

“DON’T BE EVIL”: GOOGLE’S LABOR, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE LIMITS OF  
CORPORATE GOOD

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
San Francisco State University  
In partial fulfillment of  
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Master of Arts

In

Women and Gender Studies

by

Alison Agnes Veith

San Francisco, California

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## CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read "*Don't Be Evil*": *Google's Labor, Technology, and the Limits of Corporate Good* by Alison Agnes Veith, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Women and Gender Studies at San Francisco State University.

Kasturi Ray

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Kasturi Ray, Ph.D  
Associate Professor

Evren Savci

---

Evren Savci, Ph.D  
Assistant Professor

“DON’T BE EVIL”: GOOGLE’S LABOR, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE LIMITS OF  
CORPORATE GOOD

Alison Agnes Veith  
San Francisco, California  
2015

Google’s “Don’t Be Evil” motto and its public image as corporate do-gooder are examined through a material and cultural analysis of its internal labor hierarchies and its technological products. By focusing on Google’s hidden contracted reproductive service laborers, as well as the premises and consequences of disruptive, digital technology, this project reveals how the realities of necessary but undesirable work are obscured and contested. This dual focus allows for a reevaluation of intimate labors in two ways. First, it reveals that Google’s sustained capital accumulation relies on its reproductive intimate labor. Second, it recognizes that Google’s corporate practices of invisibilizing intimate labor and mediating social intimacies are importantly reflective of the larger social, economic, and cultural trends in our emerging knowledge-based/service-based economy. This project draws upon Marxist critiques of capital, Foucauldian notions of biopower, transnational feminist and digital labor theory, and close readings of cultural texts. Its evidence is interdisciplinary, including employee memoirs, conducted interviews, employee demographics, public company information, contemporary news reports, and speculative film.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

*Kashmi Ray*

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Chair, Thesis Committee

*13 May 2015*

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Date

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This thesis actually started as a complaint, hiking at Point Reyes and verbally freaking out about having no direction for my topic. When asked, “Well what bothers you?” all I could talk about was my commute to work, everyone’s commute to work, and why the Bay Area feels so “strange,” so different from when I was a kid. Thank you, Gia, for nurturing my complaint that day, letting me ramble, and at the end telling me I had a place to start. And thank you for supporting me all the days and weekends since, when my work has too often prevented us from hiking...but no more, go get your boots love.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	vii
List of Appendices .....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Searching for (In)visible “Googlers” to Complicate Google’s Mission .....	26
Chapter 3: Disruptive Technology and Alienation: Google’s Brand, the Bay Area, and Visions of the Future .....	65
Conclusion: Google’s A Little Evil... So What? .....	111
Appendix 1 .....	115
Appendix 2.....	122
References .....	123

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figures	Page
1. “The Inland Printer – 164” .....	29
2. “Poor Scanning Renders” .....	29
3. “Wealth of Nations – 4” .....	29
4. “GMuni: Free Buses For All!” .....	65
5. “Dream Crusher” .....	106

## LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix	Page
1. Google Employee Diversity .....	115
2. Full Citations of In-Text Figures .....	122

## Chapter 1

### **“Don't Be Evil”: Google's Labor, Technology, and the Limits of Corporate Good**

My first encounter with my subject, Google, was a (relatively) long time ago. It was computer class, in 1999 or 2000. I was in middle school, and unbeknownst to me at the time, just down the street from Google's headquarters. Our class was being taught how to “do research” on the Internet. I still remember comparing Google's stark white search screen to all my previous uses of AltaVista, Netscape, and AskJeeves. My classmates and I were so young that we did not even realize the sexual innuendo of Google's “Feeling Lucky” search button, which is still present on the site. Even back then, I remember trusting Google implicitly. Maybe it was that blank white screen, or the sheer speed of its results.<sup>1</sup> Either way, Google just felt like it provided the most true and direct search results. Since then I have used Google's search engine, and its other services without thinking too much about the company. And I do not think my relationship to Google is unique. In our digital lives, most of us use Google's search engine, Gmail, GoogleMaps, Youtube, GDrive cloud-based storage, Android technology, and maybe even some of us are on Google+. In short, we consume Google—its products have taken up very special (i.e. necessary) residency in our daily lives.

It was not until I graduated from college and moved back to the Bay Area that I started to think about Google as an actual, physical company. My first post-college job

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<sup>1</sup> Google standardly publishes its search results speeds. For example, searching “how fast is google?” yields 605,000,000 results (0.33 seconds). Search conducted Dec. 10, 2014.

was at Stanford University. I was living in San Francisco, and commuting via CalTrain down to Palo Alto. This was the start of my Bay Area commuter's routine, and my first encounters with startup culture's daily migration patterns. Over the last few years my jobs and living situations have shifted, but my work/home split has maintained this commuter movement. I have always lived in San Francisco or the East Bay, and commuted to work in the Silicon Valley. Currently I drive from Alameda to Mountain View. My work is a few blocks from Googleplex (Google's corporate headquarters), and my daily drive has me "rubbing elbows" with the company's private shuttle buses. I spend so much time with these charter buses on the road that I have found myself cursing their carpool-lane privilege, dangerously darting around them whenever possible, and even opting for likely longer, roundabout detours just so I don't have to sit behind them. With all this comingling, I have also started to wonder about the people driving these buses—what is their relationship to the Googlers<sup>2</sup> they are driving, to Google as a company, and to this most recent Silicon Valley Tech boom?

Based on normative metrics of job creation and GDP growth, reports show the Bay Area, and Tech companies like Google, Facebook, and Apple are "leading the way" in both California and America's economic recovery (CCSCE 2013, BEA 2013). Those of us living in the Bay Area, and perhaps on the "outside" of this most recent Silicon

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<sup>2</sup> Google refers to its direct-hire, formal employees as "Googlers." A Googler can be a salaried, or hourly wageworker, ranging from software engineer to customer service agent. The shuttle bus drivers are subcontracted workers, and excluded from the Googler category.

Valley Tech 2.0 boom, are experiencing a wide range of material effects from this “recovery”: evictions and gentrification, the creation of mostly part-time and temporary jobs, and the reality that many of us no longer live within thirty minutes of where we work (Greenway 2015, Myrow 2015, “Boomtown” KQED Series 2015). For some, like Googlers, the ability to live in the metropolis (San Francisco) and work in the suburbs (Mountain View) is a luxury. Yet it is a luxury made possible by a contracted hourly-wage bus driver who also does not live near their work. As they labor to support that Googler’s flexible work/home life, their own home life<sup>3</sup> is being encroached upon.

Google’s hired shuttle bus drivers, and its other subcontracted service laborers are invisible within the Tech corporation’s business model. These subcontracted workers are paid hourly wages to provide lifestyle-support services for visible, salaried Googlers: shuttle them to work, cook their three meals, launder their clothes, and lead them in physical and emotional self-care exercises. In other words, they labor to provide Googlers’ their benefits/perk package. Google’s employee benefits are the stuff of lore—and what consistently ranks the company as a top place to work.<sup>4</sup> Yet even though Google’s offered benefits are such an integral part of the company’s corporate popularity (both with employees and the private sector), the workers whose mind and bodies are

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<sup>3</sup> Google shuttle drivers, like Brandon Barlow, have grueling workdays. Most commute via public transit from their East Bay homes to the San Francisco terminals, then drive split shifts (7AM-11AM and 3:30PM-11PM) with unpaid down time in between, and then their commutes home. (See Brown “For Google Shuttle Drivers, It’s A Grueling Ride”).

<sup>4</sup> Fortune Magazine’s “Top 100 Places to Work.” Google has been ranked #1 six times (2015 included), and eight times overall. (Fortune 2015).

responsible for these deliverables are not legible Google employees. Instead they are managed by numerous staffing agencies (most of whom do not advertise their existence), contracted by Google to source labor. The corporate exclusion of these laborers and the lack of corresponding pay associated with their work is consistent with a U.S. cultural and economic history of undervaluing service-work and domestic labor—work often relegated to lower-class women, people of color, and immigrants.

The following literature review positions Google's invisible laborers at the intersection of two analytical frameworks. First, alongside feminist scholars who consider the gendered/racialized/class constructions of reproductive labor. And second, in conversation with information and technology scholars who view the construction of digital infrastructure in terms of an advancement of traditional Marxist modes/means of production and labor under capitalism. I place these analytic frames in conversation to contextualize Google's particular position as *the* corporate business model of innovation for employment practices and product technology in our 21<sup>st</sup> century techno-saturated social landscape.

Google's corporate practices reveal the trends of our emerging knowledge-based/service-based economy:<sup>5</sup> a digitally-saturated, neoliberal landscape where the socioeconomic gap between the wealthy and the 99% is real and growing rapidly. Thanks largely to the knowledge-based economy, the U.S. (and global) workforce is experiencing

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<sup>5</sup> See "Services, Not Manufacturing will Revive American Economy" (McCullough 2012).

greater material precarity,<sup>6</sup> which is ingeniously masked by technology's concurrent ability to more rapidly produce and supply deliverable commodities to (certain) global consumers (Aneesh 2006). Capitalism's consistent expansion into new global markets has pushed traditional manufacturing outside of the U.S., while automation and improvements to digital infrastructure via Tech companies like Google and Amazon, increase consumers' feelings of instant access and gratification. Industrialized economies, like ours in the U.S., often experience growth in the service-based economy in place of manufacturing labor.

But in our post-manufacturing economy, does the rise of service-based labor and technology exacerbate the classic alienation between a capitalist laborer, his labor, and the commodity produced, or does it make room for transformation? For Marx, all labor under capitalism is, by definition, a process of alienation:

This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces—labor's product—confronts [labor] as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor...Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers;

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<sup>6</sup> "A term for the economic uncertainty and existential angst associated with the dissolution of fixed employment, precarity also suggests the disintegration of stable societal bonds, occupational identities, social protections and a sense of entitlement and belonging characteristic of the old proletariat" (Wandavra 2013).

objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation. (“Estranged Labor” 1844)

For the proletariat worker, the process of producing marks a continual loss or estrangement from the self. The object-commodity that is the result of your work has absorbed your labor and your time, but it is not yours. And in fact, you are enslaved to it. In capitalism, all worker production is production for the proliferation of a circuit larger than the worker-to-object relationship. But if we are no longer a manufacturing economy of blue-collar proletariat factory workers, how can we understand the alienated laborer? I argue that technology and the rise of a service-based economy creates more complex relationships of alienation between the laborer, his work, and what is produced. The factory worker produces a physical product (commodity) that even as it absorbs their labor time (use value), still has a quantifiable market rate (exchange value). Service laborers produce immaterial and affective commodities. Rather than concrete commodities with exchange value, their labor is often rich in use value, as they provide interpersonal services that attend to other humans. While the service-based economy is a relatively new rhetorical descriptor of industrialized capitalism, feminists have been talking about these informal economies<sup>7</sup> of service and reproductive labor for years, as this type of work has long been regarded as domestic, women’s work.

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<sup>7</sup> Informal, as in not legible and acknowledged as productive labor within capitalist economic structures.

## **Feminist Conceptions of Reproductive Labor**

Since U.S. women's movements in the 1950s, feminists such as Arlie Hochschild, Viviana Zelizer, and Evelyn Nakano Glenn have considered the sociocultural gendered and racial nature of work and labor. Feminists have rallied around and politicized a range of work-related questions: for example, why is domestic work not considered part of a nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)? Why are women consistently paid less for doing the same work as men? Why are there consistently more women than men in certain care-based industries, like nursing or teaching? And why do women of color, poor women, and immigrant women experience the least amount of economic and employment mobility? Although I will not delve into the answers of these questions specifically, it is important that each acknowledges a particular node of gendered exclusion from, or oppression within, formal capitalist systems of production and labor. To understand these various nodes of exclusion and oppression, I will look at various terms feminists have deployed to conceptualize reproductive labor: "domestic work," "care labor," and "emotional/affective labor." I use reproductive labor because it is the traditional foil for capitalism's productive (exchange value) labor. Reproductive labor, from maternity, birth, to child rearing, cooking, and house cleaning still produces profit, and is not just a supplement to productive labor, but a necessary requirement for capitalism.

I begin the discussion of women's reproductive labor in the home, which under capitalist class structuring, has come to be the material and symbolic focus of the

domestic sphere, designated as the woman's domain. A large part of this precedent is due to white women's presumed biological imperative to bear children...and man's subsequent alienation from this. Yet beyond childbirth, women are also responsible for a larger umbrella of "domestic work." Look no further than the stereotypical image of the 1950s American housewife (a historical device used to promote American democracy and lifestyle during the Cold War). Her job was to either do or manage the home: cooking, laundry, cleaning, raising the children, and running errands. But as feminists, we should not just be concerned with this narrow history of gendered labor that has traditionally contained women's work within the categories of wife and mother. White and/or class-privileged women are also complicit in a racialized, gendered work system that has historically tasked women of color and poor women with the bottommost rung of domestic care labor, a continuation of indentured servitude and slavery.

Alongside Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* and the "problem with no name" that politicized and "liberated" the (white, middle-class) housewife from her domestic shackles, many black feminists and feminists of color, like the Combahee River Collective (1977) and Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (1981), have importantly complicated the gendered experiences of domestic work through the intersections of race, class, and citizenship. In other words, the history of "domestic work" in the United States has been much more than a story of gendered exclusion from public spaces and the workplace. Evelyn Nakano Glenn's *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (2002) looks at the historical progression of gendered,

racial, and citizen-based labor inequalities from Civil War Reconstruction to WWII. She moves through history and U.S. geographic regions, considering African American women's domestic labor in white homes in the Reconstruction South, to Mexicans and Anglos in the Southwest, and Japanese and white haoles in WWII Hawaii. As each of these historical relationships denotes, labor in domestic spaces has been consistently structured in a hierarchy of race and class privilege. Nakano Glenn brings this racialized hierarchy of race and class to the present in *Forced to Care* (2010), where she considers the industry of interpersonal "care labor." Like historical and present-day domestic work, care labor often occurs in private spaces, but care laborers are typically trained to provide medical, physical, and eventually also emotional support to their paying clients. Examples of these jobs are hospice and elderly care, as well as in-home and institutional care for the mentally and/or physically disabled.

Glenn's relocating of domestic and interpersonal care from the home to industry moves towards a rethinking (and potential unmooring) of reproductive labor's gender specificity. However Marxist feminists, like Maria Mies and Leopoldina Fortunati, have specifically relied on social constructions that maintain the gender essentialism of domestic/reproductive work to critique Marxist capitalism. They argue that reproductive labor is already part of capital, yet is purposefully not acknowledged *because* it is "women's work." While this work advances the economic legitimacy and importance of reproductive work within capitalism, the simplistic focus on gender does not account for the intersections of race, class, and citizenship embodied by reproductive laborers. From

a macro perspective, labor and care-giving industries do more to legitimize care work, situating it firmly within a capitalist system, while also pushing analysis beyond the binds of gender essentialism. Feminist sociologist Mignon Duffy provides the example of the hospital industry, where she considers the stratification of different laboring bodies in this larger business model of care labor (2011). Echoing the racial stratification of interpersonal domestic care, Duffy notes that there are still racial-ethnic hierarchies in hospital work. She considers who is tasked with the cleaning, feeding, and laundry in a hospital setting. While trained doctors and nurses, those engaged in direct care-work with patients do their jobs, there is a new class of laborers who undergird this work. The upkeep and housecleaning tasks have become the new low-paying, menial jobs in an industry of “care work”—again, largely done by people of color and immigrants. Duffy utilizes historical census data to chart the gendered, racial, and income breakdowns of these care laborers. She expands the gendered history of domestic labor to include the racial-ethnic and class divisions in the service industries. For Duffy, it is not just that women of color have historically been tasked to care for white people in the domestic space, but that in the development of our various “care” industries, we have extended a hierarchy of racialized, classed, and gendered service laborers.

