech industry is not as strongly unionized as other industries, she chooses ERGS to leverage her privilege as a way to advocate for others. However, some of the tech organizers I spoke with had the opposite experience. After initially trying to advocate for change through corporate-approved channels, they eventually became frustrated and disenfranchised by the lack of response from their superiors. At a community event for tech workers advocating for Palestine, one technologist vented that “at my workplace, we wrote a letter and collected signatures and sent it [to higher-ups], but it felt like nothing came out of it.” Another revealed in exasperation, “We already went through the appropriate channels, and our concerns weren’t even addressed or we were ignored...we’re not

⁴² In fact, one of my friends, an immigrant from China who was a programmer for a small tech company, had told me I couldn’t interview him because his contract prohibits organizing or discussing organizing with colleagues. It is illegal to prohibit employees from organizing, but because my friend’s visa status was tied to his employment, he opted not to question this stipulation, and was worried that participating in my project could affect his employment status.

satisfied with the bare minimum acknowledgement.” Their experiences expose the limitations of corporate activism: if corporate activism must work within the constraints of the bureaucratic structure and financial incentives for the company, bigger structural upheavals like divesting from profitable Israeli contracts and the military industrial complex proves much more difficult. From their experiences, these activists agreed that corporate activism was no more than a façade when it came to challenging widespread industry harm. Tired of following the bureaucratic procedures for advocacy and activism to no avail, they have instead turned to grassroots organizing to leverage their privilege and identity as technologists towards social justice and workers’ rights. But in order to understand their methods, it is important to first examine how the technologists themselves view their role and work within the larger workforce and industry.

Class Consciousness and the Ambiguity of the Technologist

I initially met Grace Li, a UX designer at an employment-searching platform, at a protest at the Apple headquarters in Cupertino. Although neither of us work for Apple, as locals to the area, we were both eager to lend our support to the cause—a joint effort between Apples Against Apartheid and Friends of the Congo to raise consumer awareness towards Apple’s participation in the genocides in Palestine and in the Democratic Republic of Congo. A few months earlier, Apples for Apartheid had written an open letter condemning their company’s complicity in genocide: Apple heavily invests in Israeli tech startups, matches donations to Friends of the IDF and other nonprofits upholding Israeli occupation, and reprimands workers who wear a keffiyeh or show support for Palestine “under the guise of ‘breaking business conduct’” (Apple4Ceasefire 2024); meanwhile, Apple (as well as most major tech companies) sources cobalt, coltan, and other minerals for its lithium-ion batteries from Congolese mines run by the militant group M23, which relies on the enslaved labor of roughly 40,000 children and has caused mass displacement

(Halepis 2025; Kamara and Bumba 2025). Coinciding with the launch of the newest iPhone, we spent the morning outside the campus store, holding banners memorializing Turkish American activist Aseynur Ezgi Eygi, who was killed by the IOF in the West Bank just a few days prior to the protest. In between chants, members of our group took turns speaking into the megaphone about the suppression of activism and dissent in the industry, including a few Google workers who were fired for holding a sit-in for Gaza. Nearing the end of the protest, Grace and I paired up as walking partners on our trek back to the post-protest meeting location. As we got to know each other during our brief walk, she became interested in my work and involvement in tech activism, and agreed to meet up for coffee a few days later.

I felt a sense of camaraderie and familiarity with Grace right away. Conscientious and eager to learn and better herself (she told me excitedly she's reading *The Communist Manifesto* for the first time) while carrying a sense of tranquil composure, the first thing she asked me during our coffee meetup was, "I just wanted to check, what are your pronouns?" Grace had grown up in the Bay Area with an engineer father; ever since she was young, she was inundated with the belief that Silicon Valley was the ideal industry, both innovative and lucrative. She first started learning about structural racism during the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 as a thirteen-year-old scrolling through Tumblr posts, and eventually participated in social justice movements and activism in college. However, she hadn't always made the connections between the tech industry and structural inequalities—she recalls that "there was just one course or maybe even just one lecture on race in [her] computer science major." However, current events of the past few years compelled her to "de-glorify" her view of the tech industry, as she puts it. After George Floyd's murder and the BLM protests in 2020, she began to draw connections between tech and mass surveillance and police violence, especially

after her partner—who also grew up in the Bay Area but in a working-class, single-parent household in Section 8 housing—prodded her to reevaluate the harmful aspects of the tech industry and the privilege she reaps as one of its workers. These feelings were only exacerbated after October 7, 2023, through witnessing tech companies contribute to genocide by providing surveillance technologies, propelling her into “learning more about the interconnections between the tech industry, the economy, and surveillance.” Finally, the mass layoffs in tech in 2022-2023 made her realize just how disposable she and other workers are to the industry, especially now that companies are cutting costs by using AI in place of hiring workers. In one instance, Grace had attended a conference for UX designers that was “originally for people who valued the craft of design, but the last time I went, it was all corporate people, CEOs, steering it away from design. Now it’s all about maximizing profit, and being steered towards AI. It felt like a waste of time to hear CEOs talk about corporate bullshit.”

Grace’s realization of the “corporate bullshit” and the devaluation of design work had pushed her to take part in grassroots organizing. Her recent recognition of her privilege within the industry as someone who’s relatively well compensated yet also disposable, mixed with the understanding that she’s part of an industry currently perpetuating a genocide, made her reevaluate her position within a broader system of exploitation and harm. Now, as part of a socialist coalition, she attends weekly meetings, writes opinion articles for their website, and organizes teach-ins on class solidarity, anti-capitalism, and anti-colonialism. She hopes that with the tech industry devaluing and deskilling technologists’ labor while replacing workers with AI, that technologists will gain class consciousness and “now realiz[e] they’re part of the proletariat class.”

Grace's newfound class consciousness presents an ongoing and contested debate over technologists' class status. Acknowledging the exploitation she experiences as a rank-and-file technologist, she aligns herself with the proletariat which, in Marxism, is defined as workers who do not own the means of production and must therefore sell their labor. But technologist class status is fraught with ambiguity: some technologists have argued that their class status is not clearly defined but skews toward maintaining and reinforcing capitalist interests, while others hold the belief that they need to "assert our identity with all workers; that objectively we are working class, the problem being to develop that consciousness among our colleagues" (SftP 1973, 5). Science for the People (SftP), an antiwar, anti-capitalist organization of STEM workers founded in the 1960s, had ultimately argued in their 1973 publication that "class analysis of technical workers (ourselves) must transcend the description of us as propertyless wage workers and requires careful consideration of our role in maintaining the system—in particular, in determining to what extent we (as technical workers) are important and necessary instruments in maintaining capitalist class rule" (5). In 1977, John and Barbara Ehrenreich deviated from SftP's stance by using "professional and managerial class" (PMC) to describe technologists and other professional, well-educated, and (often times) managerial workers. Using "class" to encompass both "a common relation to the economic foundations of society" and "actual relations between groups of people," they argued that the PMC are "salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations" (Press 2019; see also Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1977). Through the term PMC, they make a distinction between the traditional working class and the newly emerging class of professional workers who, though still exploited themselves, oftentimes exploit the working class as well.

During my fieldwork, I found that discussions around class status amongst technologists often led to tension regarding occupational status. When I was formulating my project early on, I spoke with a retired technologist who had worked in the industry in the 1980s. I told her about my desire to interview tech workers of all positions, but with a stern warning, she informed me that programmers, engineers, and other technologists may be offended to be grouped in a category that also considers gig workers, service workers, and other precarious and lower-waged workers as tech workers, and may choose not to participate for that reason. Although I did not personally experience that in any of my interactions, the tech organizers I met were all well aware of this divide, and sought to use their organizing efforts to bridge this gap and foster cross solidarity amongst tech workers across occupational status.

Annika Bishop, who I met at a teach-in event on how to broach unionizing in tech workplaces, was a program manager at a tech company in a southern U.S. state before she was fired, allegedly for organizing. Watching Annika lead the teach-in, it was obvious how much she personally cared about bettering the workplace for all workers and being a resource for anyone looking to unionize. She was incredibly friendly and supportive, and warmly assured me I could reach out to her any time if she could ever be of assistance. Despite the emotional and financial strain of being targeted and let go from her company, she now dedicates her time to helping other workers strategize in organizing and unionizing, guiding them through common tactics employers use to break organizing efforts. Her journey into tech organizing began when she experienced what she refers to as a toxic work culture at her company: sexism and racism, harassment, and pay disparities for women (especially women of color), to name a few examples. During COVID, she discovered that not only was working from home completely viable, but she was both happier and more productive. However, her company ended remote

work in 2021 just one year into the pandemic; when she asked management if she could continue working remotely, they informed her that this was “against their work culture,” while brushing aside legitimate concerns about COVID. She further tried to resolve workplace issues like harassment through institutionalized channels such as speaking to HR and leadership, but was told that the harassment she experienced was just a “quirk” within her team; she later faced retaliation from other team members for going to HR. Eventually, Annika and a few of her colleagues coalesced and shared their experiences with one another, quickly realizing that their workplace issues weren’t “just a quirk” or an isolated experience, but a systemic issue.

Annika then co-founded a worker-led movement for a safe work environment, pay transparency, and diverse hiring and leadership. As a group, they started a social media campaign, spoke with the press, and penned open letters. Through their organizing efforts, they also collected and shared colleagues’ experiences with sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination in the office. Although she was later fired, she still believes that “if you’re in a privileged position to take a risk, it’s worth it” to speak out.

Annika’s organizing efforts sought to unify tech workers of all positions throughout the supply chain, from the factory workers manufacturing the products, to the TVCs, to the technologists, as well as the cafeteria workers, shuttle drivers, and retail workers whose labor upholds the company. Her group even held a campaign to support the company’s factory workers in China fighting for better working conditions and wages. She staunchly believes that “you don’t need to meet an arbitrary level of ‘tech-ness’” to be considered a tech worker. As Annika explains, “by expanding the definition of tech worker, you counteract devaluing the worker in general, like Uber drivers versus employees. This kind of phrasing works to

dehumanize certain workers by the company. By only defining tech workers as ‘those in the shiny buildings,’ you lose *how* tech is built and *by whom*.”

For Annika, the importance of centering workers in the tech industry means expanding both the parameters of the tech worker identity as well as the boundaries of the high-tech workplace. To elaborate on her example of the factory worker solidarity campaign, I draw on sociologist Jenny Chan’s (2013) paper on Foxconn factory’s inhumane working conditions. Foxconn, a Taiwanese electronics manufacturer based in China that manufactures for Apple, Sony, and other major tech companies, received global scrutiny for their working conditions after eighteen factory workers attempted suicide in 2010. In her article, Chan (2013) features excerpts from one of the survivor’s diaries to provide “insight into the human consequences of the labour regimes of the globalised manufacturing supply chains of China’s export industries” (85). Through extreme work policies—losing breaktime as punishment for failing to meet quota, monitoring and reprimanding workers for the minutest infractions (including their posture), and needing to sign a no-suicide “consent” letter—their every movement is highly surveilled and scrutinized. Some workers have even reportedly worn diapers because they weren’t given bathroom breaks. And yet, Chan (2013) states, “[t]housands of miles from the shelves of the Apple store, and ordinarily concealed from consumer concern, lies the reality of alienating toil that, in extreme conditions, contributes to individual tragedies such as Yu’s [the survivor]” (85). I couldn’t help but recall these words during the Apples Against Apartheid protest Grace and I had attended. As Grace and I stood outside the company headquarters store with unfurled banners, diasporic Palestinian protestors held up photos of family members who were murdered and mutilated in Gaza—but most of the customers ignored our presence. One protestor pressed a photo of her nephew’s lifeless body, slain at just three years old, to the sterile glass walls of the

store; barely anyone gave us a second glance, their attention turned to the loud, flashy commercial of the newest iPhone repeatedly playing on the display TV. Some customers even ridiculed us, while others treated our presence as a nuisance, cutting in-between our group or giving us eyerolls while walking by; only one customer approached us to ask genuine questions out of curiosity, having been unaware of the connection between the tech industry and the genocides in Palestine and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Chan's (2013) reflection on the exploitation of Foxconn workers, she uses Marx's commodity fetishism as a framework to describe the obscured human suffering throughout the tech supply chain. Through commodity fetishism, the value of the newest high-tech gadget is not determined by the labor involved, but is imbued with status and social value that takes a life of its own. The suicide attempts of Foxconn factory workers suffering from extreme working conditions, and the genocides fueling Apple's bottom line are not visible to the consumer, but tech workers like Annika and the Apples Against Apartheid organizers challenge this invisibility by unmasking all aspects of the labor and exploitation involved in the product. By recognizing every job and every role that encompasses tech work, they bridge the occupational alienation between technologists, precarious tech workers, and the normally invisible aspects of tech labor throughout the supply chain. As Annika reiterates, "without them [the factory workers], there is no 'us.'"