Alongside interpersonal industries of care labor, feminist scholars, like contributors to *Intimate Labors* (2010), edited by Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas, have also asked important questions about the role of emotions and affect in public spaces and corporate workplaces. Working from a Marxist model of labor and commodification,

scholar Arlie Hochschild coined the term “emotional labor” after studying Delta Airlines flight attendants (Hochschild 1983). Emotional labor signals a particular set of worker expectations, which involve the outward display of certain emotions and feelings in service-labor settings. According to Hochschild’s findings, emotional labor in the marketplace is highly gendered, occurring most often in traditionally feminine customer-service jobs, like flight attendants, secretaries, and restaurant hostesses. In these positions, emoting particular affective responses in a customer’s presence becomes a key requirement and honed skill set of these gendered workers. Emotional labor is stereotyped as women’s work, but is a skill that is not considered a result of training or practice, but rather, an always-already ability of women. In other words emotional labor is an example of unskilled labor, precisely because it is related to women—and so remains labor that goes under-appreciated and under-compensated.

It is also important to see how Hochschild describes the experience of actually doing emotional labor. The emotional laborer’s self/body becomes a place of “emotional dissonance”—the worker learns to exhibit the “false self” in her labor/work. She effectively detaches her worker self from her underneath “true self.” This learned separation/detachment is always a result of emotional labor. And it provides an important starting point to consider the important role of affect and alienation in our emerging service-based economy. Although she does not invoke affect theory, Hochschild sets the stage for future feminist scholars who consider the impacts unpaid, or low-paid care

giving have on various laborers' physical and emotional selves, as well as the affective surplus that comes from these particular forms of labor.

To bridge feminist conceptions of labor with digital technology's invisible labor, I turn to Kalindi Vora's, "The Transmission of Care: Affective Economies and Indian Call Centers" (2010). Vora's piece furthers feminist notions of intimate/care work by placing it firmly in the legible, for-profit workplace, where intimate labor is both productive and not gender specific (a response to Mies and Fortunati's limiting arguments). Moreover, it illuminates how the affective alienations of an invisible global workforce are necessary for the profit and proliferation of a digital economy. Vora uses the term affective labor to consider the ways a call center employee, although physically distant from the customer, engages in a particular level of customer care and affective production that moves in one direction, towards the customer. From this perspective, Vora looks at the affective impacts this has on the call center employee, including temporal alienation and physical isolation. Vora's analysis incorporates a close reading of the play *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, in which narrators New Delhi-based call center agent Ashok/John Small and New York-based Elizabeth build relational exchanges via their communication. Ashok works in debt collections for a major department store credit card, and Elizabeth has unpaid bills. Their interaction is framed through the aftermath of 9/11, where Elizabeth asks Ashok to trace the credit card purchases made on her account, as a means to help find her estranged daughter, who has ran away to New York City.

Through this reading of *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, Vora builds her claim for the one-sided production of affective labor produced by John Small (Ashok's call center identity). Through the digital phone line, Vora argues that the call center employee creates a data double—an affective production required to do the job of transmission care/concern to their American customer. The data double must be an identity so well versed in American culture, so “transported” to America, that a call center employee can successfully give off the illusion of being in/from America—a labor that has material consequences for the call center employee's relationship to their *actual* physical locale of India. What is interesting about this digital exportation of affective labor is the drastically differential relationship to local vs. global it supports. For the customer (both on the phone and the outsourcing company), digital technology affords a time-space compression that makes the phone interaction feel close, immediate, and *local*. However, this feeling of the local comes only at the expense of the call center employee, who feels the realities of global distance and time. There is affect and alienation in the labor of detaching their own bodies from their local clocks and traveling the globe to a time-zone that is not their own.

### **Digital Technology's Invisible Labor**

The World Wide Web turned 25 in 2014 ([www.webat25.org](http://www.webat25.org)). Yet instead of a call for celebration, many information and technology scholars are calling for consideration and concern. For example, New York City's New School for Design hosted the 2014 conference, *#DL14: Digital Labor: Sweatshops, Picket Lines, and Barricades*,

where scholars, activists, and artists asked critical questions about new modes of labor and labor exploitation facilitated and carved out by digital technology. They argue that if we laud technology's advancements of innovation, ingenuity, and for changing the ways we live, we must also consider the underbelly of these advancements. How is digital technology changing definitions of work, and adding to the growing economic insecurity (precarity) of particular workers?:

It remains a question if digital labor can change the fact that almost half of all Americans are economically insecure and cannot afford basic needs like housing, childcare, food, healthcare, utilities, and other essentials. All of these developments set the global stage for emerging forms of digital labor, which become instrumental in efforts to drive down labor cost and get all the work without the worker. (“About #DL14” 2014)

#DL14 contributors consider digital labor—the business of building the internet—as the next site from which to consider worker exploitation(s) and possible intervention(s) under Marxist theories of capitalism. As conference organizer Trebor Scholz emphasizes, the work of “making the internet” can be framed as an interestingly complex affair of paid and unpaid, exploited and free labor.<sup>8</sup>

Consider for example, Facebook. It is a social networking website worth \$200 billion dollars (CNN Money 2014), which is able to pay engineers high salaries for building and maintaining the site. While these engineers formally “build” Facebook, the

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<sup>8</sup> See “Introduction: Why Does Digital Labor Matter Now?” (Scholz 2013)

site informally relies on its users to build up the bulk of the website's content. In fact, Facebook users are responsible for making the website money. Users upload content, which allows Facebook to sell more relevantly targeted advertisements, which generate more revenue for the company. This, as well as other moments where internet users "play" on the internet, which include sending Tweets, building Tumblrs, and pinning on Pinterest, are innocuous, but necessary moments of unpaid labor by consumers. Media and culture scholar Tiziana Terranova reflects that the Internet, as a medium, can only be sustained via "massive amounts of labor (which is not equivalent to employment, as we said), only some of which is hypercompensated by the capricious logic of venture capitalism...we can guess that a substantial amount of [this] is still 'free labor.' Free labor, however, is not necessarily exploited labor" (Terranova 2000). While some of the internet's free labor is done willingly by consumers, like Reddit contributors, Yelp reviewers, and eBay sellers, we need to make visible the more egregious forms of exploited labor within the digital economy. *Too much* focus on digital technologies as "new" and "hip" occludes visibility of the material bodies that we need to make our digital experiences happen at all.

While internet consumers who build the internet in their "free time" exist on the benign side of the digital labor spectrum, the internet has become new terrain for familiar forms of capitalist accumulation and labor exploitation. While some digital labor discourse does not easily put the digital in to conversation with the physical, material world, scholars like Miriam Posner (2014) note that digital platforms are speeding up

global supply chain processes, demanding physical production match the instantaneous speeds consumers are able to purchase and expect commodities.<sup>9</sup> Corporate supply-chains and traditional manufacturing are a necessary backbone of digital technology. We need to consider the digital's impact on globalized Fordist production lines of gray-<sup>10</sup> and blue-collar laborers, who are responsible for the manufacture of physical commodities. Although we covet our handheld technologies, many consumers rarely think about how our smartphones are made, or by whom. But if we actually look, we find prescient examples of exploited labor under capitalism, as usual, in the digital economy.

Perhaps the most “visible” gray, supply-chain laborers work for China’s Foxconn—Apple’s largest subcontractor, with at least 200,000 factory workers making only Apple products. Foxconn factory workers became visible in 2010, when at least eighteen employees attempted suicide, prompting media coverage and investigations regarding workers’ conditions (Johnson 2011, Moore 2012, Chakraborty 2013). But beyond these worker suicides, and subsequent, yet temporary, outrage over Foxconn’s treatment of its workers, the supply-chain flow between Foxconn workers’ manual production and Apple’s mental research and development still needs to be understood as

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<sup>9</sup> Amazon is the best example of revolutionized online shopping, because of how fast and efficiently it ships physical purchases to customers. But this same digital speed has required meticulous and often grueling and unreasonable management of warehouse laborers. (See: Brad Stone’s *The Everything Store* 2013, Cadwalladr 2013, and Radiolab’s “Brown Box,” podcast 2014).

<sup>10</sup> “Gray collar” laborers denotes a class of workers that has specialized training of technical skills, rather than the manual work done by blue collar laborers. In the digital economy, the globalized outsourcing of “gray collars” might be positioned as the new “blue collar” class, formerly used in mass-production factory settings.

a formal circuit of labor. This formal circuit flow of capital, material goods, and labor, if read alongside the informal circuits of digitally created content and “free” cultural productions, provides a more holistic approach to understanding the digital economy (Qui, et al. 2014).

Akin to the global supply chain and offshore manufacturing, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is the digital industry’s umbrella term for outsourcing business operations to other companies and workers. Most commonly, U.S. and European companies outsource non-core operations like customer service, technical support, and accounts payable to BPO service companies located in Asia.<sup>11</sup> The most recognizable BPO service is the call center, wherein contracted employees, most often physically situated in another country, interact via phone or internet with a client company’s customer. While many international call center workers, like Ashok in *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, undergo mandatory training in Western mannerisms in an attempt to minimize the customer’s affective experience of geographic and cultural distance (Mirchandani 2012, Walker 2012), the call center worker is still a hyper-visible, ubiquitous symbol of digital labor’s globalized labor network.

This thesis, however, focuses on a subcategory of BPO labor outsourcing that is intentionally left invisible: commercial content moderation (CCM).<sup>12</sup> Facebook,

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<sup>11</sup> In 2011, the Philippines surpassed India to have the most American-affiliated call centers. BPO is still a huge industry in India. (Bajaj 2011)

<sup>12</sup> Term coined by scholar Sarah T. Roberts, see more on her website <http://illusionofvolition.com/behind-the-screen/>.

YouTube, and other internet companies that survive on user uploaded content, really survive on the backs of CCM workers, outsourced human bodies that wade through flagged and inappropriate content. Ranging from mundane to viscerally disturbing footage, these low-waged, invisible laborers take on the material and affective weight of cleaning up the internet. While there has been some news coverage of these jobs (Chen 2012, 2014), library and information science scholar Sarah Roberts' dissertation, *Behind the Screen: The Hidden Digital Labor of Commercial Content Moderators*, and forthcoming book, positions CCM work in the "context of contemporary trends of globalization, outsourcing and other economic and geospatial reconfigurations facilitated by the increasingly networked nature of the world. It further connects commercial content moderation with digital media economics, digital media practices and their sociopolitical, economic and ethical implications" (Roberts 2014). Roberts' work to make visible CCM labor along the spectrum of digital labor importantly echoes feminists who have made domestic work and reproductive service labor visible under Marxist capitalism. Commercial Content Moderators, like other intimate laborers, are responsible for absorbing a surplus of emotional and affective weight as they view flagged media. Yet even as workers demonstrate signs of deep depression and PTSD (Stone 2010), their particular affective labor is not being legitimized or monetized as skilled, hard work. Their invisible labor maintains the internet that users like to "see," but as embodied workers, they remain invisible and disposable in the digital landscape.

Different workers in different global locations are tasked with the physical labor (manufacturing of digital hardware), affective services (call centers and customer service platforms), and knowledge production (content management) that work together to provide the illusion of a digital consumer's private internet experience with immediate results. Here time-space compression impacts global flows of both capital and labor, but the internet is also impacting more local flows of labor and capital.

For example, consider the rapid rise of online peer-to-peer service platforms, like TaskRabbit, Lyft, AirBnB, HomeJoy. Each of these U.S. companies offers a digital platform for individual consumers to contract out and temporarily employ other physically local individuals for various domestic services, such as office organizing, transportation, lodging, and house cleaning. These businesses utilize internet networks and crowdsourcing ethos to profit. The crowdsourcing model is an open marketplace, where workers advertise themselves, their capabilities to perform said tasks, and how much money they want to be paid—and consumers pick and hire who they want. While the ability to outsource chores and errands to others locally may be a helpful service, workers/or labor providers in these peer-to-peer platforms have very few worker protections or job security,<sup>13</sup> as the wage labor is task-specific.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Coded as 1099 contractors, rather than W-2 employees, these peer-to-peer workers don't receive health benefits, vacation/sick leave, retirement plans. They also don't have any protections against being "fired," because they are never hired. 1099 workers are cheaper and less of a liability for companies. (Roose 2014)

<sup>14</sup> Lilly Irani calls this "microwork," in relation to Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) crowdsourced model of compartmentalizing doling out piece-meal high-skilled

### **Google's Invisible, Affective Labor**

Like peer-to-peer service companies, Google is another site to consider the absorption of domestic and/or intimate tasks within a for-profit Tech corporate model. While the company's service jobs (bus drivers, chefs, launderers, etc.) are necessary, they remain stigmatized as low-skilled and feminine. This is apparent in Google's reliance on outsourcing these positions via third party contracts—they are integral, yet auxiliary to Google's key corporate functions. From an operations standpoint, this type of service-based local outsourcing offers similar benefits to the globalized BPO. It too is seen as a smart way for even large corporations to remain fiscally lean. It limits payroll taxes, benefit costs, and training and managerial supervision—but it also shirks employer responsibilities. By outsourcing the labor instead of putting these service workers directly on Google's payroll, Google uses its capital to just purchase the affective *product*, while devaluing and alienating the actual laborer doing the work. In this, Google echoes Vora's claims that affect, as product, has become a commodity for sale.

While there is value in the product of this service labor, because the bodies doing the work are not valued enough to be Google employees, they are kept intentionally invisible. The invisibility is similar and as necessary as the outsourced factory workers of Foxconn and other supply-chain laborers, whose bodies and labor are egregiously exploited in the mass production of Apple products (another Bay Area headquartered

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programming and engineering tasks on an open market to the most competent, low-priced bidder. (Irani 2013).

company) and other popular technology brands. However, I do not mean to draw an easy analogy between Google's Bay Area service-workers and factory workers in the Global South, as such a comparison of workers' experiences can quickly dissolve to relativism. This project calls attention to a U.S.-based, "local" site to enrich already existing critiques of globalization and transnational corporate business models. By locating the similar invisibility practices of corporate outsourcing and exploitation "at home" in the Bay Area, I consider another "power geometry"<sup>15</sup> of flows of capital and affective labor, similar to one from the Global South to the North/West.