Other tech workers, like Neel Thomas, sought to bridge the solidarity gap by starting a mutual aid fund that redistributes a portion of technologists' paycheck to gig workers during COVID. In doing so, he recognizes technologists' relatively privileged position in the industry, and their need to support the most precarious tech workers as a form of economic equality. He refers to this action as a "redistributed justice," seemingly based on the philosophical concept of distributive justice, in which the economic benefits and burdens of a society are evenly

distributed to promote equality. In an emergency organizing meeting for rideshare driver solidarity that I participated in back in 2021 (and as Prop 22 loomed over us), we brainstormed other ways to support rideshare drivers, like urging lawmakers to prioritize COVID vaccines for drivers as essential workers. Brett Chen, the former engineer at a rideshare company, recalled how “there is no relationship between office workers and drivers,” which he identifies as being intentional by the way these companies are structured. Brett’s experience as one of the technologists in a “shiny building,” as Annika put it, lends insight into the ways they contribute to precarious tech workers’ exploitation—but also how they can draw on their experiences to promote structural change. A particularly striking moment for Brett happened at the height of COVID, when he became disillusioned by his role in the tech industry while listening to his colleague vent about buying groceries. As his colleague searched Instacart for groceries but kept finding that everything was sold out due to scarcity during the pandemic, he jokingly asked himself, “is this what poverty is like?” In that moment, Brett felt a sense of disgust at his colleague’s joke and the clear disconnect between the lived realities of technologists and gig workers. As a technologist, Brett and his colleague were afforded perks, privileges, and even just basic rights that gig workers had to fight for—healthcare, flexibility to work from home during a pandemic, paid leave—all while gig workers continued risking their lives during COVID to buy *them* groceries. And while he did not necessarily work on this directly, he realized that “engineers are making the technology that exploits rideshare drivers.” At Uber, for example, drivers and journalists have reported that fare calculations are obscured by a ‘black box’ system, so it’s unknown to drivers how prices are determined, and how much they actually earn out of the entire fare charged to customers (Winshell 2025). In one experiment, drivers found that even if they were just a few feet away from each other, “the company offers them the same customer

rides at different fares, meaning one driver would earn less than another for driving the exact same route” (Winshell 2025). Legal scholar Veena Dubal (2020) similarly finds that Uber and Lyft’s black box algorithms make it so that “workers themselves cannot know or understand their income in relationship to time spent working or their own expenses.” In another instance, she finds that rideshare companies utilize behavioral psychologists’ expertise to entice drivers to keep working by “creat[ing] an enchanting sense of possibility and hope. Drivers receive in-app individualized ‘promotions’ and badges for their ‘performance’ to make them feel special and rewarded, and yet drivers say it’s often unclear what they are getting” (Dubal 2020). Other drivers report that “Uber’s algorithms seem to know how much they [the drivers] need to make” by keeping track of their routines—how long they typically clock-in, or how much they earn per day before clocking out—and then “make that goal harder to achieve,” or entice them to continue working by offering surge prices (Dubal 2020; see also Kenner 2019).

Brett’s realization snowballed into abruptly quitting his job during COVID with no other job lined up. But he utilizes his sudden departure to emphasize that technologists build the technological infrastructure to exploit gig workers, and should therefore be held accountable for these systems of exploitation. He has since joined gig worker organizing groups to continue sharing his story and leveraging his identity as a technologist. However, he also made it clear that technologists are not here to save gig workers, but rather, gig workers are leading the charge and “saving themselves.” This framework recognizes gig workers’ own agency and the ability to determine their own futures within the industry. At the end of the emergency meeting, we made plans to grow our organizing bases through phone banking outreach, and to continue building out relationships with one another.

Scholars have explored how the technologist occupational identity, especially in relation to the professional and managerial classes, has impacted their inclinations toward organizing—or rather, their disinclination towards organizing. Laurie Milton (2003) theorizes that technologists will only unionize “when and only when doing so is consistent with their high-tech identities, when they perceive unions to be instrumental, and when their social structure supports unionization” (33). In her study on Seattle software workers’ attempts to unionize, she finds that tech workers have a preconceived notion of unions as blue collar, which is antithetical to their belief that white-collar tech work is innovative, creative, self-sufficient, and meritocratic. As workers who are well compensated and strongly identify as being well educated and professional, Milton (2003) finds that “[t]hey are...a product of how high-tech workers perceive their work and their professional role, perceptions linked intimately to their definitions of themselves” (49). Conversely, many believe that joining a union could signal to their employers that they’re either unsuited for their profession, or are troublemakers. Some technologists further question what a union could even offer them given their high-level status, office perks, and other privileges they already reap. Milton (2003) suggests that unionization efforts would be more successful if organizers focus more on issues relevant to technologists. For example, her interlocutors felt that an important aspect of their work was to constantly update technological skills and learn the latest systems; when this type of work was not prioritized, workers became frustrated and left their companies. She further advises that unionization be reconceptualized and pitched to technologists as an innovative solution to a puzzle—one that taps into their identity as problem solvers.

However, in the 2010s-2020s, J.S. Tan, Natalia Luka, and Emily Mazo (2025) have found that technologists have had an increased proclivity for organizing, with occupational

identity playing a key role. Unlike tech workers in more precarious positions, “tech professionals are well compensated, afforded considerable workplace autonomy, and have high labor market power, allowing them to switch jobs rather than organize for change from within the firm”; this contributes to their identifying as innovators, professionals, creatives, or entrepreneurs, rather than as workers (Tan et al. 2025, 2). Tan et al. (2025) have also observed the increase in technologist organizing through two trends: activism focused on their direct workplace conditions, or labor activism, and activism focused more on social justice issues unrelated to labor conditions, or social activism. In their comprehensive review of tech worker organizing from 2014 to 2022, they observe that technologists may not readily recognize labor issues or class solidarity, but firmly believe that their role as technologists is to create tech for the greater social good. Therefore, when their companies’ actions contradict this mission—for instance, when their companies collaborate with the military or the oil industry—technologists are likely to view this as incongruent to their beliefs and identity, making them more likely to participate in social activism. Because Tan et al. (2025) also observed that social activism tends to precede labor activism in tech companies, they predict that “employees [will] come to understand their own identities not just as professionals but as workers, creating the basis for labor activism” (Tan et al. 2025, 3). In other words, technologists’ participation in social activism will (theoretically) eventually push them to develop a stronger worker identity and gain class consciousness.

As technologists struggle with their involvement in other workers’ exploitation, they seek to utilize organizing as a way to leverage their privileges as well compensated workers who are comparatively more valued within the tech company structure. In some ways, organizing work is its own form of distributive justice—they redistribute the burdens of activism and fighting for better working conditions from the most exploited workers. Their growing class consciousness

and solidarity across occupations also challenges long held notions of the technologist as neutral and apolitical, focused solely on innovation. But to return to Brett's earlier statement, why and how is it possible that "there is no relationship between office workers and drivers" by design of the company, and how does that impact their ability to build coalitions? Using Uber as an example, I explore how the geographic isolation of tech workers throughout the industry hierarchy intentionally contributes to their precarity and ability to organize.

Gig Work, Precarity, and Geographic Isolation

When rideshare apps first broke into the market between 2009-2012, they promised flexibility and convenience for both consumers and drivers alike. For drivers specifically, the possibility of being "self-employed," while making supplemental income and having flexible hours, was particularly enticing following the Great Recession of 2008. The growing gig economy, according to Brian Dolber (2019), led to the formation of the "cybertariat"—a new class of workers "whose lack of traditional labor protections are justified by an ideology of flexibility, independence, and creativity" (5). Moreover, Uber had early on framed itself as antithetical to the bureaucracy and regulations of the 'evil' taxi empire: in line with neoliberal discourse, it promised drivers self-determination rather than bureaucracy, a way to earn money outside of the typical work structure, and with schedules to be decided by the driver (Dubal 2017; see also Freeman 2014). Uber's hiring advertisements further appealed to upstart millennials looking to "make middle-class incomes even in an unstable economy,"⁴³ capitalizing

⁴³ According to Alex Rosenblat (2018), Uber attempted to "gentrify" driving as an occupation by using photos of fashionable, young white men in its advertisements, implicitly disassociating rideshare driving from taxi work, which is often associated with working-class immigrants of color. In reality, rideshare driving is still very much a racialized and gendered profession (see Hua and Ray 2017).

on the post-recession period of financial instability (Rosenblat 2018, 21). Despite operating “extra-legally” in its early years, Uber had appealed to both consumers and drivers through its premise of convenience and innovation.

In order to circumvent the legality of operating an unlicensed transportation company in San Francisco (where rideshare companies had first rolled out), rideshare companies had argued that they’re a software company because they don’t provide vehicles to their drivers; therefore, they should not be subject to the same regulations as taxis (Dubal 2017, 126). While the city later set minimal regulations in order not to stifle startup innovation, it focused on consumer safety rather than working conditions, setting fares or wages, or the number of vehicles permitted to operate. By designating rideshare companies as Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) outside of the taxi industry, the city of San Francisco essentially allowed “a new, but old, version of taxi work” (Dubal 2017, 22). In other words, rideshare drivers were doing taxi work without the industry regulations. In 2019, California passed Assembly Bill 5 which sought to reclassify rideshare drivers as employees, but with Proposition 22 passing in 2020, rideshare companies were allowed to reclassify drivers as contractors.

Despite its promises, very few drivers found the entrepreneurial success these rideshare apps had advertised. Drivers pay additional out-of-pocket expenses for gas and vehicle maintenance; meanwhile, black box algorithms determine their pay, making it difficult to figure out just how much they actually earn per ride. Dubal (2020) finds this lack of transparency intentional so that “workers themselves cannot know or understand their income in relationship to time spent working or their own expenses.” Dubal (2020) refers to the rideshare payment model as a form of “digital piecework,” in which workers pay by the “piece” (in this case, the ride) rather than by the hour. Borrowed from the nineteenth century garment manufacturing

practice of hiring homemaker women to sew garments during their “leisure time” at home, Dubal (2020) argues that “[i]n the same way that domestic labor has long been invisible, despite its centrality to economic production, a growing amount of work in the gig economy has become, by design, unremunerated and hidden from regulation.” Juiletta Hua and Katsuri Ray (2018) also argue that Uber has created a class of part-time drivers by framing part-time rideshare driving as a way to earn money and be productive during time that would usually be spent on leisure. But for full-time rideshare drivers, their work and home life collapses together in a different way: some drivers sleep in their cars to be able to accept rides at any time of the day, or plan their routes around available public restrooms (Hua and Ray 2018). Rather than providing lucrative employment through flexibility, rideshare drivers instead find that their work further adds to their precarity and financial insecurity.

However, one issue the COVID pandemic revealed is how the most exploited and underpaid workers are also the most essential in upholding the tech industry. During Governor Newsom’s 2020 stay-at-home directive, all but “essential critical infrastructure” workers were expected to continue working in-person during the pandemic (Newsom 2020), including rideshare drivers, other app-based gig workers, and Amazon warehouse workers, at times without basic healthcare or PPE. This directive revealed the discrepancies between how workers are treated by their employers versus the importance of their labor: it’s the precarious workers who are recognized as critical to the infrastructure, yet they are not the ones who are adequately compensated nor celebrated for their labor. This reality forced some technologists to confront their own privilege within the tech industry’s labor hierarchy and turn to organizing.