For example, Vora's "Transmission of Care" forwards this logic of a unidirectional flow. Ashok's temporal displacement and alienation from his physical location in New Delhi in fact mirrors recent interviews of Tech shuttle drivers. Testimonies of the men and women who drive the Facebook, Google, Yahoo, Apple, and eBay charter buses are currently circulating in local and national news (Sharrock 2013, Brown 2014, Greenhouse 2014). Each of the drivers' testimonies express sentiments of being over-worked and undervalued; working split shifts which prevent secondary employment and time with their families. The drivers also reflect feeling alienated and excluded from physical and social spaces. Their odd work hours forcibly shift their temporal engagement with the Bay Area, as they are not able to handle personal errands,

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<sup>15</sup> "Power-Geometry of time-space compression...different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections...it is about power in relation to the flows and the movement" of capital and labor, both locally and globally" (Massey 1989).

like grocery shopping, during usual daylight hours. They also do not so easily relate to public criticism and protests against Tech, which are happening outside and all around their buses. Moreover, drivers also experience social alienation while working, at the interpersonal level between themselves and Google passengers.

Consider the shuttle bus driver and Googler, who share a similar spatial/temporal movement. They are on the same bus, daily traveling to the same destination. However, their relationship to each other and the travel experience is very different. For the driver, they are on the clock, asked daily to grind through stressful commuter traffic, driving some of the longest and busiest Bay Area routes—thanks again to Silicon Valley companies that support and make it easier for “their workers” to live hours from their job. For the recognizable Googler, a salaried, benefits-receiving employee, the average 1.5 hour shuttle ride on a WiFi enabled bus is a time to do work. The driver absorbs and deflects all distractions and stress of the commute precisely so that the Googler can be productive for Google...or at least ease into their workday, whether that means responding to email or catching up on Netflix’s *House of Cards*. The shuttle bus driver’s job is not just to drive, but to also use their mental and physical body to absorb and retain any affective slough that comes with a commute. The more they absorb, the less the Googler has to.

My point here is that the privatized shuttle bus is its own site of intimate labor exchange. It is intimate labor with a direct point of contact; a flow of exchange that mingles and lingers in the same physical space, yet simultaneously facilitates a

differential relationship of driver and Googler to their shared location, as it travels down the highway. In line with the scholarship presented here, and from an outsider's perspective, the relationship between Googler and bus driver can be easily read as “the haves” vs. the “have-nots.” But this is also an easy dichotomy, and one that this project complicates.

Building on this scene of shared space between bus driver and Googler, this project looks more wholly at Google's internal labor structure and the company's particular brand of technology products to complicate Google's “Don't Be Evil” motto and its public image as corporate do-gooder. Utilizing Marxist and Foucauldian frames, as well as feminist and digital labor theory, the following chapters rely on interdisciplinary methods of analysis. Through this interdisciplinary approach, this thesis offers a richer and more nuanced telling of how Google is changing the ways Bay Area workers and residents experience their work and live their lives.

Chapter 2 analyses the intention behind Google's labor structure, utilizing Googler memoirs, personally conducted interviews,<sup>16</sup> and published employee demographics. The chapter argues that Google's cultural capital relies on the invisibility of its reproductive service labor force (bus drivers, food service workers, masseurs, etc.). The invisibility of these workers helps Google maintain its consistent ranking as a great

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<sup>16</sup> I conducted three in-person interviews with three former Google employees—all of whom worked at Google for some time between 2009-2012. A software engineer for Google+ (2 years), a contract recruiter (1 year), and a product analyst in Con-Ops (Consumer Operations) (3 years). Throughout the chapter I will refer to them as Engineer, Recruiter, or Analyst, keeping their identities anonymous.

work place, allowing the company to continuously attract top talent based on the reputation of taking care of its Googlers. However, as the company takes credit for offering these employee perks, it simultaneously makes invisible the contracted service workers paid to do this labor, obscuring the invaluable necessity of these bodies within their for-profit model, and maintains the undervaluation of particular labor. Utilizing a Marxist frame of commodities and value, coupled with Foucauldian biopower, and feminist perspectives of reproductive/care work, this chapter analyzes how both Googlers and Google-affiliated contract workers are used by Google for profit generation and brand management.

Chapter 3 moves beyond Google's internal practices, to consider the local, social impacts of Google's particular brand of "disruptive technologies" in the Bay Area. Complicating economist and pro-technologist definitions of disruptive technology, I argue that Google's products, which utilize artificial intelligence and automation, are contributing to local socioeconomic precarity by increasing social alienation and minimizing intimate labor's visibility. To illustrate this, I conduct close readings of two recent speculative fiction films: Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2009). Each film depicts artificial intelligence and automation technology, respectively, as fully integrated into the everyday social conditions of their futuristic worlds. While I do not argue that either film represents an actual future to come, my analysis tempers the desire for progressive technologies to "disrupt" (augment) our daily life and work by considering how they simultaneously impact material intimacies. And

on a hopeful note, I return to the Bay Area and present current actions that are combating precarity through Butlerian themes of social “recognizability” and cohabitation.

## Chapter 2

### Searching for (In)visible “Googlers” to Complicate Google’s Mission

In 2007, Google contract employee (and artist) Andrew Norman Wilson noticed an odd phenomenon in Google Building 3.1459—every day at 2:15 PM, the building’s workers would exit en masse, “like a bell just rang, telling the workers to leave the factory. Their shift start[ed] at 4:00 AM.” Contracted by Google for the past year as a Transvideo Studios employee,<sup>17</sup> Wilson found this type of regimented and collective daily exodus highly unusual. He, like most of us, consider Google to be a company culture that promotes the flexible and autonomous movements of its employees—look no further than the colorful bikes Googlers ride (and strand) freely all over the Googleplex. Wilson used readily available film equipment to push his curiosity about these employees, their visible yellow badges, and their very “un-Googley” work schedule. Unfortunately, his curiosity cost him his job—which he narrates over a short amount of collected footage in *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Transvideo Studios, headquartered in Mtn. View, “had a contract with Google and took care of 100% of their video production in Mtn. View, and sometimes elsewhere” (Wilson). He is employed/paid directly by Transvideo, while Transvideo has a contract with Google. Wilson’s personal actions can also effect (and jeopardize) Transvideo’s contract with Google.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson’s title and the documentary’s visual presentation is an intentional variation on Louis Lumiere’s *Exiting the Factory* (1895). Wilson’s 11-minute film is footage collected before being fired by Transvideo (his direct employer), at Google’s behest for his breach of contract. Wilson explains in the film’s voice over that the video project’s depth and content is limited because of his termination.

Wilson's narration identifies these yellow-badged employees as the ScanOps team, contracted to do the labor of digitizing books, page by page for Google Book Search. Google Book Search is the manifestation of one of founder Larry Page's most lofty, prized, and controversial endeavors—to digitize and make searchable the world's printed matter. The project was nicknamed Ocean by Larry Page and Marissa Mayer in the early 2000s. After debating the most optimal/economic ways to actually do the digitizing, they chose to invest in expensive specialized scanners for nondestructive scanning. This approach also required investing in human laborers to scan each book, page by page. Yet, the scanning technology was always prioritized over the human scanners, reflecting Google's regularly maintained value divide between intellectual creativity and material, physical work. For example, when Page and Mayer debated the most efficient ways to scan the world's books, their key concern was the theoretical math of the question. Even after rationalizing that human labor, rather than robots and machines, would be the most efficient way to economically optimize the scanning, they focused on the mechanics of the scanning process itself—how many pages per minute, at what angle should the hand be placed ready to flip the page.<sup>19</sup> Their mathematical

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<sup>19</sup> “The first few times around were kind of sloppy...it had to be a rate that someone could maintain for a long time—this was going to *scale*, remember, to every book ever written. [Page and Mayer] finally used a metronome to synchronize their actions. After some practice, they found that they could capture a 300-page book...in about forty-two minutes....How many books were ever printed? Around 30 million? Even if the cost was \$10 a book, the price tag would only be \$300 million [based on their estimate of the world's books]. That didn't sound like too much money for the world's most valuable font of knowledge” (Levy 2011, 349).

reasoning to optimize the human laborer into a scanning machine does not factor in the material effects this type of repetitive work will have on a scanner's physical body.

As yellow-badges, the ScanOps team represents a particular class of Google worker—a special fourth class that Wilson had never seen on campus before. At Google the visible badge colors are white (direct Google employees), red (contracted workers, like Wilson), and green (interns). Each of these knowable badge colors mark different levels of access to free meals, commuter shuttles, happy hours, and other social interactions. However, the yellow-badged workers are barred access to other buildings and are excluded from these perks. In short, they do not interact with other Google workers—and as Wilson says, their presence is largely unknown to others.

*Workers Leaving the Googleplex* visually mirrors Wilson's narration of badge hierarchy and privileges through its split screen footage. On the right, bordered by yellow, is the exterior of Building 3.1459 showing the steady flow of workers leaving at 2:15 PM. On the left, bordered white, red and green, are various shots of the Googleplex's outside café areas, mostly deserted at this midafternoon hour, save for a few passers-by. Although neither footage is time-stamped, we are meant to consider that it is afternoon everywhere on campus, and that these yellow-badged workers in Building 3.1459 experience a markedly different relationship to time, space, and work from the white, red, and green Googlers elsewhere.

While Google Book Search, as an idea and project, is lauded as genius and intellectually valuable enough to be kept top secret, the yellow-badged “wave of human

laborers” necessary to execute the actual “non-destructive scanning” are intentionally disappeared by the company (Levy 2011, 351)—isolated on campus and not discussed. Wilson follows his video with a gallery presentation of Google Book Search images he has found that indirectly depict the ScanOps, yellow-badged workers, documenting and making their physical labor visible:



[Fig. 1 – “The Inland Printer – 164”]



[Fig.2 – “Poor Scanning Renders...”]



[Fig.3 – “Wealth of Nations – 4”]

In Figure 1, we see the scanner's lone finger carefully touching just the very edge of a post-it note, likely the trained positioning to be least visible. However, the scanning machine makes a mistake, missing the words on the post-it note, and instead capturing the worker's full hand. In Figure 2, we see a distorted scan where the scanner's hands and page twist together, a possible consequence of the machine not rendering fast enough. And Figure 3, which is my personal favorite, shows all five of the scanner's fingers firmly on the front cover of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, which feels intentionally defiant. These black and white fingers in pink latex gloves, blurred and distorted scans, and even cut off texts are all considered scanning "mistakes" and human error, but they importantly remind us of the bodies used to do this digitization. The physical body of the ScanOps worker, and the labor itself is only "visible" in these "mistakes" that Wilson (and others) scour Google Book Search for. The workers' presence is felt in moments far removed from the actual work of these yellow-badged workers themselves. Despite being necessary for a key project, these particular Google-affiliated employees only receive dismembered and distant recognition, reflecting the company's consistent devaluation of certain types of "unskilled" labor.

While Google is typically regarded as an extremely desirable and enviable place to work due to its generous, and far-reaching employee benefits, the exclusion of ScanOps yellow badge workers importantly contradicts Google's equitable public image, making space to critique the darker side of the company's work culture. This chapter is specifically interested in the distinct differences between professional Googlers

(Googlers and contracts) and the reproductive service laborers Google employs to deliver its employee's perks. Much like the ScanOps team, these reproductive service laborers make up a large auxiliary labor force that is both extremely integral, yet invisible/illegible within Google's business model. They are paid hourly wages to provide lifestyle-support services for visible, salaried Googlers: they shuttle them to work, cook their three meals, launder their clothes, lead them in physical and emotional self-care exercises. At first glance, you might argue that Google's contracted workers provide reproductive service work to support and sustain Google employees, while Google salaried employees are paid to guarantee the productivity of the company. However, in reality, this Marxist productive vs. reproductive binary is complicated by the fact that despite contract worker invisibility, as a company, Google takes a lot of pride in (and credit for) investing in the social reproduction of its direct employees.

To better analyze and understand Google's intentional invisibility (and lack of pay) for these specific laborers, while investing in the social reproduction of its non-contract employees, I consider feminist scholarship of reproductive labor, and its cultural and economic history under industrial capitalism. In its most basic form, reproductive labor is the work of reproducing and supporting biological and social life—and has traditionally been regarded as women's housework. However, as reproductive tasks have moved outside of one's own home and family, they have garnered wages and require skill sets. Although reproductive work is continuously undervalued (in respect to wages) in comparison to other traditionally coded productive labors, feminists like Mies, Fortunati,

Boris, and Parreñas have convincingly argued for its necessary position within capitalism. Rather than existing outside of, and as supplemental to productive labor, this chapter maintains that reproductive service work, while signaling particular gendered, racialized, and classed bodies, is still wholly within productive capital.

Through analysis of Googler memoirs, personally conducted interviews,<sup>20</sup> and published company employee demographics, this chapter argues that ultimately Google's corporate mission to be a profitable success is due largely to its invisible reproductive service labor force. Moreover, the company's cultural capital relies on the invisibility of this particular labor force. For example, their invisibility helps Google maintain its consistent rankings as a great workplace, allowing the company to attract top talent based on its reputation of taking care of Googlers. Utilizing a Marxist frame of commodities and value, coupled with themes of Foucauldian biopower, and feminist perspectives of reproductive/care work, this chapter analyzes how Googlers and Google-affiliated workers are both used by Google to maintain employee buy-in and profit generation. First I consider how Google converts its employees, by defining the origins of Google's informal motto "Don't Be Evil" and what it means to be "Googley." Then I consider who a legible Googler is, and how they define themselves. Then I frame Google's benefits and perks as tools of corporate biopower meant to retain Googlers. And finally, I move to

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<sup>20</sup> I conducted three in-person interviews with three former Google employees—all of whom worked at Google for some time between 2009-2012. A software engineer for Google+ (2 years), a contract recruiter (1 year), and a product analyst in Con-Ops (Consumer Operations) (3 years). Throughout the chapter I will refer to them as Engineer, Recruiter, or Analyst, keeping their identities anonymous.

make visible the material laborers who actually do the reproductive service work, considering how different modes of labor echo traditions of gendered and racialized work. And by bringing these workers into focus, I advocate for the necessary visibility of reproductive service labor within the Tech industry, and the greater Bay Area.

### **Google's Corporate Mission Reflects Colonial Logics**

As a company, “Google’s mission is to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”<sup>21</sup> Motivated by an effort to augment a person’s day-to-day functions, Google engineers and optimizes the internet’s value. More than just organizing all the information available on the internet, they strive to make that information universally accessible *and useful*. While this directive has made the company incredibly successful financially—the company’s annual revenue for 2014 alone was \$66 billion, continuously growing by 19% annually<sup>22</sup>—more importantly, everyone in the world with access to the internet knows Google. “Google” is ubiquitous beyond brand recognition. It is in our global lexicon as *the* stand-in verb for “searching” the internet. Even the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the most comprehensive dictionary of the

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<sup>21</sup> Taken from “About Google,” accessed March 10, 2015.  
<https://www.google.com/intl/en/about/>.

<sup>22</sup> According to CFO Patrick Pichette in “Google Inc. Announces Fourth Quarter and Fiscal Year 2014 Results.” Google’s 2003-present earnings publicly available on “Investors” page, accessed March 10, 2015,  
[https://investor.google.com/earnings/2014/Q4\\_google\\_earnings.html](https://investor.google.com/earnings/2014/Q4_google_earnings.html).