With all her work organizing on Prop 22, I was extremely fortunate to be able to meet with Ashley Smith one day over Zoom. Ashley is a former rideshare driver in her fifties who,

despite quitting rideshare driving a year prior, is still incredibly active in gig worker organizing. Throughout our conversation, it was obvious to me how principled and knowledgeable she is on labor organizing. She excitedly told me all about the different laws related to unionizing, and vented about the anti-union leanings of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) at the time. We also immediately bonded over being Los Angeles transplants originally from the Bay Area; as she tells me, “the Bay Area is my spiritual home, but the tech industry really ruined it.” After several years, Ashley had quit rideshare driving due to health issues and added expenses. She understands firsthand the struggles rideshare drivers are facing, especially during the height of COVID when they weren’t paid to sanitize between each ride, had to supply their own PPE, and weren’t offered any protections from Uber if they were to actually catch COVID—she personally knows a driver who caught it twice in 2021 before vaccines became widely available. In Ashley’s experience, organizing drivers is a challenge because of the physical isolation of the job, since there is no centralized location for drivers to congregate or meet each other. She asserts, “You can’t really do old school organizing because there isn’t a traditional, enclosed work or office space. Plus, the other drivers don’t know each other—and that’s by *design*. Uber doesn’t want you to get to know other workers so you can’t talk to each other and organize.” As a result, her group had to get creative to organize with other drivers by using Facebook ads or going to locations that rideshare drivers frequent (like the airport), and speaking with them directly.

While Brian Dolber (2019) notes that “the atomization of gig workers, and the lack of shared spaces as one would find in a factory or an office present additional challenges for gig worker organizing,” many of the same issues are also present in more traditional tech offices (5). Grace Li’s workplace was entirely remote as a result of COVID by the time she joined, so she

hardly ever interacts with her coworkers in-person. One of the few times she's ever met them was during a business trip in Denver, Colorado, where they visited Red Rocks Amphitheatre, an outdoor concert venue on the edge of a mountain which "resides on the traditional territory of the Ute, Cheyenne and Arapahoe Peoples...[who] are among the 48 contemporary tribal nations having an historic presence on the land that makes up the State of Colorado" (Red Rocks Park & Amphitheatre 2025). Before the concert, a land acknowledgement was spoken, which sparked a meaningful discussion with her colleagues about settler colonialism and the Land Back movement on indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and the reallocation of economic and political control of their lands. Grace recognizes that this conversation only came up organically because they were able to meet and spend time together in-person. Otherwise, it would be very difficult to have a conversation like this during a Zoom meeting or through the company's Slack channel, the two mediums in which she interacts with her colleagues the most. Without these opportunities to connect with one another, she admits it's difficult for any potential organizing to happen. As Rhacel Parreñas (2008) observes, occupational isolation is not unique to tech worker organizing or remote work, but applies to precarious workers who lack shared spaces conducive to organizing. She notes how Filipina domestic workers faced difficulty coalescing and organizing due to isolation in their work and their lack of shared spaces. Because "the actions of the police and the complaints of Italian pedestrians informed migrant Filipinos that they cannot impose on the public domain of Italians," they've had to create temporary public sites to build race and class solidarity: at bus stops, train stations, in front of their employers' homes, informal swap meets, and sometimes churches (104).

This is not a critique of remote work in general, but rather, how physical and geographic isolation further alienates precarious tech workers from full-time employees. In Sara T. Roberts'

(2019) ethnography on digital content moderators for a large tech company, she observes how these content moderators, who are contracted workers, often take the job in hopes of making connections and transitioning into full-time roles; yet the moderator position is either remote (if not outsourced), or geographically isolated on the outskirts of the tech campus. As such, they never have opportunities to interact with other tech workers. Although content moderators “fit the description of knowledge workers...their labor differs from the high-status, high-wage, creative-class knowledge workers of the late 1990s and early 2000s,” which is further reinforced by their contract position and geographic isolation (Roberts 2019, 59). The structure of the tech workplace also lends itself to working autonomously, which Laurie Milton (2003) speculates “may decrease the likelihood that they will coalesce with others. Although often carried out within a project-team structure, significant portions of systems work tend to be highly autonomous, even when workers are task or outcome interdependent...Colleagues do not get to know one another well enough to align or coalesce on work issues” (Milton 2003, 37-8).

Yet Grace analyzes her workplace autonomy through a more positive light. While she does not organize within her own workplace, she readily admits, “I’m fairly compensated now, which allows me to organize in my free time,” utilizing her privilege as a technologist to address industry issues in her own way. Despite a business model built on precarity and isolation, tech workers like Grace and Ashley nonetheless work to build solidarity and address issues of capitalism and corporate greed through grassroots organizing.

‘There are signs of change’: Worker Power, Collective Organizing, and Crafting Technologist Identity

Making the decision to organize and *how* they choose to organize, for technologists, encompasses complex reasons and justifications. Even though I met Grace at the Apples Against Apartheid protest, she for the most part chooses to organize within socialist coalitions to address capitalism and labor issues broadly, rather than organizing around specific issues within her own company. While she believes some of her colleagues would be understanding towards her social causes like Palestine, she senses they might not want to get too involved to risk their privileges as full-time employees; she also acknowledges that getting involved in workplace organizing could result in a higher degree of burnout for her. But after careful contemplation, she further adds that as a UX designer for an employment-seeking online platform, “in terms of evil, the tech we’re making is relatively low on the totem pole.” Regardless of her company’s own ethics, Grace does have hesitations about working in an industry producing large-scale harm, and she isn’t alone. After all, Brett Chen had quit his job out of disgust with his colleagues’ privileges and their obliviousness to the realities of living in precarity during COVID. However, as I will later discuss, quitting one’s job in protest is, according to one organizer, a solitary act that gives up a technologist’s greatest point of leverage. So how, in organizers’ own perspectives, is their position as technologists best utilized?

“The thing about tech workers is that some of us are geeks, and geeks are necessary,” Faye emphatically stated during the boycott, divest, and sanction (BDS) teach-in for tech workers. Faye, like her two co-presenters, were organizers with No Tech for Apartheid (NOTA), comprised of Google workers protesting its contract with the Israeli government to provide cloud storage service, known as Project Nimbus. With many audience members unsure of how to start addressing BDS in the workplace, Faye elaborated, as “tech workers, [we] can help do research, find good targets, [and] look for vulnerable points of connection between your community and

the apartheid system.” In this way, she highlights how the technologist’s skillset directly translates into organizing skills—their hyperattention to detail, efficiency and organizational skills, research capacities, and creative problem solving—traits which technologists as innovators pride themselves on.

Faye’s example demonstrates how organizing contributes to the shaping of technologists’ identity and selfhood. I found that technologists often justify and frame their organizing as an extension of self, like how Faye encouraged others to organize by recognizing their well-suited skills as technologists. But beyond their special skillsets, almost every tech worker I spoke with viewed organizing as an ethical obligation for their occupation, as if it were an extension of their occupational duties and responsibilities. They regularly justified their organizing not through generalized moral obligations of shared humanity, but specifically as a moral obligation related to their duty as tech workers. For instance, as I introduced in Chapter 2, No Azure for Apartheid (NOAA) and similar groups have been pressuring their companies to divest from apartheid Israel through sit-ins, disruptions of important public events, open letters, and other publicized tactics that bring the tech industry’s hidden involvement in exploitative and harmful systems to light. In their latest action, members rowed kayaks in the middle of Lake Washington—where CEO Satya Nadella’s shoreside mansion faces—holding banners accusing him of being complicit in genocide (NOAA 2025). I got to hear more from several NOAA members as well as other organizers from similar groups in an online event bringing together tech workers for Palestine. For one technologist who was fired for organizing, he frames organizing as an obligation that comes with working in the industry, in that “most of the systems in our globalized world are intertwined with Israel and the genocide, [and] dismantling it is part of the greater task at hand. Everyone complicit in this should be held accountable...the vast majority of the tech industry

falls under that bucket.” While much of the blame for industry harm is placed on CEOs, board members, and others with financial interests at stake, as the people who build the infrastructures of harm, technologist organizers assert that they’re not exempt from the responsibility to course-correct their industry. Another technologist argued that organizing was a way for him to reclaim agency in the industry. While trying to mobilize his colleagues, he recalled how most responded with a mix of sympathy and apathy along the lines of, “‘Yeah it sucks, but what can we do about it?’ Or, ‘I don’t feel comfortable doing anything about it.’” But, he argues, “it’s an illusion that we don’t have agency. Workers are powerful when they come together, [and] given our position as workers inside the belly of the beast, we are well-positioned to confront the company and reclaim our labor.” He acknowledges his colleagues’ sentiments in that most of them do not want to be involved in systems of harm, and frames organizing as a chance to take back their agency: “the same workers whose labor is being exploited to enable the genocide must come together to force an end to it.” Another organizer chimed in, “if you don’t do it, no one will.”

In Dorinne Kondo’s (1990) ethnography on identity within Japanese workplaces, she notes that “the levels we call personal, institutional, economic, and political cannot be neatly separated from one another and that identities are not essential wholes, but subject-positions—shifting nodal points within often conflict-ridden fields of meaning” (46). For Kondo (1990), selfhood is constructed through work, family, and other relations, all inseparable from their power relations. Ajantha Subramanian (2019) notes the “neoliberal commodification of identity” when it comes to Indian tech students and workers (22). Indian IT workers undergo soft skills training programs to shape the “neoliberal model of the self” in line with a “global” identity (Subramanian 2019, 218). With Indians at global corporations being seen as lacking soft skills—leadership, teamwork, communication skills, and western-style “emotional intelligence”—these

programs shape their sense of identity and personhood around American workplace expectations, in order to increase their chances at success in a global work environment. Carol Upadhyia (2016) similarly finds that IT workers in India co-construct identity and selfhood through the precarity of their work. By adapting flexible job strategies for social mobility, they “have internalized a neoliberal ethos of individualism and self-responsibility, accepting that job insecurity is now a ‘part of life’ and that they must equip themselves to survive in a competitive labor market” (Upadhyia 2016, 112-3). Upadhyia (2016) notes that the burdens of job precarity has shifted from being the responsibility of the state or the corporation, onto the individual workers themselves. Therefore, IT workers reshape themselves through this precarity, using a neoliberal framework to construct an identity of the ideal entrepreneurial worker-subject—one who is flexible, constantly learning new skills, and has a willingness to relocate or job-hop to find positions in which they’re more suited. Likewise, through the ethical obligations of their workplace, technologist organizers I spoke with believed being a technologist meant creating technology for social good, and that holding their industry accountable to this mission was part of their occupational duty. In this way, they construct themselves as an ethical worker subject, recognizing their own complicity and agency within the industry and its power relations.

Tech organizers also emphasized the importance of collective organizing over individual actions. Although Brett Chen quit his job in protest, Sara Zhou, an Amazon employee who was fired for organizing around environmental justice, urges principled technologists to collectively organize rather than quit. In an online teach-in on the environmental impact of AI data centers, Sara discussed how she first became involved in environmental organizing: in 2018, during a “global awakening of climate issues,” she and a group of coworkers were frustrated by Amazon’s absence of public sustainability statements. While they first tried going through

internal channels by writing papers (the standard procedure for making institutional change at Amazon), their concerns were left unanswered. Finally, they decided to “make it a public fight” by forming the coalition Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, filing a shareholder resolution, and writing a public letter to CEO Jeff Bezos and Amazon’s board of directors—which 8,000 employees signed—calling for an end to contracts with oil and gas companies and pollution from its warehouses. They later escalated their tactics by interrupting an annual shareholders’ meeting, and by organizing a global walkout with roughly 3,000 workers. As a direct result of their organizing, Amazon publicly committed to reduce shipping emissions and announced its first ever climate pledge. While Sara recognizes that it’s “tempting” for workers to quit in protest of their companies’ harmful actions, she believes “we should convince principled coworkers to decide to stay and fight rather than quit the company—this is acting individually and not collectively, and by quitting, you’re giving up your biggest point of leverage...Tech CEOs have actually complained about mass actions between 2018-20, because they’re working. We must act collectively.” Adds another organizer, “The power of organizing is the collective. Every single person who joins can add something and make the group more powerful.”

The leverage that Sara is referring to is the visibility and privilege of technologists within collective organizing. As insiders and architects of the industry, their visibility is what draws public attention to these issues—especially if they end up getting fired as a result. Although it is technically illegal to be fired for organizing, tech organizers recount how their official, stated reasons for their firing somewhat circumvented the illegality (for example, being told they’re let go for not following company code of conduct). However, technologists utilize their firing as a tactic to mount greater public pressure on their companies. Diane Felder, a Microsoft engineer who was fired for participating in a sit-in for Gaza, recognizes that “a lot of times, what gets

visibility is people who are fired for their organizing. I anticipated it, I prepared for it. But the majority of the work that pushes these things forward does not have to be visible to your place of employment or to other people. And there are people who are willing to do that [risk being fired] if you are not.” Despite risking job security, organizers recognize that being fired shows that their companies fear collective worker power. Sara Zhou points out that “tech companies are cracking down more and more on worker organizing because they know it works. Business and policy decisions are not making decisions based on research for the greater good, so we need to organize workers and communities to stand up during this time.” Similarly, Diane acknowledges how their organizing efforts pushed Microsoft to respond and take action:

Some executives might nod and make you feel heard in the hopes that you go away, while some might be more aggressive. But you can never count on executives’ goodwill. Leadership and people in power will never hand you what you want, but you *can* exert pressure on them. The NOAA campaign was active for 500 days. No one [in the media] was initially talking about Microsoft—all the attention was on Google and Amazon [tech worker campaigns]. The way Microsoft handled it was first, they started with repression; they never commented publicly to the press on our campaigns. Then as it gained momentum, they had to change course, so they conducted an [internal] investigation and found that they didn’t do anything wrong [laughs]. So there was a shift from hoping it’d go away, to outright denial. And then, [most recently] they sent an email to every employee about divesting from Unit 8200 [the cyberwarfare and surveillance agency to which Microsoft was supplying its Azure cloud platform]. It wasn’t always obvious, but there are signs of progress.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how tech workers hold their companies accountable by identifying the hypocrisies between their practices within their own CSR and mission statements. Here, I highlight how both tech workers operating within corporate activism and grassroots organizers alike recognize the importance of a company’s public image and its financial incentives in order to push for change. For tech organizers, this means public disruptions of their companies’ brand image the way that CPP and PWRM had done, decades before them. And yet, precarity and job insecurity is one of the greatest concerns for

organizers—a risk which most corporate activists do not face, discouraging even relatively privileged employees from organizing. It’s also why tech organizers emphasize the importance of collective worker power and the behind-the-scenes organizing work. For one organizer, a former Apple employee, “anonymous organizing is very successful and so much of what you’ve seen accomplished is done by people who don’t want their names out there. If you want to start something, you don’t need your name on it—start a campaign, a page, an account, until you feel like you can put the public pressure for someone to be fired.” Diane also notes the level of community she gained from organizing, adding that “if you were to do that [be fired], there’s an extensive network of people doing this work. Once you start this work, not only are you not alone, you will have more camaraderie than you’ve probably experienced previously.” Through collective worker organizing, technologists have created solidarity and community to counteract company intimidation and fears of precarity.

Conclusion

In 2018, in one of the instances that inspired the direction of my project, a computer scientist for the predictive policing software PredPol stated that because he’s “just ‘a researcher,’” he was unfit to navigate the ethical dilemmas of how his work might contribute to the over-policing Black and brown communities (Hutson 2018).⁴⁴ In contrast to this statement, technologist organizers often pointed to their moral obligations as tech workers as central to their identity as technologists. As Tan et al. (2025) summarize, “tech workers possess a distinctive

⁴⁴ This also speaks to UX designer Grace Li’s point on how detrimental it was to only have one class on race in her computer science major. Instead of treating race and other social dimensions of technology as separate from tech work itself, technologists like Grace understand the importance of viewing tech as a social artifact, and carefully consider the social implications of technology, both positive and negative.

professional identity centered on using technology for societal benefit. However, when employers undermine these idealistic values by engaging with perceived bad actors...they violate tech workers' belief in contributing to the social good. In response, tech workers...engage in social activism in the workplace" (3). Especially with the COVID-era resurgence of labor movements bridging vertical solidarity for workers across the industry, workers across the spectrum are bringing attention to the large-scale harm the tech industry perpetuates. For technologist organizers who view themselves as integral to this harm—as architects of the infrastructure needed for surveillance, labor exploitation, military tech, and exacerbating climate change—institution-approved channels of advocacy and activism are not enough to mitigate it. Instead, they view their position within broader systems of capitalism, imperialism, and exploitation, and leverage it to work towards collective action and change.

While their strong identity as technologists is used to justify their organizing, it's not their only motivation. Their efforts are part of a larger fabric of grassroots organizing in the U.S. as people experience increased job insecurity and cost of living, with California as a hot spot for organizing (Dean 2023). In 2024, a Consumer Affairs report found that Oakland was the only major Bay Area city where you would not need to make a six-figure income to live comfortably, based on the federal government's affordability threshold that states one should not pay more than 30 percent of their income on rent (Favro 2024). Following on the heels of a pandemic that left many feeling that our current social services are insufficient to support us, even highly skilled, white-collar tech jobs are no longer a source of security.

Despite the continuous efforts of tech worker organizers, however, labor organizing as a whole in the tech industry is still an underutilized source of collective worker power, with very few unions and general participation in organizing. To return to Grace Li's earlier speculations,

will precarity in the face of AI drive technologists into class solidarity and organizing? In Sophie Bandarkar's (2025) opinion article, "The AI Gold Rush Is Cover For A Class War," she theorizes that "companies are using the AI boom to rewrite the social contract—laying off employees, rehiring them at lower wages, intensifying workloads, and normalizing precarity. In short, these are political choices masquerading as technical necessities. AI is not the cause of the layoffs but their justification." Bandarkar asserts, in other words, that job loss will not occur due to AI replacing tech workers (which she suspects is not yet an immediate concern), but because AI will become the scapegoat in which companies can restructure and weaken labor power. Building upon her argument, I contemplate if the already invisible labor of precarious tech workers has laid the groundwork for the future of labor precarity in the wake of AI. While there may be a visual absence of a tech worker when it comes to content moderation or a delivery robot, humans are nonetheless behind the work we assume to be automated. As Veena Dubal notes (2020), "The historical relationship between capitalism, workers, and machines suggests that automation does not make labor obsolete; it reorders it, often rendering it invisible" (3). If that is the case, how should tech workers best approach their industry and its relationship to labor, especially if the technology itself is set to render them invisible or exploit them? What kinds of technologies and infrastructures do technologist organizers hope to build in its place? In the next chapter, I discuss how tech activists address their growing concerns for technology through creating their own alternatives, and how building these alternative ecosystems are a form of community care.

CHAPTER 4: TECHNOSOLUTIONS OR TECHNOPROBLEMS? NEGOTIATING THE TERMS OF AGREEMENT IN ‘GOOD’ TECHNOLOGY

Introduction

“AI is not your friend. It took me a month to teach it to do something a toddler could do,” an engineering student bemoaned, with chuckles of approval from the rest of the audience. While attending a community event on the future of tech work, our discussion on the U.S. military’s use of AI had somehow segued into a conversation on AI’s infiltration into all aspects of life—and the ethical concerns that go along with it. This topic piqued the interest of much of the audience, with one software engineer voicing, “There are ways to use AI critically. We can construct aspects of AI, rather than being simply channeled or replaced by AI. But we have to do that construction *actively* and collaboratively,” while a graduate student jokingly chimed in, “The solution to the AI problems are just better, more empirical AI.” As we continued to discuss AI through its varied uses differing in scale and potential impact, their familiar exasperation with these precautions sparked concern for what they as tech workers are being asked to build and implement. Amongst this circle of progressive tech workers and STEM graduate students, not a single person expressed uncontained enthusiasm for AI as seen in the likes of Big Tech CEOs. As another graduate student summarized, “there’s been a top-down, centralized push [towards AI] that workers can and need to push back on.”

While AI is one of the most recent and forefront concerns for tech activists, their trepidations expand far beyond AI and towards all aspects of technology and its potential effect on society. As I explored in Chapter 3, many tech workers were originally drawn to the tech industry for the opportunity to positively impact society, and subsequently turned to organizing when their industry failed to meet these expectations. I’ve also previously discussed the methods tech workers use to protest and steer their industry away from harmful and exploitative practices,

whether that be through institutional diversity measures, or on-the-ground organizing efforts. But I've yet to address a more technological component of their activism: how do they, as innovators of the industry, create the technology, the products, the systems they wish to see in the world? As the attendees at the AI community event articulated, tech workers want an active and collaborative role in shaping technology aligned with their morals and ideologies; for if they object to making technology they deem negative to society, they are also in the best position to reimagine new products and systems. By creating their own apps and products, participating in tech for good projects, joining free/libre and open-source software groups, founding tech cooperatives, etc., they seek technological possibilities outside the realm of harmful Big Tech practices. But I ask, what does it actually entail to create the technologies they envision, and what does tech—for 'good,' for social justice, for community-building—look like beyond the current ecosystems and infrastructures?

In this chapter, I examine how tech workers negotiate what it means to create 'good' technology in line with their own visions of social, humanistic, and community good: what are the factors that shape their concepts of 'good' and 'bad' tech, and how are these categories contested and enacted? And what compromises or negotiations, then, are necessary? For instance, many of the tech organizers I worked with had general ideas of what constituted 'good' technology from a theoretical standpoint, but disagreed with how these ideas should actually be implemented. Other times, organizers clashed over harm reduction strategies that prioritized minimizing certain harms at the expense of others. In exploring the ideologies they use to create and implement their own tech, it is not my goal to challenge their frameworks and arguments, but rather to understand how their categorizations of 'good' and 'bad' technologies are shaped by existing global structures, narratives of empowerment, or their experiences under capitalism,

colonialism, and imperialism, amongst other factors. This chapter provides an overview of various tech movements and groups seeking to create ‘good’ technology, most notably the “tech for good” movement—which endeavors to develop and use technology as a means to solve societal issues—and decentralization efforts to de-monopolize Big Tech. As tech activists build their own technology and ecosystems around their ethics and views of social justice, I speculate on the services, infrastructures, and collaborations needed to make their ideas a reality.

The Tech for Good Movement: In Pursuit of ‘Good’ Tech

For software engineer Nazaneen Izadi, working at a company committed to making a positive social impact was absolutely crucial. Before accepting a job offer at her current company, a civic tech startup that provides online tools to increase voter engagement and registration, she had spent copious hours researching and reaching out to current employees in order to hear more about its mission, goals, and company culture: *did their culture and policies actually show a commitment to social justice, or was it all just performative? Were they working to improve diversity in the workforce through diverse hiring and DEI policies? Did they have a sustainability statement?* I caught up with Nazaneen and Ellen Lin, another software engineer, immediately after their “tech with social impact” panel at a women-in-tech conference.

Similarly, Ellen felt that one of the biggest reasons she was compelled to work at an educational tech (edutech) company was for “their commitment to helping students,” and their sustainability and charitable practices. Not only does her company offer employees paid time off for volunteering, for the past few years they’ve reallocated their swag (promotional, branded items to increase company visibility) budget towards charitable donations, with each employee choosing where a portion of the donations will go. While asking them more about their work in the tech for good space, Nazaneen added with encouragement that one’s contribution to social

good isn't limited to their company's mission statement or policies: "join open-source projects to contribute to, get together with colleagues, and figure out the best way you can make impact even if it's not baked into your organization."

In tech for good, however, social impact is very much baked into the organization, with the overarching mission to create technologies that work to solve complex social problems and positively impact society. It is perhaps most commonly implemented in (but not limited to) international development, healthcare, civic tech, and edutech. In our conversation, Ellen reiterated that tech work "is more than just programming—you can combine a love of engineering with your desire to make an impact on social justice causes that are important to you." For Nazaneen and Ellen, their strong desire to create meaningful tech at socially conscious companies is what compelled them to work in tech for good; both the technology and the workplace practices had to be aligned with their own morals, with products and goals that are meant to help others, corporate donations to charitable causes, and a commitment to diverse hiring and leadership. They both recognize the structural issues within the industry—creating harmful products, lack of racial and gender diversity in the workforce, environmental pollution—and were familiar with the industry's "performative" aspects when it came to correcting these issues (see Chapter 2). As Nazaneen had said in her panel, "After George Floyd, all these tech companies were throwing 'diversity' into their mission statement, but what were they actually doing to support diversity? It's not enough to say you support diversity without any follow-through...do the research, check out their DEI programs, leadership [diversity], talk to people at the company first...before you decide [to work there]." Nazaneen and Ellen took great pride in their work and their companies during a time when, post-2020, many tech companies were going

through a racial and gender reckoning. There seemed to be a sense of relief that their companies were “different” from the rest.