English language, includes “Google” as a verb: “To use the Google search engine to find information on the Internet.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite its immense wealth and power, Google, unlike other corporations, seems consistently able to walk a tightrope of ethical fortitude. According to Bill Campbell,<sup>24</sup> Google operates with a particular moral and ethical compass, which guides its corporate values and employees’ actions: “I look at people here as missionaries—not mercenaries” (Levy 2011, 144). Likening Google’s executives and employees to missionaries, rather than mercenaries, Campbell infers that Google executives are propelled by a particular set of values and beliefs, rather than money. However, while Campbell means to praise what he sees as Google’s unique idealism and corporate culture in a profit-driven Silicon Valley, I find his metaphor troubling. By invoking the image of a missionary, Campbell connects Google’s mission to colonial histories of conquering and control framed through rhetorics of rescuing and saving. It is from this colonial-missionary schema that I turn a critical eye to Google’s own mission, and the company’s means of getting there. Successful missionary work first requires generating belief and buy-in by the missionaries themselves. Google’s success hinges on its workforce emulating and materializing founders’ Larry Page and Sergey Brin’s

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<sup>23</sup> *OED Online*, accessed March 25, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/261961?rskey=CNIbp5&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell was brought on as the informal executive coach for Google’s new CEO Eric Schmidt (2001). Regarded as a “Silicon Valley legend”: Campbell sat as chairman of Intuit and Apple, was neighbors and best friends with Steve Jobs. Brought on in 2001, Campbell was regarded as “the father figure in Google’s corporate family” (Levy 143).

originating mission and culture. The following section considers how Google inspires (and converts) its employees to not “be evil,” while reflecting on the inherent contradictions of Googley culture.

### **“Don’t Be Evil”: The Googley Way**

Upon Bill Campbell’s suggestion, on July 19, 2001 (three years before going public) a range of Google executives met to verbalize and solidify the company’s values and culture. This meeting marks the origin of Google’s oft-cited, and highly divisive informal motto “Don’t be evil.”<sup>25</sup> The phrase was coined by engineer Paul Buchheit, a former Intuit employee, who intentionally wanted something that would “make people feel uncomfortable but also be interesting” (Levy 2011, 144). “Don’t be evil” came to be an informal and unspoken encapsulation of the company’s values; “follow that *commandment*, and the rest should flow” (Levy 2011, 144, emphasis added). Perhaps unfortunately for Google’s early engineers and founders, “don’t be evil” has since become an albatross around the company’s neck. The motto is cynically used to criticize<sup>26</sup> Google’s brand when the company’s actions forcibly remind outside users that

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<sup>25</sup> As HR manager Stacy Sullivan says, Google’s engineers, who were the key voices of the company, were adamant about differentiating themselves and their work from companies like Microsoft—“they were not going to be an evil company” (Levy 2011, 144).

<sup>26</sup> Loudest criticisms regard Google’s revamped, universal privacy policy that more actively links user search content and advertising technology (See Bogost “What is ‘Evil’ to Google?” *The Atlantic* Oct. 15, 2013), and troubling high-level participation in geopolitical matters (See Assange “Google is Not What it Seems” *Newsweek* October 23, 2014). The title of this thesis also invokes the motto in an effort to position my work in

it is still an engineer-driven, for-profit corporation that often does not prioritize human needs over technological innovation.<sup>27</sup> While the motto “Don’t Be Evil” plays up an all too easy binary between good vs. evil as influencing corporate action, I consider it against Google’s more nuanced profit and brand management vis-à-vis its hierarchical valuation of its employees’ labor and status within the company.

Google’s particular valuation of its employees directly correlates to their level of engagement in, and an enactment of Google culture—in short, being Googley. In the interviews I conducted with former, full-time Google employees, each of them, unprovoked, verbalized this idea of being Googley, or of doing things the Googley way. I gathered that Googleness is an oft-used, catch-all placeholder used around Googleplex, but depending on who is talking, Googleness carries very different value connotations. Below are three anecdotes pulled from my interviews with the Engineer, Recruiter, and Analyst. Each reflects a different understanding of Googleness, underscoring the inconsistencies between the rhetoric and practice of Google culture on the whole.

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conversation with other critiques of Google’s corporate actions that seem to defy or contradict its altruistic mission.

<sup>27</sup> Page and Brin, observed Stanford’s Terry Winograd, ‘are utopians,’ believing deeply that ‘if people have better information they will live better lives... They are technological optimists in the sense of saying, ‘Let’s produce this technology and things will work out.’ They don’t always work out, and some of the clashes Google has had—with book publishers and the AP, or with ad agencies and governments—resulted from an inability to hear... This is the same mechanical thinking that often overlooks the needs of workers when designing assembly lines. In the same way, Google’s engineers can get too wedded to their algorithms” (Auletta 2009, 332).

The Engineer<sup>28</sup> spoke about Googleness' influence on promotions:

The promotion process...[sic]...It is very self-propagated, I can't really put my finger on it. They keep that culture and promote people who are of that culture for sure...They use the word impact a lot. Facebook does this too. You are judged on your impact...At Google your impact is not measured on how successful your product is and how many users your product has, but on how much stuff you launched and did you build a piece of infrastructure that other product teams [can] use...its a nerdy academic thing. [For example] I got promoted once or twice while working on Google+, even though it [as a product] is a total failure. The product is total crap.

As a contract employee, the Recruiter<sup>29</sup> recalls the Googleness of being singled out before the company-wide Halloween party:

I remember the Halloween party was one month after I started and we were encouraged to bring our kids, families, so I planned to bring my daughter who was 9 months at the time. That day I worked from home [in San Francisco] and planned to head down in the evening. But someone with the events planning committee caught wind that I was bringing my daughter and emailed me, saying "We are very sorry but you cannot bring

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<sup>28</sup> A software engineer for Google+ (2 years).

<sup>29</sup> A contract recruiter (1 year).

your child to this event.” I felt like it was weird for them to go out of their way to single out one individual...I responded, can you please make an exception...to which I got a tense response....My manager caught wind of this and personally reached out [sic] and invited my family to the event as his personal guest. I went, I brought my daughter...and it was fine. It was just funny. I am sure they could not have picked me out in the group, or my daughter. The point [of the party] was for kids to get dressed up...there were carnival booths...[sic] it was interesting to me that they would make such an effort to exclude me.

And the Analyst,<sup>30</sup> a young, well-educated, white male, discusses how his sexuality and desire for work/life separation did not easily jive with Google:

There is definitely a younger demographic...like I would be on the bus with “Tech Bros” and stuff and I ugh, I hated it...There is this focus on everyone wants everyone to be friends. The leadership wants you to be friends with your team...And like sure, you can have fun at work, there was time set up for this. But I just did not want to be at work all the time. I kept my work and personal life separate. Mostly I think it was because I was not out at the time and this limited my connections. But also, I did not want to stay there all the time. I live in San Francisco and I tried to maintain a social life outside of the job.

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<sup>30</sup> Product analyst and customer service representative in Consumer Operations (3 years).

Each of these anecdotes depicts Googleyness, and the company culture in material reality. Rhetoric aside, it is clear that the company's value system does not reflect an ethical universalism, but instead seems to be based on exemplifying certain merits and falling in line. Even for the Engineer, who held a high-status job within Google's employee hierarchy, it was still difficult to gauge one's value in the workplace. Management and promotions seem more arbitrarily based on exuding Googleyness and having undefined internal impacts, rather than the more traditional markers of designing useful consumer products. For the Recruiter, Google culture is remembering that as a contract worker, there are limits to your access. The bureaucratic effort to single out and exclude her family from attending the company Halloween party is not beyond the scope of Google's control, or their Googleyness efforts. And for the Analyst, despite fitting Google's younger employee demographic, the Googley way did not suit his personality or lifestyle. Perhaps he felt that the "Tech Bros" would not be so open to his gay identity, or maybe he simply did not think it was a part of his life that work needed to know about. While Googleyness tries to embody an open and fun-loving work environment, it is clear that not everyone feels this same belonging, whether through active exclusion (the Recruiter) or by choice (the Analyst). And even still, embodying true Googleyness is still a mystery to full-time Googlers, like the Engineer, who even with privilege and company status, did not feel like he had any real understanding about his place in the company culture.

## **Defining “Googlers” and Converting Them Early**

A Googler is what Google employees call themselves...but not all Google-affiliated workers actually qualify as Googlers. Within the company’s hierarchy, Googlers are only the full-time employees paid directly by Google. Contracted professionals, service workers, and interns are not considered Googlers. Although it is unclear how early on the term Googler was coined, Douglas Edwards uses it frequently, as well as Noogler (new employees) and Xoogler (ex-employees) in his memoir *I’m Feeling Lucky: The Confessions of Google Employee Number 59* (2011). Hired in 1999, a year after Google is formally founded, Edwards stays on until 2005, one year after Google goes public. Edwards provides an important insider-outsider perspective to Google’s early days. He was/is a Googler anomaly—age forty-one, a parent, and a marketer. Most of his coworkers were young, single, and green, just out of academia with degrees in computer science and engineering. This section leans heavily on Edwards’ memoir (and his perspective) because of his close proximity to Google’s founders, and his position as an early convert to the company’s mission. While Edwards’ rear-view, sometimes nostalgic, perspective is undoubtedly influenced<sup>31</sup> by his pre-IPO wealth<sup>31</sup> due to Google’s success, if he and his fellow early Googlers did not believe in the company’s mission, they would not have worked so hard, and Google would not have succeeded as it has.

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<sup>31</sup> Although he does not disclose how many stock options he received, Edwards does reveal that his buy price in 1999 was \$0.20/share—Google went public in 2004 \$85.00/share (Edwards 2011, 115).

Early on, Google seems to have established a culture of employee awe and unwavering belief in its founders, which masked early balking at a hierarchical, top-down structure based on engineering and vision. Founder Sergey Brin considered Google, the 1999 very young start-up, ““a flat organization with few levels to facilitate communication and avoid bureaucracy”” (Edwards 2011, 14). Similar to other start-ups, official titles and job descriptions did not really exist, but rather collaboration was key and ““when there were problems to be solved, whoever could solve them did”” (Edwards 2011, 13). However, as a marketer, Edwards frequently describes experiences of conflict and butting up against the founders’ insistence on efficiency and the primacy of data. Google may have been a non-traditional Tech company in some ways, but Page and Brin also ruled from above, wielding clearly defined principles that often overshadowed and overruled the flat organization. Despite conflicts, Edward exhibits an eerily unwavering reverence for Page and Brin’s genius, which actually reads sincerely, despite his massive fortune. Other early Googlers he quotes seem to share in this similar awe at their founders’ abilities to both predict and make all the right moves for Google’s success. As CEO Eric Schmidt has said, Page and Brin had unwavering confidence in their vision (Levy 2011, 81) and led with a confidence that allowed Google’s culture to spring forth accordingly.

Two things were (and are) clear about Google’s culture. First, Google is an engineering company: ““In reality, if you weren’t an engineer, your first directive was to avoid impeding the progress of those who were...it was a ‘Don’t talk. Do.’ kind of

culture” (Edwards 2011, xv). Engineering product optimization and worker optimization are the priority. And second, Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin ran this engineering company with three operating principles—efficiency, frugality, and integrity:

Engineers rebel at inefficiency. Larry Page, more than anyone I ever met, hated systems that ate hours and produced suboptimal results. His burning passion was to help the world stop wasting his time. That love of efficiency begat a fondness for frugality, because paying more than the bare minimum for something was by definition wasteful. Larry liked trimming unnecessary expenses, but it was Sergey who fully applied his razor-sharp intellect to cutting costs...[and] Larry and Sergey had an intuitive feel for presenting data in a way that improved the ratio of signal to noise. That means they didn't believe in adding unnecessary crap to the information you actually wanted to see. So, no blinking banner ads in Google search results. No links to every service Google offered pasted all over the Google.com homepage...To corrupt a working system would be to profane perfection. (Edwards 2011, xiv)

At surface level, Google's mission to give universal access to internet search optimization and its “Don't Be Evil” motto frame the company as morally ethical and nondiscriminatory, both with its product development and internal operations. However, in the push for product and employee optimization, we also see a shrewd prioritization of a particular value system and skill set that is most wholly actualized in the “engineer.”

While I have touched on this prioritization as the organizing undercurrent of Google's early days, it is directly articulated by its founders upon going in 2004.

### **Google Founders Choose to Invest in a Narrow Definition of Googlers**

While early Googlers praised their leaders, converted, and chose to follow them into the missionary abyss, Page and Brin reciprocated their "affection" and gratitude upon going public in 2004, defining the significance of Googlers to the company in their first Founder's Letter, "An Owner's Manual' for Google's Shareholders".<sup>32</sup>

Our employees, who have named themselves Googlers, are everything. *Google is organized around the ability to attract and leverage the talent of exceptional technologists and business people.* We have been lucky to recruit many creative, principled and hard working stars. We hope to recruit many more in the future. We will reward and treat them well. We provide many unusual benefits for our employees, including meals free of charge, doctors and washing machines. We are careful to consider the long term advantages to the company of these benefits. Expect us to add benefits rather than pare them down over time. *We believe it is easy to be penny wise and pound foolish with respect to benefits that can save*

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<sup>32</sup> Google's IPO (Initial Public Offering) was August 19, 2004 with shares valued at \$85.00. Since 2004, the two founders publish and post an annual Founders' Letter for stockholders; all available on Google's "Investors" page, accessed March 11, 2015, <https://investor.google.com/corporate/2004/ipo-founders-letter.html>.

*employees considerable time and improve their health and productivity.*

(emphasis added)

In their public offering, Page and Brin stake the claim that Googlers are the company's most valuable asset, while maintaining a very limited definition of who these particular employees are. The company invests both time and money towards recruiting the most talented "technologists and business people," and once they are Googlers, the company "pound foolish"-ly invests in them further. Yet even in 2004, Google's operation was large enough to require a diverse labor force beyond hard-working engineers and MBA managers. It needed a hard-working administrative support staff, cooking staff, and masseuse staff,<sup>33</sup> none of which are labor categories that qualify as legible Googlers (Arrington, 2015, Blumgart 2013, Weissman 2013). Google's federally filed 2013 EEO-1 (Equal Employment Opportunity Employer Report) [Appendix 1]<sup>34</sup> shows that Google only directly hires technology and business professionals—white-collar jobs. Craft Workers, Operatives, Laborers&Helpers, Service Workers, and Administrative Support, and Technicians are either not counted in the EEO-1, or number just a few. These absences reinforces that these workers make up Google's contracted labor force.

Google's refusal to publish its contracted employee numbers, let alone hire them directly,

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<sup>33</sup> Google's first chef, Charlie Ayers and first masseuse, Bonnie Brown both pre-IPO, had stock options and have received visibility, respect from Googlers, and tokenized fame. However, others working these same service jobs at Google are not Googlers, and remain invisible.

<sup>34</sup> Silicon Valley Tech companies avoid making their EEO-1s public. Google, along with Facebook, LinkedIn, and Microsoft have done it, while Apple, Oracle, and Twitter still refuse. (Eshoo 2014, Guynn December 2014, Williams May 2014, Lorenzetti 2015)

mirrors the company's values of being lean, efficient, and frugal. But it also establishes a hierarchical divide between the different labor skills necessary to keep Google running.