And they weren’t alone in their feelings of fulfillment. Lena Lyall, who works at an edutech company that specializes in technologies for learning development, emphasized the affective qualities of her work that brought meaning to her labor:

The places where I feel the most good about our kind of work is when we're helping and influencing teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in education. I know I'm thinking really broadly here, but there's nothing more wonderful in your job when you have that feel-good feeling of like, Oh, I helped somebody today... Ultimately, the people we're servicing is the end user, and helping them in a concrete way. So they feel good about what they're doing and the kind of work they're doing.

Lena was deeply proud of her work during COVID, in which her company’s technologies helped smooth the transition to remote learning for both teachers and students. And while Meredith Hu didn’t necessarily consider herself a tech activist, she displayed thoughtfulness in her work as a medtech product manager, constantly asking of her work, *does the product make our lives better?*

In my role, I make the decision around the products that we build and ship to people all over the world. Like my last product, on a daily basis, there's like 20 million people using it. So I think it made me realize I have a social responsibility in what I build... How do you build inclusive products when you design AI, for example? Are you making sure you have an inclusive enough sample size, so that you're not just training data on like, the typical white male? When you go to a doctor, and you take your blood test, I learned that the normal range is based on an American white male, and it's like, well, this might not be normal for Asian women of this height and weight, right? And thinking about the impact of technology, I just want to be cognizant of like, okay, am I building a technology that's really helping people or harming people?

Both Lena and Meredith felt pride in creating technology with perceived social good. While Meredith later left her medtech role to work at a Big Five tech company, she continued to hold onto her sense of responsibility to mitigate harm when creating new products.

For Ari Levin, his early success as a software engineer allowed him to be selective in his current work, mainly choosing roles which he determined would “[create tech that] could be useful to society” over making money. After working for a Big Five tech company, then a unicorn startup,⁴⁵ he now works at a medtech startup that uses AI to review medical bills, while also volunteer-teaching computer science to disadvantaged high school students in his spare time. Discussing his reason for getting into tech for good, he said:

I joined this startup because I wanted to work on something that felt like it had a mission that was good, that was not just to make money but to do something good in the world...So now, having said that, it’s not a non-profit, it is a for-profit company. But at this point, my main reason for choosing to work there is not about how much I can make...Also, I think my reason for working with them is because I think healthcare in America is way more expensive than it should be, and way more complicated than it should be. And I’m excited about the idea of taking something complicated and hiding the complexity behind the scenes so that it can be made simpler for everyday people, and give them an advantage in a system in which people are oftentimes disadvantaged, against other players who are far more knowledgeable...It presents an opportunity to tap into data and do something useful for the consumers.

For Ari, technology was a tool for solving larger structural issues. He told me about how he was initially interested in starting his own non-profit for a different social issue, but once he did research and saw that an existing startup was already addressing this issue, he felt like “the problem was already solved, so I could move on.” For him, tech for good is “using tech in the name of solving problems, or empowering others to solve these problems, like democratizing data or protecting the environment.” Proclaiming a passion for problem solving, tech for good was a “way to right wrongs: it’s a practical approach to problem solving...taking complex ideas and making them simple.”

⁴⁵ A unicorn startup is a privately held company with a valuation of 1 billion dollars or more.

Lena, Meredith, and Ari all felt that their work as technologists should include solving or alleviating societal issues. Like the tech organizers I featured in Chapter 3, they displayed a strong attachment to their labor being used for social good. Sociologist Karina Rider (2022) writes that working in tech for good allows technologists to “creat[e] idealized versions of their workplaces: spaces where workers can pursue their passions while contributing to the common good” (5009). Through ethnographic fieldwork amongst civic technologists in the Bay Area, she discovered that their participation in tech for good represented a different kind of ‘repair work’—not repairing technology per se, but rather their affective attachment to tech labor. She states, “repair work conceptualizes participants’ engagement as working toward upholding, reproducing, and reinvigorating certain moral orders, understandings of desirable workplaces, and visions of the future” (50018). In Chapter 1, I discussed how Lena felt discriminated against by her coworkers for being a working mother. She felt like “there’s this weird expectation that people are working after 5pm, and are using tech to bring their laptop home and clock-in and clock-out at 10pm or something... But I feel like it’s just as valid that a twenty-something-year-old can also go home and get a drink with a friend, you know? But for whatever reason, it seems like parents get the most airtime [for not bringing work home].” And yet her work in edutech reaffirmed her commitment to contributing to greater good, despite the irony that a company geared toward educating children would have a workplace culture discriminatory toward mothers. As Lena exemplifies, the tech for good interlocutors I spoke with truly sought to create tech that benefited humanity in a way that—akin to Rider’s (2022) repair work—maintained or restored their belief in their industry’s ability to contribute to positive social change.

But critiques of the tech for good movement from other interlocutors also draw attention to its possible harms: data surveillance, thinly veiled capitalist motives, and colonial ideologies,

with continued concerns that tech for good perpetuates surveillance and U.S. hegemony. Product manager Michelle Rodgers expressed wariness over some medtech products' use of data, rhetorically asking me, "Do we really need to track how many steps we take in a day? A lot of those things are just surveillance." Communications scholar Mirca Madinaou (2022) further states that with tech for good, "visions of technological future [and] capitalism [have] found the perfect match" (283). In an example illustrative of both the aforementioned concerns, it was revealed in 2022 that Crisis Text Line, a nonprofit tech for good organization dedicated to providing emergency mental healthcare through text-based chat services with trained volunteers, was using its customers' conversations to train Loris.ai, its for-profit subsidiary, to create customer service software (Hendel 2022). After swift and widespread backlash, including calls from a Federal Communications Commissioner to open an investigation into its data practices, Crisis Text Line announced it would no longer share its data with Loris.ai, and requested its subsidiary to delete the existing data it had already shared.⁴⁶ But the damage was already done. The breach of trust in how organizations mishandle sensitive data—even those with intentions to help people through its products and services—represents greater power structures and interests at hand.

In fact, the directional flow of data sharing—or perhaps more accurately, data extraction—within the tech for good movement maps onto existing colonial relationships. Anjuan Simmons (2015) draws comparison with modern day tech companies' data collection to

⁴⁶ Although Crisis Text Line asserts that all data was anonymized before giving it to Loris.ai, John Hendel (2022) of *Politico* notes that "studies of other kinds of so-called anonymized data sets have found it possible to trace them back to specific individuals," thus making concerns for data privacy—particularly in users' most vulnerable moments—justified. It is also worth noting that Crisis Text Line has not publicly stated if Loris.ai has followed through with deleting the existing shared data.

historical colonial projects: “Just as the royal powers of old reached far into the lives of distant colonized people, technology companies gain immense control with every terabyte of personal data they store and analyze.” Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2018) remark on how data colonialism follows the same logic as territorial colonialism, with data being romanticized as abundant, cheap, and unclaimed or easily appropriated from their rightful owners: “For personal data to be freely available for appropriation, it must first be treated as a natural resource, a resource that is just there. Extractive rationalities need to be naturalized or normalized...[until] depletion is seen as unproblematic” (339). In tech and society magazine *Model View Culture*, an Anonymous Author (2016) wrote that “far from being a neutral process, the ways that data is collected, stored, processed, analyzed and shared in the field deeply reflects politics, power dynamics and ongoing patterns of privilege and marginalization on a global scale.” The Author (2016) draws attention to the ways information communication technologies for development (ICT4D), commonly utilized within humanitarian tech for good projects to gather biometric, demographic, and other sensitive data, “often fail to seek or obtain informed consent; and project participants are unable to opt-out. The fact that data is often managed outside of the country of origin, without the input or participation or design of the populations they represent, is itself oppressive.” Their own experience within the humanitarian and tech for good sector further supports that data collection is “another form of exploitation on the ‘Global South’ under the guise of aid”: while working for USAID on a project to strengthen an African country’s data management system, USAID enforced a U.S.-based data management system rather than an already existing and commonly used local and open-source system, denying local communities ownership of their own data. This would come as no surprise to Madianou (2022), who states that “the convergence of digital developments with humanitarian structures and market

forces...reinvigorate and rework colonial relationships of dependency” (283). She notes that large tech companies such as Google, Palantir, and Amazon also take on humanitarian causes under the guise of tech for good in order to test out new technologies on marginalized populations and extract their data.

These extractive data projects, I argue, are neocolonialism under the guise of tech for good. Tech companies extract tangible resources from countries from the Global South—cobalt, coltan, and other minerals from the Congo, for example—while also “giving back” to them through tech for good projects meant to extract data, thereby reinforcing exploitative colonial relationships. As Simmons (2015) summarizes, “white men found most of the companies in the sector and build entire business models on the personal data of marginalized people. Companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google are predominantly used by women and minorities whose data and usage patterns are sold for profit.” While recognizing many technologists’ good intentions, these critiques at the very least give nuance to a movement working within capitalist and colonial structures and motives, and reveal the limitations to which technology can unequivocally solve societal issues.

Technosolutionism—that is, the belief that technology has the capacity to solve all of humanity’s problems—overshadows many tech for good initiatives, especially when implementing technological solutions before understanding the full social context of the issue at hand. Just as Ari had, with matter-of-fact swiftness, moved on from a social problem he was interested in after seeing that another organization already “solved” the issue, technosolutionism responds to longstanding systemic issues with quick technological solutions. New technologies are constantly touted as uplifting humanity before it’s had due time to address any pertinent issues. Using cryptocurrency through blockchain technology as an example, Madianou (2022)

writes, “it was often acknowledged [in humanitarian and technology sectors] that blockchain was the end rather than the means: a preoccupation with ‘what can be done with blockchain’ instead of ‘how can we address an actual problem’” (290). And in an industry fixated on hype, these technologies are anxiously upheld by tech workers and enthusiasts as revitalizing the industry.

Yet tech for good workers, like the corporate activists I met in Chapter 2, view tech for good within the framework of harm reduction. Although Meredith Hu left her medtech company for a Big Five corporation not exactly known for making a social impact, she brought with her a commitment to do good and a willingness to think about the impact of her work, now that her products had further reach and would be affecting more people than her previous work did. Just as Mario Zanetti, the cannabis tech worker who I introduced in Chapter 2, felt that “the best way to spread the word and get people on the same wavelength, as far as thinking or making change, is getting the right information out there and talking to the right people” through one-on-one conversations, Meredith and other tech for good workers felt that bringing individual conscientiousness into their work was a way of helping through harm reduction in a capitalist, financially incentivized system.

I also highlight that Madianou’s (2022) earlier example of cryptocurrency is particularly relevant in conversations on ‘good’ tech, particularly in this current digital era known as Web3. The ‘Web3 era’ is a term used to describe and speculate on an internet characterized by decentralization, with cryptocurrency and AI as the drivers (Messerli 2024, 21). Computer science scholar Partha Pratim Ray (2023) defines Web3 as “a decentralized and democratized internet that puts users in control of their data and online identities,” with a “shift from centralized servers, data centers, and intermediaries to distributed networks, peer-to-peer protocols, and user-centric models” that foster collaboration (214-5). He predicts that “cutting-

edge technologies like blockchain, AI...[will] create a more equitable, secure, and interconnected digital world” (Ray 2023, 214). The Web3 push for decentralization also coincides with rising distrust of institutions, which became all the more pertinent after the Great Recession of 2008. There are evidently a lot of promises hinging on cryptocurrency and AI as tools to bring about good through decentralization, but what does this entail exactly? In the next section, I discuss decentralization efforts as a method for social good and achieving liberatory goals, along with its varying ethical frameworks. How do tech workers and enthusiasts imagine decentralization technologies bringing about the societal changes they seek?

Cryptocurrency, AI, and Conflicting Frameworks of Good

“We’re changing the world,” enthusiastic cryptocurrency users repeatedly told me one lively Monday evening in Santa Monica. As I headed up the stairs of a trendy, upscale bar to attend a “women in crypto” mixer, an event for people of all genders interested in breaking into cryptocurrency, I was warmly greeted by Skylar Houghton, a public relations specialist for a boutique tech firm. Skylar and I had initially met a week prior at a Tech Girl Boss event when she invited me to the mixer; as I stood bewildered at the top of the stairs, she spotted me and waved me over to the sign-in table, embracing me in a tight hug while exclaiming, “I’m so glad you could make it!” Since her company was trying to break a record for the biggest turnout of women at a cryptocurrency meetup, she handed me a sign-in sheet specifically for women attendees—“otherwise we don’t buy into the gender binary,” she informed me. Once inside, I met technologists and tech enthusiasts eager to hear more from women who had successfully used cryptocurrency to achieve their financial goals. At the refreshments table lined with rows of sushi, I made small talk with two attendees in accounting who were hoping to find employment at a Big Five tech company. Simultaneously, I eavesdropped on another attendee wearing a

“Satoshi is female” T-shirt explain why she believes Satoshi Nakamoto,⁴⁷ the pseudonym for the anonymous person or group of people who created Bitcoin (Nakamoto 2008; Tripathi et al. 2023), just had to be a woman: “Bitcoin is all about collaboration! Is that something a man would do?” With more than 120 attendees—62 of them women, a new record for Skylar’s company—the room was packed as I made my way through clusters of people and found a seat in the audience.