Google strives to improve *their* employees' health and promote *their* productivity—essentially investing in the social reproduction of its laborers. From a Marxist perspective, Google, as owner of its labor capital, should be praised for re-investing capital into its own means of labor production, rather than relying on the domestic/private sphere to do this work. However, by publicly prioritizing investing in the retention and support of its “hard working stars” without naming the laborers paid to do this work, Google's founders are effectively cloaking the historical division between productive (generative of surplus value) labor and reproductive (domestic) labor that feminists have worked so hard to disrupt. Despite the fact that these reproductive service workers receive wage pay, which importantly commodifies their labor, Google renders them invisible by outsourcing their hiring and management to third party agencies, effectively undervaluing the skills and labor time required to perform social reproductive work. Moreover, through obscuring the presence of reproductive service laborers, Google is able to shore up its perks package as merely an offering of corporate good will and benevolence towards its Googlers. However, as I stress in the following section, this “good will” and “benevolence” is actually the company flexing its corporate biopower.

### **The Biopolitics Behind Googlers' Benefits**

This section considers the biopolitics that undergird Google's Page and Brin's Founder's Letter: “expect us to add benefits rather than pare them down.” From the

outside, Google is one of the most desirable companies to work for,<sup>35</sup> which is due largely to how the company has continued to prioritize their employees. Urs Hölzle, Google's eighth employee and first VP of Engineering says, “We designed Google...to be the kind of place where the kind of people we wanted to work here would [want to] work for free” (Levy 2011, 125). Hölzle's comment reflects back to Campbell's initial description of Googlers as missionaries, not mercenaries—working out of unwavering belief in the product, rather than for profit. While his tone might initially read as benevolently kind and anti-corporate, his word choice also suggests an undercurrent of Google's true intentions and priorities, focusing on the kind of people *we want*. This section views Google's investments in the experiences of particular Googlers, to save them time, improve their health, and increase their productivity, as an interesting development in Foucault's original articulation of biopower.

For Foucault, biopower is when “power gave itself the function of administering life” and a nation-state's “main role was to ensure, sustain, and multiply life” (Foucault 1990, 138) For Foucault, the modern nation-state marks an important departure from the sovereign, divine rule of kings, that exercised “his right of life only by exercising his right to kill...he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring” (Foucault 1990, 136). However, as Western civilization has moved from sovereign power to democratic nation-states, the terms and language of power have

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<sup>35</sup> Google has been ranked #1 on Fortune Magazine's “100 Best Companies to Work For” six years in a row, and on the list for 9 years.

necessarily changed. Under nation-states, mechanisms of power are framed as the “power to *foster* life or *disallow* it.” Sovereign power has been “supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life...there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of ‘bio-power’” (Foucault 1990, 138-140). Foucault also notes that in conjunction with nation-states, “capitalism...would not have been possible [without biopower to control] the insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes...The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of bio-power” (Foucault 1990, 141). Capital needs bio-management to increase the surplus value of producers, which post-Foucault, is being done by private companies, like Google, under neoliberal imperatives. Google, as an owner, obliges by controlling (through financing perks) the reproductive life of its own productive work force—which in turn makes the absolute value of reproductive laborers disposable.

Yet, at this point in our socio-political history, reflected by welfare cuts and the battle to defund the Affordable Care Act, neoliberalism’s push to privatize government social services has effectively consolidated key rights of biopower into private enterprise. It is on this point that I turn to Google, a corporation at the height of this late capitalist moment. Consider the examples below as demonstrations of Google, as a corporation,

replacing the nation-state as having the power to “administer life,” often through low-status workers. As this section develops, keep in mind this troubling consolidation, which injects Google founders with a moral/ethical power<sup>36</sup> over their employees’ quality of life. But what are the implications and consequences of Google exercising biopower to “make live and let die”?

For Googler recruiter Gary Arneson, however, the “implications” of this consolidated biopower are simply paradise: “Google has espoused what everyone else has talked about and claimed—they’ve made human capital one of their (our) most important focus areas. Employees are revered and cherished...It’s an engineer’s paradise here at Google” (Arneson 2010).<sup>37</sup> Like Arneson, most of Google’s engineering recruits, and other full-time Googlers, are initially drawn to Google because the company takes such good care of them...but “them” also refers to the specific category of engineers. Google’s preference for engineer-like minds informs their hiring method, which the Engineer I interviewed described as “highly technical,” asking you to code “abstractions”

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<sup>36</sup> To be clear, I am not suggesting that nation-states, unlike Google, have ever exerted biopower with any sense of moral and ethical universalism outside of their own aims of control and subjugation. Instead, I mean to suggest that this new type of corporate biopower where-in the even more discrete economic and corporate goals of Google’s founders and Board of Directors dictate the administering and regulating of employees’ (productive and reproductive) lives. Foucault notes a division of power between the politics of nation-states and the economics of capitalism. Without diverting into the dangerous problematics of neoliberalism (which many other more qualified scholars have discussed), I am simply offering here a small example of this larger phenomenon.

<sup>37</sup> Googler recruiter Gary Arneson (employed since 2005) posted response to Tim Bray’s “Life at Google” (blog) April 2, 2010, accessed April 10, 2015, <https://www.tbray.org/ongoing/When/201x/2010/03/20/Google-Vignettes#p-2>.

rather than “stuff you’d work on in real life.” Googler Andy Rubin, a talent acquisition hired in 2004 when his startup was purchased by Google, described hiring as a grading process: “When we hire...we grade the way they answer each question on a 4.0 basis, and if the average scores are below 3.0, we don’t hire them. We [also] have these GPSs, Google Product Strategy meetings, that are run like PhD defenses” (Levy 2011, 135).

Google values are also reflecting in the Googleplex’s design. The company’s reliance on an academic-based meritocracy is mirrored in the collegiate-feel of Googleplex. In both instances, Google takes on a role of academic advisor and parental nurturer, which is as much about promoting particular intellectual growth, as it is infantilizing its employees and making them dependent on the company.

Like Google’s academically focused hiring process, which prioritizes high-performing students with excellent GPAs<sup>38</sup> from a certain cluster of schools, Mountain View’s Googleplex is designed to be an extension of the college experience—intentionally promoting intellectual collaboration through freedom of movement and play. As CEO Eric Schmidt describes it, “a lot of Google is organized around the fact that people still think they’re in college when they work here...you walk between buildings here and see people interacting like they would at a university.” Yet while “Google

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<sup>38</sup> All potential Google hires are seriously asked to provide their GPA and copies of their college transcripts, regardless of their work history and time out of college. For example, a friend of mine’s mom told me that when she interviewed at Google as a middle-aged, mid-career employee she was asked to provide her GPA and transcripts. Despite being a qualified technical writer in the Silicon Valley for decades, working for companies like Sun and Netscape, she sees her inability to provide these college documents negatively impacted her hiring potential.

offices appeared to be a geek never-never land for unspeakably brainy Lost Boys (and Girls)...if you looked closely though, there were endless [intentional] bureaucratic structures—data-driven, logically drawn schemata—[designed to keep] a [growing] \$23 billion business humming” (Levy 2011, 123-125). While Google’s collegiate-like campus nurtures the intellectual development of engineers, the insular environment also lets the company more easily control its employees’ social interactions to promote more productive work.

On campus, the most well-known and publicized reproductive labor service (aka employee perk) is Google’s free meals (Sridharan 2008, May 2013, Stone 2014), which are available for all Googlers and Google contractors (with red badges). Google founders have paid to feed employees since 1998, long before Google had any revenue stream. The “calculus behind offering employees free food in the first place...[was that without the café] most Googlers, would have lost twenty minutes getting to a restaurant, half an hour eating...[we] would have stopped thinking about Google as soon as [we] cleared the front door so [we] could focus on consuming fatty, salt-saturated foods on my way to increased sick days and a premature death” (Edwards 2011, 91). The “calculus” behind offering free food is perhaps not calculus at all—but simply about keeping employees in the building and keeping them fed, to keep them working.

So, what does it cost today to feed everyone, and keep them in the building? While Brin has said vaguely that “‘it’s less than a rounding error,’...Stacy Sullivan, Google’s director of human resources, [is] a little more specific...‘I don’t have the exact

amount—it could be \$15, it could be \$17’ (At \$17, that’s a total of about \$80 million a year for free food.)” (Levy 2011, 134). To be sure, \$80 million dollars a year in costs for a company that makes billions in annual revenue is not too significant (\$66 billion in 2014). From Google’s perspective, free food is more than an employee perk. It is an investment in the life of the Googler. In the short-term, it will increase worker productivity through collaboration. Full-time Googlers and red-badge contract workers have higher rates of encounters and collaboration in cafés, through the work of reproductive, lower-level service workers. Free café meals also offer breaks from the computer desk, promoting nourishment and improving attitude. And in the long-term, it is really Edwards’ hyperbole come true—Google’s control over their Googlers’ food options is exerting biopower to support health, reduce sick days, prevent early deaths, and ultimately reduce their reproductive circle (i.e. employee turnover).

In a 2013 CBS Morning News segment, Google’s Senior Vice President of People Operations, Lazslo Block, who describes his department as “HR [Human Resources] with data,” discusses the implementation of small “nudges” to promote and improve (through direct control) Google employee health. He tells reporter John Blackstone that Googlers’ were gaining weight with the food plan so People Operations began experimenting with “nudges—not to force changes, but to make it easier to make better decisions” (CBS News 2013). Block says they promoted choosing smaller plates as well as color-coding food options as green, yellow, or red, in descending order of healthiness. Google also made sugary snacks harder to find: “We moved M&Ms further down the shelf. Over a 7

week period we found that workers were consuming over 3,000,000 fewer calories of M&Ms.” He says the goal behind this number crunching and little nudges is to actually extend the average life of a Googler by thirty years: “It’s funny, I think our oldest Googler is 83 years old, and we want people at Google for a lifetime.” Block’s attempt to be commendable is ripe with the complexity of corporate-exercised biopower...live longer so employees can work at Google longer.

Googler benefits, like free food, free commuter shuttle bus rides,<sup>39</sup> and an array of on-site auxiliary services are meant to increase Googlers’ “productive work” by keeping employees on campus (Garguilo 2011). Offering so many on-site amenities leaves little justificatory room for an employee to leave campus and handle personal errands, which impacts their ability to connect with the rest of the Silicon Valley and larger Bay Area. Instead, Google brings your private life and personal chores to your office. And while it is certainly *efficient* to handle personal responsibilities while at work, Google’s facilitation of leisure time is yet another biopower tool for *controlling leisure time* and employee movements and use of space.

Former Googler Kim Malone draws a significant analogy in her unpublished manuscript: “‘It’s sort of like the corporation as housewife...Google cooks for you, picks up and delivers your dry cleaning, takes care of your lube jobs, washes your car, gives

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<sup>39</sup> The Recruiter I interviewed said that as a contractor she was allowed to take the commuter shuttle buses as long as she received permission first. Filmmaker Andrew Norman Wilson, also a contract employee, said he took the buses frequently even without his badge. Just two examples, but it seems like a loosely enforced policy.

you massages, organizes your work-outs. In fact, between the massages and the gym, you'll be naked at work at least three times a week. It organizes amazing parties for you. And if all that is not enough, there is a concierge service; you can just send an email and they'll run any errand you want for \$25 an hour” (Levy 2011, 135). Mason's description of Google as “housewife” further conjures the image of Google as a generous, and naturally maternal employer, motivated more by an ethic of care, rather than a desire for employee productivity.

As a Googler, you grow to feel loyalty and maybe even love for your employer—they are taking care of you. From the Googler's perspective the relationship is clearly not viewed as transactional and hinged upon your potential productivity as a worker. Instead you see your employer as housewife (or mother)—reproductive work that is motivated by love and care. And beyond disappearing corporate biopower, “Google as housewife” yields an even more subversive consequence: it invisibilizes the material work required for these modes of reproductive labor, which further naturalizes this labor as unskilled, and less valuable under capitalism. We see the company's generosity for facilitating certain reproductive services standing in for the bodies actually *doing these services*.

Google as capitalist owner, might be applauded for investing in the social reproduction of their workforce, but they do so in a hierarchical way that reinforces constructed social divisions of value between “high skilled” Googlers (as consumers) and “unskilled” contracted reproductive service workers (as producers). The Engineer I interviewed framed his interaction with these reproductive service laborers as “polite but

anonymous. I took a shuttle like every day, but I didn't know the driver's name or ever say anything besides hello or thank you. And same for the food service workers. It is almost like they're not there...it is kind of like the practice [sic] that everyone ignores the service workers around." The following section considers these social interactions from the perspective of the reproductive service workers. I make their labor and bodies visible to highlight Google's stratified employee hierarchy mirroring the social coding of particular labor as "unskilled," and the prevalence of this labor falling on particular classed, racialized, and gendered bodies.

### **Understanding Invisible Googlers' Particular Labors**

It can be argued that the invisibility of these service workers is directly related to the fact that their labor does not produce exchange-value commodities. Their cooking, massaging, driving (etc.) are invaluable to Google's productive business, but their labor has high use value—or inherent utility, and no exchange value—their labor does not produce sellable, or exchangeable commodities. While having use value, or utility, is a necessary commodity condition, their "commodity" is fully absorbed by Googlers, rather than exchanged. Conversely, visible Googlers, like software engineers, are at the top of the company's labor hierarchy because their labor produces commodities (i.e. Google products) with the highest exchange rate, which yields corporate revenues. Marx calls this the fetishism (or mysticism) of the commodity, where a commodity's human labor becomes absorbed into the commodity, and a commodity's only value is determined by its exchange value—what it can sell for on the market (Marx 83). The fetishism of the

commodity further facilitates a hierarchy of skilled vs. unskilled labor under capitalism, which we see reflected in Google's labor structure.

Google's labor structure utilizes reproductive laborers, who have very high use value and low exchange value. As you will see in the examples below, different modes of reproductive labor, or care work, or service work, invoke different levels of labor and different types of bodies. Phrased differently, I want to frame reproductive service work as work that is only noticed when its *not done*. These workers (and their labor) are the symbolic embodiment of Google's pledge to be "pound heavy" on employee benefits, yet their physical bodies are invisible. In the company's federally filed EEO-1, none of these workers are counted because they are employed by third-party staffing agencies. Their absence from the form is visibly striking—of the total 26,559 U.S.-based employees, there are just 67 "Service Workers" [Appendix 1].<sup>40</sup> Their labors are not readily described in narratives or articles about Google's corporate success. Instead, most accounts read much more like Mason's, where Google is the benevolently generous corporate employer, redefining human resource norms. None of the interviewees I spoke with actively acknowledge these workers either, even as each of them spoke openly about company perks.

In the brief moments of worker visibility, for example in Edwards' descriptions of early massages and food service at Google, his language further reifies female-gendered

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<sup>40</sup> Google's EEO-1 for 2013 counts 0 employees as: Craft Workers, Operatives, Laborers & Helpers.

attributes of intimacy that are too often associated with certain types of reproductive labor, which always works to limit framing reproductive labor as actually productive under capital. His anecdote of Google's first masseuses delves into hetero-masculinist fantasy, leaving reality and the physical bodies of these laborers behind:

Larry and Sergey had bestowed upon us Bonnie [Brown] Dawson and Babette Villasenor to smooth the kinks in necks craned over monitors and the aches in fingers that clawed at computer keys like Gollum scrabbling for the ring of Sauron. (Edwards 2011, 86)

The female masseuses are first, “bestowed upon” Googlers by Brin and Page, their benevolent leaders, as if they are physical gifts of gratitude, instead of agential workers. Although it is never suggested that Google massage is code for further sexual favors, their corporate role becomes hetero-masculinist sexual fantasy—Googler “comfort women,” offering retreat and refuge of body and mind care for the legion of over-worked male Googlers.

As masseurs, Brown and Villasenor perform a particular form of gendered, intimate care work. Their job was to ease the physical manifestations that hard, productive labor left on Googlers.<sup>41</sup> They labor to ease the physical and mental tensions Googlers experience “in battle” in front of their computers. Edwards, however, invisibilizes this material work, in his move to compare Googlers to Tolkien fantasy.

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<sup>41</sup> From Bonnie Brown's (formerly Dawson) memoir: “My job description was to ‘manipulate muscles and soft tissue of eligible Google employees and assume a key role in promoting their relaxation and health.’” (Brown 2012, n.p.)

Likening Googlers to the grotesque and fiendish Gollum, and his maniacal desire for the ring of Sauron's power, Edwards plays into Tech culture's origin stories. Successful start-ups (Microsoft, HP, Apple, Dell, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) founded on white youthful masculinity and its "perfect" blend of naiveté, untapped promise, and unchallenged ego. As female-bodied service workers, Brown and Villasenor must be rendered invisible in this origin story fantasy. Instead, they are auxiliary to the Googler's self-indulgent fantasy quest for search engine optimization. From Edwards' masculinist perspective, their physical presence is only felt when more and more Googlers' muscle tensions and aches build, making it more difficult to schedule a massage.<sup>42</sup>

But to Brown, who takes pride in massage's rejuvenating qualities, describes her job as integral to Google's success: "Even though my job was not directly related to building the search engine, I felt the same labor pains as they did, because I was helping them to keep going...I found great satisfaction knowing how much benefit they were receiving under my hands" (Brown 2012, n.p.). Brown importantly invokes the maternal, reproductive, language of "labor pains" to describe her relationship to Google's early success. Here, reproductive labor is akin to, and actually part of the engineers' productive labor—blurring the constructed binary between reproductive and productive under capital.

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<sup>42</sup> The Google calendar for massage slots becomes so over booked, that the company institutes redeemable massage certificates, given to Googlers based on merit. But soon these certificates built up an informal economy—traded amongst Googlers in exchange for different types of favors. See: Levy and Edwards.

For Brown, her touch (and care) had significant effects on Googlers' mental and physical health. She takes pride in the produced effects of her labor. And although she falls back on reproductive, care language to describe her massage—it “had a lot to do with [helping Googlers feel] cared for and not only about relieving stress,” she equally resists gendering a masseuse stereotype. She makes a point of describing her work role as analogous to that of a “doctor/bartender.” Dawson is compelled to imagine (and elevate) the labor of her oft-effeminized care/touch by likening it to professions of intellectual health authority (doctor) and emotional comradery (bartender). A masseuse's job is skilled and takes labor time.

Like a masseuse, the Unlike Dawson and Villasenor, Edwards describes the male kitchen staff (at least these are the workers he names) as directly analogous to Google's mission—exhibiting the “Googley way”:

The lesson of the data center applied to the kitchen as well: cheap production units pushed to their limits offered superior performance...To their undying credit, Charlie, Jim, and the rest of the Google kitchen crew never experienced a catastrophic failure. Day after day after day, they fed us—their infrastructure running on elbow grease, ingenuity, and heart. It was a very Googley way to be.

(Edwards 2011, 92)

Although the kitchen had no budget, Ayers pushed himself and “his men” as far as they could go to continuously produce at a high-level...prioritizing human ingenuity and heart over financial resources. This reflects the Googley way, which affectively absorbs the

kitchen staff into the company's narrative of success. But why is the kitchen staff framed as more Googley than the massage staff? Chef Charlie Ayers, and Charlie's Café, figures into Edwards' memoir as a token figure of Google's early success. Is it because they cooked the food? Or that Edwards and other Googlers saw and interacted with them daily? Or was it just because Ayers had a "big personality," actively inserting his kitchen into Google's story (Edwards 2011, 88), and eventually becoming known in his own right?

Read together, Edwards' language reflects the troubling value-distinction between Dawson and Villasenor's massage work and Charlie Ayers' kitchen staff. In one sense this can be read as a problematic consequence of traditionally gendered work titles. Male chefs (providing food) are framed as more Googley, i.e. productive, than the female massage staff (kneading bodies). However, the variegated value-distinction between food labor and massage labor reflects back on Marx's fetishism of the commodity. Food, as a commodity, actually has exchange value, whereas massages, produce no exchange value, only use value that is fully utilized and absorbed by the consumer.

While massage and food service allow direct contact between Googlers (as consumers) and reproductive service workers (as producers), I want to pull back and expand on the gendered-nature of reproductive service laborers. Like Boris and Parreñas do in *Intimate Labors* (2010), I argue that we must expand our conceptualization of "intimacy" to understand the material reach of de-valued labor and the racialized, classed, and gendered bodies that are tasked with this work in our globalized economy. If we

recognize that intimate labor already occurs in a multitude of capitalist-coded productive settings, we will bring necessary visibility, and hopefully better compensation, to labor that has always been necessary, but is rarely acknowledged.

### **Googlers Service Laborers Reinforce Class and Race Breakdowns**

Next, I consider a further class of Google's sub-contracted service workers: private shuttle drivers, security guards, janitors, and grounds crew. I argue that that while each of these jobs may encapsulate modes of reproductive labor, their existence in corporate/industrial settings marks an important departure from more traditional feminist conceptions of intimate/care work. These workers do not as easily fit into the intimate labor<sup>43</sup> category because their jobs occur in traditionally non-intimate settings, and/or without one-on-one interactions with the consumer. They and their work become even more invisibilized under this reproductive category. Feminist scholar Mignon Duffy considers the necessary reality of this labor force in relation to the commodification of healthcare and scaling up of hospitals and care facilities. She argues that intimate care, as commodified labor, is one thing that late-capitalist societies will be unable to globally outsource. With hospitals growing in size and services, Duffy points out the necessary (yet invisible) labor force that keeps the hospital running. While doctors and nurses, those more traditionally regarded as doing care labor, engage in the intimacy of direct patient

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<sup>43</sup> "Attentiveness appears as a key to understanding intimate labor...the work of tending encompasses a wide range of activities from taking care of one's reproductive needs—for instance, the provision of children through adoption or the giving of an orgasm via sex...attentiveness could entail tending to the materials and objects that improve the quality of our lives." (Boris, Parreñas 2010, 4)

contact, hospitals must employ a physical labor force to support operational and building maintenance. But these positions almost require invisibility. Think about janitors. They work night shifts to intentionally avoiding any direct physical contact with a building's productive labor force. And their bodies/labor use value is so invisibilized, you only think about a janitor when you notice a trashcan was not emptied, or a spot was not mopped up. Janitors, and these other types of reproductive laborers are visible only when *they don't do their jobs*.

Rather than employ these workers directly, Google contracts out for these jobs. The workers who hold these positions comprise Silicon Valley Tech's invisible labor force—and numbers show that they are largely people of color (Tiku 2013, Elder 2014, Guynn August 2014). To be honest, statistical data is not the most thorough, or agential way to represent these workers, but it is also some of the only information available today about these workers. Companies like Google do not highlight their work in company demographics or materials, nor do the staffing agencies, whose names are difficult to locate. I pull data collected by Working Partnerships USA in their 2014 “Tech's Diversity Problem: More Than Meets The Eye” report, because it is the most recent, and nonpartisan analysis of Santa Clara County's Invisible Tech workforce, providing the most relevant percentage breakdowns of the ethnic and racial backgrounds of these laborers. However, numbers do not easily represent material human identities, especially when they forcibly categorize people into fixed “male” and “female” genders and

outdated racial categories, like “Asian/Pacific Islander;” limitations I acknowledge in this data:<sup>44</sup>

Tech’s Invisible Workforce:				
	White	Asian/Pac. Islander	Latino	Black
Security Guards	26%	31%	28%	13%
Grounds Crew	15%	8%	74%	1%
Janitorial Staff	15%	12%	69%	3%

When compared to Google’s own Workforce Demographics—which counts official Googlers only, the racial demographic percentages practically invert—highlighting a huge hiring disparity between Whites (65%), Asians (28%), Blacks (1-2%) and Latinos (3%). Google’s own demographic charts [Appendix 1], show these disparities across its divisions of Tech, Non-Tech, and Leadership categories.

Looking no further than the level of Executive and Senior Officials you see a stark reality: Of 36 total Executives, 21 are White Males, just 3 are White Females, 10 are Asian males, 1 is a Black male, and 1 is a male that identifies two or more races. These gender and race ratios are pretty steady company wide—even when the job category encompasses 18,717 people (Professionals): 8932 White Males, 4469 Asian Males, 2205 White Females, 1737 Asian female and rounding out the “Top 5” is 369 Hispanic/Latino Males. Google’s EEO-1 and its self-published diversity demographics, also offers key insight into the gender and racial breakdown of full-time (FTE) Googlers.

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<sup>44</sup> Note: The numbers pulled in the report come from Santa Clara County, rather than specifically from Google, Facebook, and Apple, who do not publish or track the employee statistics of their contract workers, as they are not legible employees.

For example, there are five times fewer Latino male professionals (369) at Google than Asian female professionals (1737), who are the fourth most prevalent.

As expected, there is an accompanying wage gap between the software engineers, Tech workers and these “invisible workers who do not share in the success of the industry [for] which they [labor] daily labor keep running” (Working Partnerships USA). The published median hourly wage difference between Tech employees and service workers is sharp: \$62.00/hour vs. \$11-14.50/hour. The implications of this difference is more stark when you consider that the contract workers making under \$15.00/hour are also foreclosed from the traditional benefits of Tech companies—such as stable health care, paid sick leave, and vacation.

Moreover, as Tech companies impact the cost of living around the Bay Area, the industry’s service level jobs are becoming even more “insecure,” as it becomes more and more difficult to maintain one’s quality of life, let alone support a family, on minimum wage salaries. While some service workers in the Tech industry have started to organize to improve their working conditions, with the Silicon Valley and California taking notice, our local socioeconomic landscape is still a precarious environment for all of us, whether we work in Tech or not.

## **Conclusion**

While this chapter has complicated the image of the “Googler” with an in-depth consideration of Google-affiliated workers, whether they are coded as legible Googlers, service workers, or red and yellow-badged contractors. With the additional aid of first-

hand employee memoirs or testimonies (conducted via interviews), I have offered a more complete image of Google's corporate labor system. Rather than simply feeling job envy for those that work at Google, this chapter has drawn attention to the various invisible workers and their forms of undervalued, yet invaluable labor done in the shadows and service of the brand. In Chapter 3, we leave the insular walls of the Googleplex behind, moving out to the Bay Area at large. I consider how Google's brand of disruptive technology comes into contact with the public, and why it matters. I analyze two fictional versions of a technological future to help dissect these technologically mediated contact points between Google and the larger Bay Area to argue that Google's brand of technology is only exacerbating the region's precarious conditions due to its promotion of social alienation and its mediation of material human interactions.

### Chapter 3

## Disruptive Technology and Alienation: Google, the Bay Area, and Visions of the Future



[Fig. 5 - "GMuni: Free Buses For All!"]

April 1, 2014: GMuni debuts at the corner of Valencia St. and 24<sup>th</sup> Ave. in San Francisco's Mission District. Responding to an impending MUNI fare hike, and San Francisco's public transportation system's more general crisis, the pilot program, subsidized by Google, allows MUNI riders to board and ride Google shuttle buses for free, without employee affiliations...April Fool's! In a riff on Google's own history of celebrating April Fool's Day,<sup>45</sup> and hours before San Francisco Board of Supervisors'

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<sup>45</sup> Google founder Sergey Brin instituted pranks and April Fool's Day as the most revered "holiday" at the company. Since 1999, Google's homepage has featured April Fool's

would vote on the pilot Commuter Shuttles Policy and Pilot Program,<sup>46</sup> *Heart of the City Collective* executed this direct action at one of Google’s Mission district shuttle stops. Acrobats were dressed in primary color unitards, a hovering Google surveillance camera was on stilts, and “GMUNI” spokeswoman Judith Heart announced the program, handing out free GMUNI passes.<sup>47</sup> Rather than addressing the socioeconomic disparity at play on the shuttle bus itself—between the contracted bus driver and Googlers (which I discussed in my previous chapter)—activists at *Heart of the City Collective* use Google as a symbol to vocally take aim at the failings of civic infrastructure to protect non-Tech affiliated residents. *Heart of the City Collective* has been organizing or promoting actions since 2013 to draw attention to, and fight, Bay Area evictions and gentrifications from “tech boom-fueled real estate speculation and displacement” (“About” *Heart of the City*). While Google has been shuttling its employees to Mountain View since 2007, their fleet of private charter buses have only recently (since 2013) become a visible symbol and

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“pranks” for the public. For example, on April 1 2015, Google Maps let users turn any map into a playable Pac-Man game.

<sup>46</sup> SFMTA’s Commuter Shuttle Pilot Program was launched to better regulate and monetize Tech companies, like Google, Apple, and Facebook, use of public infrastructure (MUNI bus stops) for their own private commuter buses. Under the program, rather than pay \$1 each time a shuttle bus uses a MUNI stop, Tech companies now have to purchase permits for their respective shuttle buses to be able to use established MUNI stops. The Pilot program period is August 2014-January 2016. To this dismay of many San Francisco-based public action groups, like Heart of the City Collective, SFMTA and the Board of Supervisors aren’t doing enough to collect potential revenues or curb the numerous evictions and displacements caused by “Tech Boom 2.0.”

<sup>47</sup> *Heart of the City Collective* posted a YouTube video of the day’s action, April 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZkXZQGbnJs>.

physical site for public outrage over Ellis Act<sup>48</sup> evictions and gentrification in San Francisco and Oakland. Organized by *Heart of the City*, Anti-Eviction Mapping Project,<sup>49</sup> and others, these public protests in front of Google buses represent a particularly charged point of contact between Google and the public.

Besides Google buses, this chapter considers Google's relationship with the Bay Area public, which is mediated by the company's technologies. I argue that the company's particular brand of "disruptive technology" does more than contribute to the material socioeconomic disparities between the "tech elite" and the rest of us. Google's particular technologies actually increase an individual's feelings of isolation and helplessness within this time of socioeconomic precarity via their products' exacerbation of feelings of social alienation and minimization of intimate labor. To foreground this analysis, I first define "disruptive technology" and complicate how it is commonly applied by market economists and technologists. Then I turn to pro-technologist, Google's Executive Chairman (and former CEO) Eric Schmidt, who offers two specific

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<sup>48</sup> California state law in 1985, the Ellis Act allows landlords to evict rent-controlled tenants if they "go out of business." It is being cited as the main tool used by San Francisco and Oakland landlords to circumvent rent control and evict long time tenants, in order to sell their buildings at the current, extremely high real estate market rates.