Although public interest in cryptocurrency has slightly waned in recent years, it was once hailed as the next Silicon Valley tech boom, the latest innovation representing endless financial, technological, and creative possibilities for users. Forms of digital currencies have existed for decades, but the more recent innovation of blockchain technology—which acts as a decentralized, digital public ledger—made it possible to conduct financial transactions without going through an intermediary. War studies scholar Clara Jammot (2025) surmises that “cryptocurrency is [r]ooted in Silicon Valley’s techno-utopianism of the 1990s, [and] promised a better society where money and value could flow between actors without the intermediation of banks.” While somewhat lacking in regulatory oversight, it has nonetheless been lauded as providing secure, transparent, and immutable transactions, with some experts predicting that blockchain will change the way the world transacts (Tripathi et al. 2023, 2).

⁴⁷ The “Satoshi is [a] female” theory challenges assumptions of who we expect major technological innovations to come from, and forces one to reevaluate how women’s contributions to the tech world are perceived. According to one anonymous Guest Writer (2023) for Crypto Citizens Network, the suggestion that Nakamoto is female is “extremely provocative. To many of them [crypto users], it is akin to suggesting that Jesus was a girl.” While Satoshi is a masculine Japanese given name, the true identity (including race/ethnicity and gender) of Satoshi Nakamoto is unknown, and may also be more than one person.

At the meetup, a panel of five women in tech shared stories of what motivated them to get involved in cryptocurrency, intertwined with narratives of how other institutions had previously failed them. Amy Ortiz, a video game developer in her twenties and first-generation college graduate, was initially excited at the prospect of gaining financial independence through cryptocurrency. After a few years of crypto mining (the computational processes in which cryptocurrency is earned) and trading, she was able to pay off her student loans and buy a house for her intergenerational family. Similarly, Maria Moreno, who self-identifies as someone from an “under-banked,” working-class, Latino neighborhood, recollected how cryptocurrency’s independence from banks allowed her to bypass U.S. sanctions and restrictions on economic transactions to her country of origin, where her grandmother still lived. Maria used to face difficulty transferring money to her grandmother through bank wires, but with cryptocurrency, she’s now able to circumvent geographic and sociopolitical obstacles with ease. She reiterated how crucial alternative financial options are for marginalized people in the U.S.: for people without U.S. birth certificates, undocumented immigrants, women, and under-banked people (for example, people who banks will not give loans to, or people who cannot open bank accounts due to missing identity documents), cryptocurrency represents a lifeline for financial independence. To the applause of the audience, she concluded, “Cryptocurrency is giving us self-sovereignty. It’s helping us close the wealth gap. It’s giving us financial independence as women. We’re changing the world!”

The panelists’ spirited optimism for cryptocurrency was framed through narratives of empowerment for marginalized peoples antagonized by U.S. policies and the financial sector; at the same time, it was marked by fear of crises and distrust in institutions. Each panelist stressed how cryptocurrency gave them the financial independence they sought as women, with several

stating that “you [as women] need to be your own bank.” Another panelist chimed in that her grandmother couldn’t open a bank or credit card account without her husband’s consent in the 1960s; in contrast, through crypto, the panelist was able to afford her own home and pay off her debts singlehandedly.⁴⁸ Additionally, both Amy and Maria came of age during the Great Recession of 2008, and felt the economic uncertainty of unemployment after graduating from college, including the possibility of never being able to own their own home. Meanwhile, Bitcoin launched during the Great Recession, and while not completely inflation-proof, has a supply cap of 21 million coins, making it more inflation resistant than fiat currencies like the U.S. dollar. As such, discussions of cryptocurrency amongst enthusiasts typically revolve around fears of inflation for fiat currencies (Jammot 2025), making Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies a perceived ‘safer’ financial investment, despite its own boom and bust cycles. But it was cryptocurrency’s decentralization that was the major selling point for the women in crypto panelists. Maria’s difficulty sending money to her grandmother through bank wires to a country sanctioned by the U.S., compared with the fewer bureaucratic hurdles of cryptocurrency, seemed to solidify her distrust in banks as a source of financial support for the people. She was also able to help her undocumented friends get started in crypto mining, bolstering her conviction that alternative financial institutions were needed for under-banked communities. When viewed from this perspective, their emphasis on self-sovereignty and alternative financial ecosystems is indicative of their experiences of precarity. By allowing Amy to become a first-time home buyer and pay off student loans at a time when many of her peers were still struggling, or for Maria to

⁴⁸ Before the Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1974, women could be refused a credit card or bank account without a male co-signer (Shoenthal 2026).

circumvent U.S. sanctions to send money to her grandmother with ease, they framed cryptocurrency as a safety net for women and other marginalized peoples when other institutions fail them.

While I have no doubt that Amy and Maria viewed cryptocurrency as a form of empowerment—as under-banked women of color—from oppressive institutions, other tech scholars and activists hold a skeptical eye towards cryptocurrency as a form of liberation. Clara Jammot (2025) notes, “[There] has been a change in who shapes the narratives of cryptocurrency, as the tech elite has taken over from the tech enthusiasts... This influx of the tech elite is bringing with it specific interpretations of what financial as well as democratic systems should look like.” Tech journalist and software engineer Molly White (2026), who has documented cryptocurrency’s deep ties to authoritarianism, writes,

For years, crypto executives have touted cryptocurrency’s supposed anti-authoritarian and humanitarian credentials—whether to fend off regulators or convince the public that crypto has viable use cases beyond speculation. The technology is necessary and good, they claim, because it could support dissidents living under authoritarian regimes, help persecuted groups escape their oppressors, shield people from surveillance, or somehow inherently protect citizens from government overreach. And yet now these voices are silent on the authoritarianism unfolding before us.

Here, White (2026) references the ways executives appeal to fears of collapse in order to promote their cryptocurrencies, despite openly supporting authoritarian ideals. For example, when the Canadian government froze the bank accounts of the 2022 convoy leaders of truck drivers protesting the COVID vaccine mandate,⁴⁹ crypto executives were quick to use this as an opportunity to market their cryptocurrencies as an alternative financial institution free from such

⁴⁹ In early 2022, truck drivers and their supporters known as the “Freedom Convoy” blockaded “different locations across the country, including strategic ports of entry,” in opposition to the COVID vaccine mandates for cross-border truck drivers in Canada (Public Safety Canada 2022). In response, the Canadian government cut off protestors’ access to financial support and gas by freezing their bank accounts.

government overreach (White 2026). And yet, Coinbase CEO Brian Armstrong, Gemini cofounder Tyler Winklevoss, and other crypto and financial tech (fintech) executives are heavily involved in cryptocurrency lobbying, have donated to President Trump’s presidential campaigns, and are vocal proponents of “the network state” (White 2026), an increasingly popular Silicon Valley concept of tech-governed city-states free from democratic oversight, “under the sole control of the supremely wealthy, protected by private mercenaries, serviced by AI robots and financed by cryptocurrencies” (Klein and Taylor 2025). These are just a few examples of the contrasts and contradictions within public discourse on cryptocurrency for social good.

It’s not surprising that executives frame their technology as a social good in order to amass wealth and influence, nor is it groundbreaking that tech workers, consumers, and enthusiasts nonetheless find empowerment through (potentially) exploitative or harmful technology. What these narratives reveal, however, is the process in which the ‘good’ in tech is imagined, constructed, and contested—and by whom. In Lisa Messeri’s (2024) ethnography of the virtual reality (VR) industry in Los Angeles, she finds that “[f]antasies, in this context, are not distinct from reality but texture the social practices through which realities are brought into being” (10). Because the VR industry in Los Angeles had greater representation of women than the traditional tech sector, it was marketed as a women-led revolution that would bring about more empathy in the world. Through VR, one could put themselves in the shoes of the marginalized and the oppressed, and by immersing themselves in the virtual realities of the Other (for example, the experiences of Mexican migrants), it was thought to have the power to “make an individual better and, in pursuing these projects, VR could itself be a ‘good’ industry” (Messeri 2024, 11). However, she also notes, “The same strategies that are imagined by VR innovators to do good in the world can, in other hands, do its opposite. This ambiguity is what

makes the reality crisis challenging to navigate, demanding care and attention be paid to how worlds are imagined and created” (Messori 2024, 7-8). While I have doubt that crypto executives have genuine concern for the financial wellbeing of the masses, for Maria, cryptocurrency gave her the ability to “imagine a world without borders, without banks,” to be free from the need for documentation, and to (financially) traverse nation-state borders with ease. All the panelists similarly imagined cryptocurrency as a tool that—in the hands of women, people of color, undocumented people, and other under-banked people—would bring to life an idealized decentralized and democratic financial sector. As the panelists tapped into themes of empowerment and postnationalism, I got the sense that—despite their own financial gains through cryptocurrency—these idealized futures outshone any outcomes or practicalities. Although the mixer’s purpose was to get people started in cryptocurrency, there wasn’t any discussion of what that actually entailed—how crypto mining works; what hardware, specialized equipment, or technical knowledge one might need; and other general advice. Though their genuine conviction was palpable, as Karina Rider (2022) had similarly discovered, the tech for good framework is often more enamored with the hypothetical and abstract ideas of ‘goodness.’

Amy and Maria’s insistence on the empowerment aspects of cryptocurrency, contrasted with crypto executives’ technofascism and deregulation efforts, also demonstrate the difficulties of discerning the ‘good’ in tech. I argue that there is no fixed point of morality, no universal ‘good,’ but one that is negotiated through existing power structures. Whereas Amy and Maria see cryptocurrency as a means for decentralization after the harm Wall Street caused during the Great Recession, the crypto executive perspective capitalizes on these fears to push for deregulation for their own financial interests. Technology itself is a social artifact, and the way

different actors imagine utilizing cryptocurrency illustrates how ‘good’ tech can also be applied for ‘bad.’

But by mid-2022, cryptocurrency prices had fallen dramatically, or as journalists Julian Mark and Gerrit De Vynck (2022) bluntly stated, “That era is over.” AI was soon ushered in as Silicon Valley’s newest and shiniest trend, with tech insiders quick to predict how it would rejuvenate the industry after the crypto bubble burst (De Vynck 2024). While some tech workers have rushed to retrain in AI so as not to be left behind, others have been more critical or at the very least, hesitant to jump in headfirst. As noted in Chapters 2 and 3, conscientious tech workers have protested their industry’s use of AI to develop weapons, its environmental impact through data centers, and the push for AI to replace human labor. These workers are undoubtedly skeptical that the tech industry can develop and utilize AI responsibly towards a common social good—but that doesn’t mean they monolithically reject AI and its potential. There are some tech workers who envision AI’s capacity to do good in the traditional tech for good sense—like Meredith Hu, whose earlier work incorporated AI into medtech, or Ari Levin, whose startup uses AI to review medical bills and reduce out-of-pocket payments for patients. But in an effort towards decentralization, some tech activists instead imagine AI as a tool for liberation from Big Tech’s existing ecosystems.

I started volunteering with Incubatethics, a tech incubator for cultivating and supporting ethical technology, about a year after it was founded. What started as a small but dedicated team of innovators, funders, and volunteers soon led to a robust organization that funds and mentors roughly fifty startups and projects at any given time. Incubatethics’ mission is to create an ethical and self-sustaining ecosystem outside of Big Tech by uplifting tech projects that support and work towards community and civic good through their mentoring, networking connections, or

funding programs. Amongst its projects are apps to help people find local protests, online platforms that fact-check current events, and startups that mentor and assist refugees in finding employment. I had been doing general support work on several of these projects when Incubatethics rolled out its newest addition: Resolve, an ethical AI startup. Founded by Syrian immigrants, they sought to make their own AI company after “getting the ick” from popular generative AI chatbots like ChatGPT. But unlike ChatGPT and its like-minded competitors, Resolve uses an open-source model over a proprietary one, doesn’t train on its users’ data (nor does it sell or give user data away), and is 94 percent more energy efficient; moreover, the company pledges to reject all military contracts and refrain from using dehumanizing language towards oppressed and colonized peoples. Resolve’s by-laws additionally state clear objections to Big Tech’s contributions to the genocides in Palestine and the Congo, a decisive factor in their refusal to take part in harmful collaborations.