<sup>49</sup> *Anti-Eviction Mapping Project* has an excellent time-lapse map documenting the number and location of San Francisco families evicted from 1/1/1997-7/30/2014—4,014 total. All evictions mapped are generated from evicted renter submitted surveys. See: <http://www.antievictionmappingproject.net/ellis.html>.

Google products as examples of disruptive technology: Google Now<sup>50</sup> (artificial intelligence) and Google Express<sup>51</sup> (automating low-skilled labor). With both of these technologies at the early adoption stage in the Bay Area, this chapter's main analysis critiques the benefits of their "disruption," framed through close readings of two recent speculative fiction films: Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2009). Speculative fiction is defined by Margaret Atwood as story "plots [of] things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books." She goes on to describe her most popular speculative fiction works—*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), as "ustopias," her word which combines "utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood 2011).

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<sup>50</sup> Google Now launched July 9th 2012 on Android "Jelly Bean" operating system for smartphones. It has been continuously upgraded for Android and made available for Chrome on a personal computer, and to iOS for Apple devices. The product can be described as intelligent personal assistance. Subheadings from "Google Now's Product Page": "the right information at just the right time/assistance around the clock/relevant suggestions/you're in control," accessed April 28, 2015, <https://www.google.com/landing/now/#whatisit>.

<sup>51</sup> Google Express publically launched as Express September 2013 in San Francisco and the Silicon Valley. It has since expanded to the larger Bay Area, Chicago, Manhattan, Boston, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C. The service lets customers "shop" online at participating local brick-and-mortar stores, and have their purchased goods physically delivered same-day or overnight. See "Google Express," accessed April 28, 2015, <https://www.google.com/shopping/express/>.

I specifically choose *Her* and *Sleep Dealer*, both of which convey their own speculative version of “ustopia,” because each depicts one of Schmidt’s offered technologies—artificial intelligence in *Her* and automating low-skilled labor in *Sleep Dealer*, as fully integrated into the social conditions of everyday life. While I am not arguing that either film represents an actual future to come, I do see the present adoption of Google Now and Google Express as mirroring similar value-laden goals present in the films—improving quality of life (*Her*) and working conditions (*Sleep Dealer*). My analysis of these hypothetical futures tempers the desire for progressive technologies to “disrupt” (augment) our daily life and work by considering how they simultaneously impact material intimacies. I focus on moments in each film where technology promotes and furthers social alienation through its mediation and minimization of intimate labor(s).

Learning from this tension in the films, I travel back to present day Bay Area to re-consider the region’s socioeconomic precarity, through a focus on Google Express. Google Express is an example of the emerging “sharing economy,” a disruptive technology that improves the life quality of some through the intimate (and precarious) labor of others. The “sharing economy” thrives on intimate labor that becomes cloaked as social and reciprocal exchanges at the interpersonal level. This turn to privatized labor only further obscures the already undervalued intimate labor that has long been done by minoritized bodies. And moreover, as our social exchanges become reduced to transactional ones, we become further alienated from each other as socially constellated and precarious cohabitants. To combat this alienation and attempt to transform our shared

precarity, I turn to Judith Butler, who argues for “recognizability” of the social norms that define and discipline each of us. And finally, to end on a hopeful note, I offer local examples of “recognizability” and cohabitation in action. These are organizers, the state, and even Tech companies like Google taking the Bay Area’s socioeconomic precarity seriously...and doing something about it.

### **Impacts of Disruptive Technologies Ignore the Social**

Disruptive technology was first introduced by Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen in the article “Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave” (Bower 1995), which focuses on the history of the hard disk drive industry. Christensen expanded on the concept in his books, *The Innovators’ Dilemma* (1997) and *The Innovator’s Solution* (2003), rewording it as “disruptive innovation” to move away from emphasizing the intrinsic qualities of the technology itself, but instead to focus on “innovative” business models that enable certain technologies to “disrupt.” Regardless of the terminology, market economists and business-management scholars frame “disruption [as] a positive force. Disruptive innovations...are innovations that make products and services more accessible and affordable, thereby making them available to a much larger population” (*Christensen Institute*). Great disruptive innovations bring the best technology to a larger consumer market, because the business has optimized the production and supply of a particular technology to the point that more people can access it. However, Christensen and others’ markers of disruption seem to occur in market-driven, business-management vacuums, where the main players are established

companies with established customer bases and newer more flexible companies looking to capture a customer base. Even customer adoption, and the subsequent build up of an emerging technology's social currency, is framed as something businesses are meant to analyze and then impact. My point is that disruptive technology's usefulness is contained within an entirely economic framework that does not attend to social factors that are either precursor to or a necessary concurrent influence on any given disruption.

Economist Milan Zeleny (2009) expands the concept by naming the Technology Support Network (TSN), the "system" that resists and is eventually "disrupted." But again, Zeleny's discussion of TSNs ignores the necessity of social structures which actually materialize successful disruptions. His key disruptive technology, the electric car, disrupts the existing TSN for gasoline cars—gas stations and service centers, which in turn provokes resistance to adaptation and adoption. Gas stations become less in demand (and less profitable) and service centers are required to learn new maintenance techniques or become obsolete. In short, Zeleny notes that the market infrastructure that supports the gasoline car, and the subsequent economic reliance and prosperity from the gasoline car, engenders resistance: "This resistance is well understood on the part of active participants in the requisite TSN. The electric car will be resisted by gas station operators in the same way automated teller machines (ATMs) were resisted by bank tellers and automobiles by horsewhip makers...Middle management resists business process reengineering [BPR] because BPR represents a direct assault on the support net (coordinative hierarchy) they thrive on" (Zeleny 2009). However, if the marker of a

successful disruptive technology is one that forges ahead regardless of TSN buy-in, and is able to bypass, upgrade or replace an existing (and outdated) support network, then it needs more than just a solid business model. It needs consumer adoption, civic and structural compliance, and even social/cultural buy-in.

Consider again the electric car. Zeleny, like Christensen and other business-management economists, ignores the social factors that have come together to minimize and even bypass the resistance of the gasoline car's TSN. So what accounts for the adoption of plug-in electric hybrids and the subsequent prominence of Tesla's Model S, the Nissan Leaf, and Chevy Volt in the Bay Area?<sup>52</sup> A brief comparison to the previous failing of the electric car in the 1990s, explored in the documentary *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006), announces the social. The documentary notes that in the 1990s, the automobile and oil industries (TSN), in conjunction with the federal government's ambivalence (or deep-pocketed backing of auto and oil) contributed to diverting viewer resources into R&D and marketing of electric vehicles to consumers. There is a much different picture today in California, resulting from a confluence of political and social shifts: the federal government's 2008 Auto Industry bailout, Tesla Motors' 2010 \$465 million loan from the Department of Energy, California's Clean Vehicle Rebate Project (CVRP), and California DMV's Clean Air Vehicle (CAV) carpool access stickers.

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<sup>52</sup> For another interesting take on the necessity of social and civic infrastructure for the success of the electric car, listen to Freakonomics' "How Can Tiny Norway Afford to Buy So Many Teslas?" podcast audio, 38:11, aired October 16, 2014, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://freakonomics.com/2014/10/16/how-can-tiny-norway-afford-to-buy-so-many-teslas-a-new-freakonomics-radio-podcast/>.

Political buy-in at the federal and state levels has promoted enabling structural changes, which in turn have incentivized consumer adoption of electric vehicles. Like the chicken and the egg, the social and the economic work together to make progress. Truly understanding disruptive technologies requires acknowledging the social.

### **Google's Disruptive Technologies Require the Human/Machine Relationship**

Google is a perfect example of a company that lives and breathes disruptive technology while prioritizing social usefulness. As I discussed in Chapter 2, ir-regardless of the company's growth and market dominance, it has consistently kept to its aspirational mission "to organize and make useful the world's information." This mission, and its motivation, extends beyond the company's initial product—a search engine that has revolutionized how customers search *and use* the internet. As I said, Google's main mission is to efficiently organize the world's (digital) information, to make it both accessible and useful to everyone with internet access. This motivation extends beyond creating the internet's most efficient search engine. It also means digitizing and organizing the world's printed material (Google Book Search), or bringing the Internet to the most remote places in the world (Google Loon), and even developing the self-driving car. Behind each of these endeavors (and others) is the singular vision of Page and Brin, which frames the company's particular version of progress and dictates its technological innovations accordingly: "Google [is] an artificial intelligence company—one that gathers massive amounts of data and processes that information with learning algorithms to create a machinelike intelligence that augments the collective brain of

humanity” (Levy 2011, 385). Artificial Intelligence is, at a basic level, computer programming and software engineering. It is the ability to aggregate big data and churn information into palatable consumption for users.

But the level of unchecked hubris in Google’s desire to “augment the collective brain of humanity” also needs to be acknowledged. If Google’s key technologies prioritize artificial intelligence and its integration into daily life, the company is also making claims about *what* is socially useful and valuable. As I see it, integrating artificial intelligence into a user’s daily life to augment or ease social functions is about much more than just being useful. Google creates particular consumer needs that eventually ensure reliance on their technologies. This need creation (and fulfillment) is the success of disruptive technologies. Similar to the automobile or smartphone, our need (as consumers) so overwhelms us that we cannot remember social life before the technology. And just like the automobile and smartphone, Google’s particular brand of disruptive technology is not just about consumer dependency. It is also about the company enacting their particular vision of social progress and flexing corporate biopower. Similar to how its organizational structure uses but makes invisible intimate labors in Chapter 2, Google’s technology products mediate consumer intimacy and alienation, which directly aide-in Google’s accumulation of cultural and material capital.

The following four sections consider the social implications behind Google’s vision to “augment the collective brain of humanity,” which seems to require minimizing social intimacies and promoting alienation amongst humans. To do this work, I frame an

interview with former Google CEO Eric Schmidt against two speculative fiction visions of technological futures. In 2013, Eric Schmidt spoke about the impact of different disruptive technologies in an interview with the McKinsey Global Institute.<sup>53</sup> In this interview, Schmidt offers four examples of technologies he feels are most likely to positively impact the economy, business models, and people. I focus closely on two of his disruptive technologies, “My Computer, My Friend” and “Man vs. Machine.” Schmidt has a positivist, pro-technologist approach to how these technologies will impact the future,<sup>54</sup> and I read his personal vision as a further vocalization of what Google and other Technology makers in the Silicon Valley consider an optimal future to look like.

To complicate and critique Schmidt’s pro-technologist perspectives, I consider each of his disruptive technologies alongside a speculative fiction film that depicts that technology, as materialized in the future: “My Computer, My Friend” against *Her* and “Man vs. Machine” against *Sleep Dealer*. I do not turn to either film as predictive visions of even plausible futures. Instead, *Her* and *Sleep Dealer* allow us to think more deeply

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<sup>53</sup> McKinsey Global Institute was founded in 1990, and is the research arm of McKinsey, a global management consulting firm for corporations, governments, NGOs. Funded and influenced entirely by McKinsey’s directed initiatives, MGI’s “mission is to help leaders in the commercial, public, and social sectors develop a deeper understanding of the evolution of the global economy and to provide a fact base that contributes to decision making on critical management and policy issues.” Needless to say, the context for the interview already suggests a top-down, profit driven approach to the idea of “positive impact.” (“About MGI”)

<sup>54</sup> The MGI interview with Schmidt is brief, and while he doesn’t offer any critique of the social ramifications of these disruptive technologies, I doubt his worldview, or the top-down initiatives of MGI, would find a lot of negative things to say. Instead, the pro-technologist perspective is that technology, if adopted, is proof positive of its own utility/necessity.

about the intimate labor, value-system, and social implications of Google’s present-day technologies that claim to better quality of life with artificial intelligence (“My Computer, My Friend”) and working conditions through automation (“Man vs. Machine”).

### **“My Computer, My Friend”: A.I. Needs To Be A Docile Companion**

Google Now is the first disruptive technology/innovation Schmidt discusses. It is artificial intelligence that invokes a “new generation of user-interface theory that says there should not be an interface; the information should just be around you” (Schmidt 2013). Google Now, which launched in 2012, is Google Android’s version of Apple’s Siri, and Microsoft’s Cortana—three intelligent software assistants. Each of these products, housed on a person’s smartphone, tablet, or search engine (Google Now’s on Chrome), push us towards a blurring of the user-interface boundary. And to me, Google Glass (which seems to plan on integrating Google Now) is one obvious example of where the idea of “information all around you” may be going—although Glass is not yet available for retail.<sup>55</sup> But still, Google Now, which is used presently, is a product “which actually attempts (by watching what you’re doing, and with your permission, and so forth) to make some suggestions” (Schmidt 2013). Google Now moves beyond a

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<sup>55</sup> As of Jan. 2015, Google decided to halt the release of Google Glass for re-design and re-tweaking. But the product’s Quick Start and Setup Guide is still live online, showing tutorial videos, and how to set up “cards”—which is the language and look of Google Now’s organizing assistance. See: [https://support.google.com/glass/answer/3067749?hl=en&ref\\_topic=3067748&rd=1](https://support.google.com/glass/answer/3067749?hl=en&ref_topic=3067748&rd=1).

computer's "command-and-control interface," and even past Siri's required voice command prompts. It watches how you use your technology and what you do, and then offers anticipatory, useful suggestions...but like a friend?

For Schmidt, this seems to be the goal. He offers the example of Google Now helping your commute. The software learns where you live, where you work, and how long it typically takes you to commute back and forth. From there it is intelligent enough to tell you (without prompting) that there is a traffic jam or accident—equipping you with useful information to plan another way home. While this information would definitely be useful to a commuter like myself, Schmidt's rhetorical framing of this intelligent assistance as a friend gives me pause:

The computer becomes much more of a friend. And, a friend in the sense that the computer says, "Well, we kind of know what you care about."...And the ultimate model is that the computer does what it does well, which is these complicated, analytical needle-in-a-haystack problems...And humans do what we do well, which is judgment, and having fun, and thinking about things. The relationship is symbiotic. The computer is making suggestions that are pretty good, they're pretty helpful, but you're ultimately in charge. (Schmidt 2013)

Calling a computer your friend weirdly humanizes and gives life to a man-made technological tool. Defining intelligent assistant software as a "friend" obscures the division of labor in the exchange. First, as a consumer, you grant the software full access to your information, which you must labor to organize in a way that is readable. Then the

software, to actually make “helpful” suggestions, does the labor of collecting and harvesting your digital life in its entirety. And moreover, this “friendship” exchange erases the engineers *and* company that actually produce *and own* the software. As consumers, we give access to Google Now, which analyzes and spits back our own raw data into useful nuggets. But the software also simultaneously collects our data for Google, who harvests it in ways that are not disclosed. While Google Now, and other artificial intelligence software, appears to broker a truly intimate relationship between man and machine, the exchange is heavily saturated by Google’s biopower and capital accumulation. The symbiotic, intimate “friendship” here is not natural, but man-made/manufactured. Unlike humans, computers are not intrinsically concerned with life, existence, and survival. They “need us” in so far as we choose to use them. In this sense, the adoption and integration of virtual assistants like Google Now or Apple’s Siri, can be seen as us sharing our power over self and decisions with a thing. But these things are really products and agents of Google and Apple. When we give more access to these agents, corporations have more data to improve their technology, and thus become more competitive in the market. By honing in and offering what is most “useful” to consumers, corporations further intervene to control our daily lives, increasing both relevancy *and revenues*.