While the project launch went smoothly overall, with one user exclaiming that they “did the switch [from ChatGPT to Resolve] and love it!”, we also received pushback from others on how AI could even be constructed as ethical. One person commented, “Why is AI even necessary when all it does is steal and fabricate information and real content from real people and their hard work?”⁵⁰ Isn’t no AI an environmentally better alternative than an AI that uses slightly less horsepower than ChatGPT?” Another wrote, “AI can’t be ethical as long as it keeps killing our planet...the people who are over reliant on this technology aren’t going to care to find an ethical alternative, and the people who hate AI for all the reasons you listed are not going to

⁵⁰ Resolve uses an open-source model so it does not train on its own data. When the company grows and can train on its own models, the founders pledge to ask artists for permission and compensate them fairly to train on their work.

be okay with the environmental impact.” Others came to Resolve’s defense, with one person writing, “Companies are hiring those who can use AI effectively and if we don’t do that we’ll lose our jobs,” while another said, “People hate being Big Tech’s serfs but if there’s no alternative then...we either lose out on certain advantages or stay serfs.”

During a Q and A, one of the founders addressed these critiques, stating, “I appreciate these comments, but we have to think realistically. It’s better to provide something better than what’s out there.” He continued:

The thing is, AI is already everywhere. It’s not going to go away, people are using it whether we like it or not. And the Big Tech versions are pretty terrible. They’re energy hogs, they’re centralized, and they make us totally dependent on them. So instead of just letting them keep having a monopoly on this technology that everyone’s using anyway, we decided to build something that’s 94 percent more sustainable. If we don’t offer an alternative, then Big Tech stays in control and we’re stuck with their wasteful, centralized approach. At least this way people have a choice that’s actually better for the planet.

For the founders of Resolve, it’s not enough to boycott harmful products—“there also needs to be alternatives” in order to incentivize consumers to switch over to more ethical options. For example, Resolve’s launch came a few months before President Trump announced that Claude, the AI chatbot from the company Anthropic, was a security risk after its CEO “refused to bend his company’s ethical safeguards preventing the technology from being applied to autonomous weapons and domestic mass surveillance” without any human oversight (O’Brien 2026). Many praised Anthropic’s actions as maintaining a high moral standard for the application of AI, and Claude subsequently experienced a surge in downloads overnight. However, others have also pointed out that “years of AI industry marketing [from Anthropic and other AI companies had] persuaded the government to apply the technology to high-stakes tasks,” and that Claude may have already been used in determining targeted strikes in the U.S.’s attack on Iran (O’Brien 2026). Moreover, Anthropic is still intertwined in surveillance and the military industrial

complex, like through its partnership with Palantir, which provides surveillance technologies to ICE (Haskins and Kelly 2026). Resolve’s founders position their AI as the more ethical choice compared to Big Tech’s AI, but even further, they view Resolve as just part of a multi-step solution towards a decentralized future: “with time, once they [Big Tech’s AI] have this grip on us, there’s no escape. So one step is providing alternatives that fight back, even though it’s not perfect—it can never be perfect...but we have to think realistically. It is better to provide something better than what’s out there,” but that “no one should rely on any single company or product.”

While Resolve is working towards decentralization mainly by providing an AI alternative, they’re also decentralizing by using an open-source model over proprietary software and black box algorithms. Open-source software is a key part of the decentralization movement; the free/libre and open-source software (FLOSS) movement encourages collaboration through the creating, sharing, and modifying of software.⁵¹ While participants in FLOSS spaces (often referred to as hackers) have a wide range of political beliefs, they tend to value and work within ideologies of free speech, freedom, right to privacy, and meritocracy (Coleman 2013, 17), though a growing number also take part in politically motivated hacking (or “hacktivist”) acts such as “civil disobedience in online settings, ranging from electronic mass protest or virtual sit-ins to launching distributed denial-of-service attacks to paralyze corporate websites...the creation of tools to protect speech and privacy online, and cracking to obtain information on political

⁵¹ There are some philosophical differences between the free software movement and the open-source movement, with FLOSS being a somewhat generalized and ‘neutral’ term to combine the two. For a more nuanced take on the FLOSS movement, see Coleman (2013) and Dunbar-Hester (2019).

adversaries” (Dunbar-Hester 2019, 43). As Dunbar-Hester (2019) notes, many hackers view FLOSS as a path towards technical sovereignty.

Unite, a FLOSS cooperative for democratically owned technology and internet services, posed the following question to activists: if you’re still using Google or other Big Tech services to store sensitive data, why have you not moved over to decentralized, free and open-source platforms? After participating in their survey, I joined them for their webinar on a breakdown of their findings and suggestions for making the transition. True to their mission, Unite only uses free and open-source services, including Jitsi, a video conferencing alternative to Zoom. It had been my first time using Jitsi, and by the level of confusion from some of the audience, the same seemed to be true for them (after all, we hadn’t switched over to FLOSS services yet). As we waited for their presentation to begin, one of the organizers helped some of the attendees (myself included) troubleshoot video quality issues, telling us to—somewhat ironically—“try using Google Chrome.”

Referring to Amazon’s contract with ICE, Google’s Project Nimbus, and the loss of reproductive rights in the U.S. which led to rising fears of health tracker surveillance (as Michelle Rodgers had pointed out earlier), Unite organizers made a convincing argument that activists should be more cautious of what is being done with their stored data. Whether it’s switching over to another email service, deleting some pictures off the cloud, or even switching over to analog calendars, there are little things, they argued, that we can do every day to wean ourselves off of Big Tech. One attendee, a lawyer for an immigrant rights organization, interjected to share that she had convinced her entire workplace to switch over to a FLOSS alternative from Google Drive during the first Trump administration. But after experiencing ongoing technical difficulties, her organization eventually decided to move everything back to

Google. In a somewhat defeated tone, she added, “The U.S. empire makes [their tech] efficient so we’re stuck in their systems, because they have all the resources in the world. But how do we make systems where we can just stay there?” A Unite organizer suggested to her, “Don’t think of it as an infrastructure we have to build as an alternative—think of it as an ecosystem...we aren’t trying to be the alternative Facebook or Google,” but are instead “building a self-sustaining community...we can’t resolve every issue on our own. These systems are going to need community involvement. It’s not about us creating these systems and solving every issue that might come up.” Here, Unite emphasized the community aspect of building up tech ecosystems, antithetical to Big Tech’s capitalist model: it’s not just for one person or group to solve, but to put time and effort into building it together. In fact, they admitted their tech may feel “worse” or “clunkier,” but the point was to build an ecosystem that matched their ethics, not the fastest or smoothest tech. The Unite organizer also added that sometimes it’s about adjusting expectations: because “these big tech companies are the first in line to shape your expectations on how these services should work, we get stuck applying the same mental model to Big Tech alternatives.”

When it comes to creating self-sustaining, alternative tech ecosystems, one point that regularly came up is that ‘good’ tech will almost always be ‘worse.’ Sean Scott, an Incubatethics funder, echoed this sentiment during a monthly volunteer community call when he shared with a chuckle, “If you want tech that’s morally good, you’ll have to get used to slightly worse tech for a while.” For activists whose visions of good and ethical technology require decentralization, they readily admit that their tech might be less user friendly and reliable, but necessary in resisting Big Tech shaping how tech should operate. But to return to the criticism directed at Resolve during the launch (and to probe more into these categories of ‘good’ and ‘worse’ tech), its detractors make a valid point that even with higher ethical and environmental standards,

Resolve may just be short-term harm reduction. As one detractor put it, “we were able to get along without AI before,” and now tech activists are caught in a cycle of creating ethical versions of Big Tech products that were initially developed with exploitation in mind. And as another commenter pointed out, a slightly more energy efficient AI is still harmful to the environment. Reports have found that data center energy consumption has skyrocketed with the rise of cryptocurrency and AI, with “a single data center consuming the equivalent electricity of 50,000 homes...[and] accounts for 0.3 percent of overall carbon emissions,” with a greater carbon footprint than the airline industry (Monserrate 2022). A UN report found that Bitcoin mining consumed 173.42 terawatts of electricity, burned 84 billion pounds of coal, and used 660,000 Olympic swimming pools worth of water in one year alone (Chamanara et al. 2023). Meanwhile, AI data centers require even “more energy, more mineral and more material support” (Edwards et al. 12, 2024), with Goldman Sachs Research (2025) predicting AI power demands will increase 165 percent by the year 2030. The environmental destruction caused by data centers and their resource consumption is inextricably tied to the logics of colonialism and capitalism. Decisions on where to build data centers are informed by expansionist discourse—tapping into unclaimed resources, or the potential financial benefits of the location—for instance, tax breaks from the host city, or the idea that data centers will reinvigorate the economy and “give back” to the community. Dustin Edwards, Zane Griffin Talley Cooper, and Mel Hogan (2024) argue that “data infrastructures exist in tension with local histories, environments, communities, and publics. Data centers take shape through specific relationships and promises about the future, not as inevitable or unmalleable technical systems” (2024). The industry also uses flexible narratives about the environment and climate to justify where data centers should be built: sometimes cooler climates are best to naturally cool down servers, other times arid climates, and so forth,

revealing a different kind of “climate control” (Edwards et al. 2024, 11). Meanwhile, it’s the local communities that shoulder the cost of water and electricity and deal with air and noise pollution (Tan 2025; SELC 2025; Wittenberg 2026), which has led to grassroots community organizing to push back against data centers being built in their neighborhoods (Data Center Watch 2025).

For these reasons, one person at an Incubatethics event resolutely declared that “blockchain and AI can never be liberatory.” While recognizing Resolve founder’s statement that “it can never be perfect,” for some activists, outright refusal is the only ethical choice. In line with discussions of refusal, Ruha Benjamin (2019) cautions against inclusion in tech as being the solution to countering ‘bad’ technology. Noting how digital cameras’ inclusive facial recognition technology has contributed to greater surveillance technologies, she recognizes that Black people are “threatened by inclusion in science and technology as objects of inquiry” and surveillance, and makes a case for refusal and the right to privacy instead (Benjamin 2019, 125). Similarly, the debate regarding refusal versus alternatives complicates how activists can effectively resist Big Tech while creating similar technologies. Ultimately, for some, it might not be enough to reject current technologies and ecosystems while embracing alternatives, but to reject the technology itself in its entirety.

Conclusion

Rather than viewing the development of ‘good’ technology as a straightforward process, this chapter explores how tech workers conceptualize and implement their own versions of good: how ‘good’ is determined, and by who or what processes. If, as Messeri (2024) asserts, the imagined goodness is determined by regimes of knowledge, then Big Tech’s priorities—namely capitalist accumulation—shape the ideas and priorities for ‘good’ tech (9). Edwards et al. (2024)

concur that Big Tech's interests determine the moral hierarchy, with cryptocurrency in particular having "forced questions about which kinds of data processing are good and useful, and which are not" (8). Much like the institutional diversity workers of Chapter 2, technologists in these spaces may instead seek harm reduction within a largely more harmful industry; messages for good become tailored to financial backers to negotiate harm and risk, or inadvertently reproduce Big Tech logics due to their targeted audience, playing catch-up to Big Tech, funding networks, etc. In one humorous incident, while planning an Incubatethics event, our request to rent out a tech coworking and event space was rejected on the grounds of our messaging being 'too political,'⁵² only for us to come across the CEO of this space at a separate tech for good conference, where he was one of the keynote speakers. As this example illustrates (and perhaps unsurprisingly), tech workers' desire to create good tech sometimes creates a narrow concept of 'good' that adheres to capitalist and colonial motives.

Perhaps even more difficult to parse through, however, is what *isn't* considered good tech beyond weapons and surveillance technologies. In fact, the more I questioned what tech workers meant by 'good,' the more perplexed I became: almost all technology was framed as a source of good in a way that, similar to the crypto panelists' sentiments, felt beyond marketing tactics. This also made questioning 'bad' tech all the more confusing. In one surprising instance at a teach-in on AI and environmental impact, there was disagreement on what made AI and data centers 'bad' for the environment. While most agreed that data centers drain resources like water and

⁵² The phrase 'too political' is often used to shut down dissent in order to preserve the status quo. It also assumes an apolitical neutrality is possible, which often skews toward the white, male, middle-class viewpoint. In our case, our event was rejected on the grounds of having anti-war messages and being opposed to technology used for military purposes.

electricity from local communities, two activists minimized these claims and were instead adamant that the *real* environmental harm comes from oil companies using AI to determine drilling locations and perpetuating our dependency on oil. They argued that the water that data centers use gets recycled and returned to the community, and that the electricity comes from renewable resources. While this varies from data center to data center (and is not always clearly outlined or verified by the data centers in question), this shows how the moral complexities, and the concepts of good and bad, are shaped by subjectivities, and in this case, post-colonial environmental views. Even if data centers did recycle their water and use renewable resources, would that be enough to justify building it in one's neighborhood, or giving it first access to water? But for these activists, AI could be harnessed for 'good,' as long as it wasn't being used for a greater evil.

Sociologist Carolyn Chen (2022) was also initially puzzled by the over-simplification of goodness. In her ethnography on Silicon Valley technologists, she questioned, "Could technologists really believe that helping people find parking spaces was 'doing good,' that connecting people to retailers for gift certificates was 'spreading love,' or that giving internet access to the impoverished farmer in rural Vietnam, who didn't even have reliable electricity, was a way to 'level the playing field'?" (Chen 2022, 51). While frequently referring to them as having drunk the Silicon Valley Kool-Aid, Chen (2022) ultimately finds that technologists' belief in their work's potential to do good was akin to religion in the way it creates meaning and purpose in their lives. These tech workers sincerely believed that their work would positively impact society, and Chen argues that their belief and investment (of time, labor, and relationships) was akin to religious faith: "Calvinists in seventeenth-century Europe developed a ceaseless work ethic because they believed that the fruits of their labor were proof that they were

predestined for heaven. Three centuries later, faith and salvation are still a feature of work...faith that work offers salvation in *this* world—the assurance of purpose and significance in a capitalist cosmos” (2022, 51-2). Technology in Silicon Valley is largely associated with neutrality and scientific secularism. But within these spaces for good, tech frequently evokes themes of religion, fate, and imagined futures. AI was, for many people, “inevitable,” therefore ethical AI was necessary to combat the “evils” of Big Tech. STS scholars Emily Bender and Alex Hanna also point out the connections between “artificial general intelligence and Christian eschatology, which is the idea that there is something we could build that could save us...from everything from the dread of menial tasks to major problems we're facing, like the climate crisis, to just the experience of not having answers available...[but] we do not live in a world where every question has an answer” (Melton 2025). Similarly, an AI researcher with Incubatethics drew on Islam for his caution towards AI: “In Islam, taking a life is one of the worst things you can do. AI is now making those decisions for us [in weapons development]...But AI is not human. There are no ethics without accountability, no one is paying the price right now for what AI is doing... and on the day of judgement, AI won't be judged, we will be.”

In discussions of ethics, fantasies, and good technology, I found tech workers' mission to create 'good' tech akin to seeking and finding meaning and purpose *through* technology, as a way of working towards an idealized and just future. Of course, “fantasies of 'the good' don't inevitably yield the intended better worlds” (Messerli 2024, 11), but instead are shaped by their own understandings and lived experiences. For instance, in FLOSS spaces, there are a number of people who hold the cyberlibertarian belief that the internet should be a place of freedom and social leveling (Dunbar-Hester 2019, 68), rather than viewing it as a digital space inescapable from the very same social hierarchies and inequalities of the physical world. After all, fantasies

are still products of epistemologies and positionalities. But as tech activists navigate what makes technology good, it's clear that they view their methods—be it through tech for good, decentralization, refusal, etc.—as a way to contribute to their visions of an ideal world. While it's understandable (expected, even) that they would not come to a consensus on how this world is achieved, what I sought to demonstrate is the active collaborations and processes these tech workers undertake to navigate the good, the bad, and the fantasies that shape the industry.

CONCLUSION

In 2020, Silicon Valley faced a major cultural reckoning that would challenge the industry's veneer of progress for the next few years. With mounting pressure from Black Lives Matter protests—and following increased attention to gender inequalities due to the #MeToo movement—tech CEOs rushed to publicly condemn police brutality and systemic racism, and followed through with a surge of DEI and corporate initiatives for racial and gender equality. Meanwhile, in a rare move in organizing and cross solidarity in the industry, tech workers across roles and positions protested their industry's unfair labor practices by pushing for unionization, organizing against surveillance and military projects, and building their own alternative, ethical tech infrastructures. Although their methods varied across the board, this wave of activism highlights how tech workers themselves sought to reshape the industry through their own visions of justice and equality. In an industry that prides itself in being (somewhat counterintuitively) both socially progressive and meritocratic, their activism addresses the gap between the industry's romanticized public persona and the lived realities for tech workers in a systemically racist, sexist, and exploitative industry, alongside exposing the harm their technologies perpetuate. While some may view their approaches to activism as disjointed from one another, it is through these diverse efforts that I explored what tech workers themselves identified as industry harm, and how they sought to change their workplace for the better.

My dissertation investigated how tech workers tackled structural inequalities in the workplace through activism, specifically looking at recurring themes of gender, race, colonialism, and labor issues. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Silicon Valley, through participant observation and taking part in organizing protests, teach-ins, and tech conferences; interviewing tech workers in different roles and companies; and interacting with activists on

social media. In Chapter 1, I explored NGO and non-profit efforts to incorporate more women into skilled creative and technical roles. Through the women-in-tech nonprofit organization Tech Girl Boss, I examined how their attempts to increase gender diversity in the tech industry inadvertently reproduced gender inequalities by calling on women to perform normative gender roles—namely, the emotional work of affective labor. While highlighting women’s assumed proclivity for affective labor as a key trait in women’s leadership skills, I draw connections between women’s expected labor in the tech workforce, with the expected labor of feminized virtual assistants in the technology itself. Continuing this exploration into corporate activism and advocacy, Chapter 2 looks closely at tech workers’ participation in corporate-approved channels of activism and advocacy: DEI initiatives, employee resource groups, and corporate social responsibility. Although workers involved in these initiatives have their own critiques of corporate activism, recognizing it as a neoliberal attempt to deflect from their companies’ more harmful capitalist and imperialist projects, they also view these opportunities as a way to make incremental changes for marginalized workers. While couching their objectives in neoliberal language to appeal to their companies’ definition of progress as individual empowerment, I explored how and why these workers navigate capitalist systems, through corporate activism as a form of harm reduction. In Chapter 3, I transitioned to discuss grassroots organizing around unethical technology and labor practices in the industry. During an explosion of worker organizing—which until that point, had been uncommon in the tech industry—tech workers coalesced to unionize both gig workers and white-collar workers, protested against their industry’s development of surveillance and military tech, and challenged their companies’ damaging environmental practices, among other examples. This chapter analyzed how technologists in skilled and well compensated positions view and utilize their role within the

industry: how they challenge norms in Silicon Valley, navigate conflicting moral dilemmas, and leverage their positions and identity as technologists as an organizing strategy. Lastly, Chapter 4 speculates on the possibilities of ethical technology outside of Big Tech products and systems. With more and more tech workers becoming skeptical of Big Tech's ability to 'do good' while perpetuating inequalities and violence at home and abroad, they have taken it upon themselves to create their own technological products and infrastructures according to their visions of ethical and socially good tech. But despite their good intentions, there is no consensus on what 'good' tech entails, and this chapter discussed the movements and people negotiating what the future of technology could look like if guided by their own ethical standards. Overall, this dissertation takes an all-encompassing approach to tech worker activism in order to understand how workers address various exploitative and inequitable conditions in the industry.

Given the increase in activism in 2020, one might wonder how the tech industry fares today in terms of concrete structural changes implemented as a result of their activism. But as of 2026, the pendulum has swung the other way, and tech workers are now facing greater limitations with their industry becoming more overtly repressive. Tech journalist Lauren Good (2026) succinctly summarizes,

During the nationwide protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder six years ago, many large tech companies issued statements against systemic racism and police brutality and pledged to diversify their workforces. Some of those commitments were criticized as being hollow, and 'DEI' soon became a political flashpoint rather than a shared corporate goal. But now, in the wake of [Renee] Good's death and other reports of alleged violence by ICE agents, big tech companies and their CEOs are choosing to stay silent, a testament to how the political landscape in the US has rapidly changed.

Influential tech CEOs are now openly catering to the political right, with tech billionaire Elon Musk having led the Department of Government Efficiency to cut federal regulations and

oversight, and all Big Five tech companies donating to the construction of the new White House ballroom for political favor. Meanwhile, many of the changes that tech workers fought tirelessly for post-2020 have all but disappeared overnight: President Trump’s federal budget cuts on diversity initiatives in 2025 led to many companies ending their DEI programs altogether,⁵³ and organizers who protested their corporations’ involvement in ICE and military projects are facing retaliation through job loss and blacklisting. Additionally, tech CEOs are increasingly embracing AI as a substitute for human labor and as a result, workers are being laid off en masse, and communities across the U.S. are being threatened with the construction of data centers in their neighborhoods. To put it plainly—and as one Microsoft tech organizer said to me, “Big Tech is acting cartoonishly evil right now.” And while President Trump’s second term has shifted U.S. politics further to the right and has consequently accelerated and exacerbated the issues in tech we see today, my dissertation has also reiterated that women and people of color have historically bore the brunt of workplace inequalities in the industry, and that the relationship between the tech industry, surveillance, and the military industrial complex has persisted for decades, whether or not overt. This sudden political shift in the industry, however, highlights the precarity for tech workers of all positions. Given the bleakness of the political landscape and the mounting uncertainties for tech workers, what can we expect for the future of the industry, for tech workers, and for their activism?

⁵³ Before the federal budget cuts on DEI in 2025—and the second round in 2026 to eliminate “radical gender and racial ideologies” (Cuts to Woke Programs 2026)—some tech companies had already begun walking back their stance on DEI when the Supreme Court banned affirmative action in 2023. Meta, in an effort to appeal to the political right, ended its DEI programs in 2023, publicly citing how the political and legal landscape for DEI has since changed (Gibson and Lyons 2025).

Despite the political whims and decisions of the tech elite, tech workers have shown that they too have power and influence over the industry's direction through their activism. In fact, due to mounting pressure by No Tech for Apartheid and other organizing groups and journalists alike, Microsoft announced in September 2025 that they've decided to withdraw some of their cloud software services from the Israeli military for violating the company's terms of service regarding mass surveillance on civilians (Smith 2025). And although some tech companies recently ended their DEI programs, corporate activists have still found ways to continue supporting institutionalized diversity. When I followed up with Lauren Chow, the B2B tech worker who had started an Asian American ERG at her office, she told me that even though her company ended their DEI initiatives on paper in order to receive federal funding, thanks to her and her colleagues' influence, they were able to surreptitiously replace it with similar programs under different names. As these examples illustrate, tech workers continue to pressure shareholders, navigate corporate policies to support diversity, and ring the alarm bells when their workplaces fail to uphold the values they believe in.

Their activism is all the more crucial now that we're seeing the general public grow more outraged over Big Tech's reach. With people getting arrested for destroying Flock cameras in protest of mass surveillance (Whittaker 2026), or even just peacefully protesting the construction of data centers in their neighborhood (Gault 2026), everyday people are now wondering what can be done to halt the dystopian development and use of technology. In this case, we can look to the tech workers themselves to provide a clear path forward. Although they work within and uphold the industry, they also seek accountability and largely believe in tech's potential for social good while wanting to work in diverse, progressive, and conscionable workplaces. Through modes of corporate activism, labor organizing, or reconceptualizing how tech can be

used for good, they challenge status quo and demonstrate the power they have as workers to push back against a powerful, influential industry. In doing so, they also provide a blueprint for activism amongst other professionalized, white-collar sectors that face similar issues. While they fight for the direction of the industry and of future tech development, one thing is clear: it's the tech workers who are going to determine the ways of engineering change.

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