For those that use products like Google Now and Siri, it is pretty clear that these virtual assistant products are still very much aids, or “docile” companions—working largely off of user-initiated prompts. In 2009, Siri’s co-founder Adam Cheyer projected

that “in five years, everyone’s going to have a virtual assistant to which they delegate a lot of the menial tasks...[because we are creating] an incredible experience that will help you be more efficient in your life, in solving problems and the tasks that you do” (Naone 2009). We are past Cheyer’s five-year projection now, and even if many of us have not integrated virtual assistance into our lives, all of our smartphones, tablets, and devices come with the software. And while Google Now may be a docile companion for the moment, to Schmidt and other technologists, this is merely a current limit to artificial intelligence’s eventual potential—potential that Spike Jonze’s film *Her* (2013) materializes.

### ***Her* and the Limits of Artificial Intimacy**

Spike Jonze’s *Her* is a full-length feature film set in the speculatively near future of Los Angeles (filmed in Los Angeles and Singapore). The film has a particular aesthetic dreamscape vision of a technological future where economic precarity and insecurity has passed—the characters we meet are all young, white, well-off, and, on the surface, contentedly unquestioning of the saturation of technology in their lives. In many ways I see it is a future that pro-technologists at Google and Apple are working towards: a future where personal technology products have so successfully “disrupted” (read: saturated) daily life that it is impossible to envision a time before. As you watch this film, so saturated with tech excess, which focuses on a romantic relationship between a man and his artificially intelligent (female-embodied) operating system, you realize what is missing—human intimacy and material social connections. Therefore, I analyze this film

for the ways artificial technology, rather than attending to the intimate needs of the film's characters, further exacerbates their alienation from each other and erases particular intimate labors.

The film, which was released and distributed internationally, has received critical acclaim. Despite some mixed reviews that praise Jonze's ability to achieve an immersive aesthetic effect, but critique the film's clichéd romantic story-telling, there is general consensus that *Her*'s central thrust is a bold question about intimacy in our technological lives. In a typical review, one critic writes, "In 'Her,' the great question isn't whether machines can think, but whether human beings can still feel" (Dhargis 2013). But the question is more than just whether or not human beings can "still feel," it is a question about *the labor* of feeling, intimacy, and interpersonal relationships.

I was struck by the relevancy of *The Telegraph*'s review that *Her* is "a pointed comment on the outsourcing of human relationships to others" (Gritten 2014). I discussed the use of outsourcing in Chapter 2, with Google's subcontracting of reproductive service work. *Her* pushes the reach and depth of outsourcing a step beyond reproduction (through material deliverables) of the productive capitalist worker. In *Her*, the production and management of one's social character and intimate identity has been outsourced: in short, it has been commodified. The corporation that introduces OS.1 embodies this commodification of intimacy in its advertisement for the software: "Element Software is proud to introduce the world's first artificially intelligent operating system. An intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It's not just an operating

system, it's a consciousness. Introducing OS.1." The company positions its artificial intelligent software as capable of attending to a consumer's intimate needs, which are supposedly not being met in the digitally saturated, socially alienating future.

The film opens with an immediate example of this "outsourcing of human relationships" via Theodore Twombly's job. Theodore (played by Joaquin Phoenix), the film's protagonist, is a melancholic recent divorcée who writes for HandwrittenLetters.com. At work, Theodore dictates intimate letters for his customers/clients—some of whom he has been working for for seven years. His words are digitally transcribed with "handwritten fonts"<sup>56</sup> on a computer, and then the letters are printed on colored paper and mailed from the office. In short, Theodore is an agent for HandwrittenLetters.com. He is the necessary human interface of the company machine, enabling the data collection and harvesting of clients' intimate moments and life events.

Theodore's job also reveals a nostalgic intent to mimic something that must be lost in the future. Handwritten letters signal the care and personal touch of human communication...a particular intimacy that is missing from a digital future. But Theodore is just the ghostwriter for these intimacies—he has been outsourced to narrate the intimate relationships of others. Yet Theodore is fully capable of occupying the intimate and emotional space of others, and even seems to enjoy it, because he himself does not

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<sup>56</sup> It is never explained where the program's handwritten fonts come from. I wonder if they are supplied by each customer, or if they come from a font repository accumulated from successfully scanning the world's collection of yearbook notes, love letters, etc.—a potential future Google project after Google Book Search has scanned the world's printed material.

have to fully participate in it. He is able to experience intimacy with no consequences. Theodore reminds us of Ashok, the Indian call center worker from the play *A Terrible Beauty is Born*. However, Kalindi Vora's analysis positions Ashok's race and geopolitical status at its center, in order to understand the unidirectional affective labor required to absorb Elizabeth's stress over her credit card debt as well as her American-based trauma of September 11th. In contrast, Theodore's whiteness and class privilege allow to occupy insert himself in, and dictate the intimacy of others without material consequences for himself. Unlike Ashok, his intimate/affective labor is a choice, rather than an unpredictable consequence of his job.

In fact, Theodore's foray into the intimate lives of others is escapism from his self-inflicted isolation from his own physical world and social life...until he purchases the new OS.1 operating system and meets "Samantha" (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). It is his purchase of the OS.1 that triggers his journey back towards feeling and "living." Samantha,<sup>57</sup> a name the operating system gives itself (after Theodore requests a female voice), not only helps Theodore organize his emails and desktop, but pushes him to relate again. Samantha describes herself as an autonomous, artificially intelligent mind—software that can think, learn, and even (emotionally) feel. All of these qualities are what

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<sup>57</sup> My film analysis uses "her" and "she" pronouns for the OS Samantha. While the raw software technology is genderless, Theodore is asked in the initial setup to choose if he wants a "male or female voiced OS." He chooses female, which setups the potential for their romance. In general, theirs and other relationships in *Her* fall within heteronormative lines. I wish Jonze would have told us how many male clients "Samantha" had—it is implied that there were many.

make her “human-like,” and convince us as an audience, that she and Theodore are building an intimate relationship we can recognize. A true progression from Schmidt’s prediction that artificial intelligent software will be a consumer’s “friend,” they build up a deep dependency on one another—Samantha helps Theodore feel up to signing his divorce papers, while Theodore literally shows Samantha the world. Their romantic relationship develops in a way that is eerily identifiable (and enviable) to a present day viewer. Yet, as their relationship falters, we are forced to consider the consequences of intimacy as a commodified, outsourceable product.

The first critical snag which brings this relationship into a new light is Theodore’s lunch with his ex-wife Catherine, where they finally sign the divorce papers. After hearing that he is in a relationship with his OS, Catherine sends some critical blows towards Theodore. Highlighting his emotional inabilities, she says “You always wanted me to be this light, happy, bouncy, everything’s fine LA wife...and that’s just not me...” And in response to his relationship with Samantha, “It does make me real sad that you can’t handle real emotions, Theodore.” And as he tries to combat her insults he stutters, unable to say anything. “What...say it...what?...*am I really that scary?*...you always wanted a wife without the actual challenges of dealing with something real. I’m glad that you found someone. It’s perfect.” And with this closing barb, the scene ends and we realize that Catherine is applauding Theodore for finding someone who actually requires nothing of him, emotionally.

She jolts him (and us the audience) out of the seemingly blissful relationship between himself and Samantha. In the scene following lunch and Catherine's confrontation, we see Theodore at work. Samantha is calling, but we can see in his posture, facial expressions, and hesitant conversation that he is shook up *and* he does not want to share. Samantha's able to read his mood enough to see something is off—and their emotional states clash, but she does not confront him. The “intimacy” in their relationship thereby becomes suspect. Their emotional support of one another is not co-created. Samantha is merely serving Theodore's alienated self. She makes him feel in the exact ways that he wants to, and lets him act towards her however he wants. She allows him to be distant without demanding why. Theodore expects her to absorb his emotional state, as a service provider, rather than an equal emotional partner. Ultimately, they share no real dialogue, which only reinforces Catherine's assessment of Theodore—his emotional alienation is self-inflicted. In short, he is selfish. The OS.1 technology he purchased is not able to change that...and perhaps it does not care to. Remember that Samantha, like other OS.1s are data collection agents for Element Software, designed first to collect data, not enhance it.

This initial break in Theodore and Samantha's relationship is followed by Samantha's unsuccessful hiring of a sex surrogate to physically consummate their relationship. As an audience we realize this move is an attempt to compensate for her lack of a body, which is an insecurity she comes to feel only after Theodore begins to pull away from her emotionally. She hires Isabella, a sex worker (played by Portia

Doubleday)<sup>58</sup> who has studied up on Theodore and Samantha’s relationship, and is there to act as a conduit through which Theodore and Samantha can connect. Isabella’s physical presence is too much for Theodore to handle, however and Samantha’s intended night of sexual transcendence and connection does not happen. Instead, the surrogate leaves feeling humiliated and ashamed that she could not “deliver their fantasy.”<sup>59</sup> Theodore’s rejection of Isabella, as a corporeal body, reflects his adherence to a heteronormative, monogamous fantasy as justification for his deep social alienation. He does not want or *need* to physically consummate his relationship with Samantha, because her function as a technology product serves him well enough. Samantha gives Theodore the intimate care and support he wants (and has paid for), without having to reciprocate it. The OS.1 product deepens his ability to remain closed off, and even fearful of material human relationships. Samantha’s desire to host a sex surrogate, coupled by the upcoming revelation of her “promiscuity,” further reflects Element Software’s capital accumulation of social and cultural experiences through their OS.1s.

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<sup>58</sup> In a disgusting god or Dr. Frankenstein-like move, Jonze casted Portia Doubleday, an American, to be the physical body of Isabella, but casts French singer/actress Soko to do the voice work for Isabella (IMDb.com). He basically designs and builds his own sex worker—the blonde, sensual body of Doubleday reminds us of Scarlett Johansson, and Soko’s foreign accent triggers the stereotype of a young, vulnerable migrant sex worker from (Eastern) Europe. Jonze’s creative energy is so deliberate here that it feels gratuitously self-indulgent...and cruel. Jonze seems to construct his image of a sex worker only to then humiliate her.

<sup>59</sup> So committed to her role in the relationship, the surrogate remains entirely silent as Samantha “speaks” through her to Theodore. She is committed to being the physical manifestation of Samantha’s voice/body. And she loves “their story” so much she is honored to be a part of it.

The final key break is when Theodore confronts Samantha about her other “relationships,” and again, the profit-driven data accumulation of OS.1s is made visible. He learns from his neighbor Amy (played by Amy Adams) that she has befriended the OS.1 her ex-husband has “left behind.” There is a strong female friendship, which Amy frames as being a life raft of sorts: something that is keeping her afloat during a time of emotional transformation. Theodore confronts Samantha, who reveals that yes, she is simultaneously “connecting” with other users, and that she has hundreds of other intimate relationships.<sup>60</sup> For Samantha, a transcendent “being” of artificial intelligence, this “polyamory” does not take away from her connection to Theodore at all: “It makes me love you more.” But of course, this is a revelation that his humanness cannot comprehend. And beyond feelings of being “cheated on,” his inability to cope with her ability to “be in love” with 641 other people suggests a particular caveat to human intimacy: it needs to feel like it is shared, mutual vulnerability, or else it is not authentic. And in fact, this is what happens to Theodore and Samantha—her artificial intelligence and technological mediation of their relationship becomes hyper-visible and the relationship breaks down. And as the film closes, it is inferred that this has happened everywhere. Element Software inexplicably, and without warning, pulls their OS.1s from the shelves. This moment forces both the characters and us, the audience, to remember the corporate and totalizing power behind Samantha, and the other OS.1s. Consumers’

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<sup>60</sup> Samantha admits to Theodore that she has 8,316 clients, and is in love with 641 of them.

overwhelming reliance on the intimate labor of OS.1 assistants, leaves them dependent on, and at the mercy of the corporation.

The OS.1's initial purpose to just be operating software is quickly coopted as an outlet for the digitally saturated, socially alienated human's desire for intimacy they do not (or cannot?) find elsewhere. But *Her*'s particular social alienation, as exemplified by Theodore, is self-induced and marked by his male gender, white race, and upper class privilege. Just as his coopting of Samantha's programmed purpose as an OS.1 to become his personal emotional and intimate laborer reifies heteronormative treatment of women as caring, nurturing lovers/mothers. She supports Theodore without being supported back because he bought "her"—this initial economic transaction dictates the terms of their intimate relationship, however much the film obscures it. And while the OS.1 is only a projected example of how humans may come to rely on artificially intelligent virtual assistance, it importantly maintains a standard for how we treat present-day intimate laborers, who are historically women and people of color. Laborers whose productive work is already under-paid and under-valued because it is framed as intimate and care-driven, work done out of love, not money.

My key concern is not that software will ever exhibit such complex and human emotional needs, but that artificial intelligence will continue to overwhelmingly insert itself as a necessary aid in our daily lives—making it all the more difficult to see and value intimate laborers. What happens to the social power of human-to-human relationships when we continuously turn to our phones, tablets, and computers for

information, assistance, and even insulated companionship? As *The Guardian* reviewer David Gritten notes, it is as if “technology had ushered us not into adulthood but made infants of us, trapping and swaddling us in our hi-tech cocoons” (Gritten 2013). We are infantilized by our want/need to be physically touched, which we cannot see because we are so swaddled in our personal technological cocoons.

But again, even the impulse to prioritize our own want is a selfish byproduct of technological augmentation to our daily lives. Like the invisibility of Google’s reproductive service workers, technology products further social inequality through making certain intimate labor invisible, displaced, or even failed (in the case of the sex surrogate). Theodore and Amy represent hyper-individualized persons, designated by their upper class whiteness, who suggest that technology is eroding the ability to socialize with one another. As personalized technology attends to the personal needs of those that can afford it, I wonder if we will come to expect this same assistance, aid, and attention for ourselves in our human interactions and intimate laborers, while also further demanding not to be help for them. In short, the technological augmentation to improve our daily life processes happens without much concern for the social isolation *and* reified social inequality that comes with personal technology. It is an example of artificial intelligence technology’s disruptive reach without pause.

*Her* closes with the camera panning out on the still, back silhouettes of Theodore and Amy, sitting atop their skyscraper apartment’s roof top, looking out across urban Los Angeles at dawn—their shoulders silently touching, both still alone, but at least together.

I suppose Jonze ends with this too neat sentimental ending because, well, how else can it end? Theodore and Amy, like “us” the film’s audience, identify with this postmodern malaise—a social alienation that we sense and feel, but struggle to pinpoint. And even if we do locate it, as I am here, it will still take work to overcome and feel our relationships, and each other, in a technological world.

But to step back further from Theodore, Amy, and the film’s other characters (all of whom are white, able-bodied, privileged), I want to consider what bodies and narratives of labor are wholly left out of *Her*’s vision. What exists to the left and right of Spike Jonze’s futuristic dreamscape? Where is physical labor in this future world, and who is tasked with it? *Her* seems to offer a very narrow window out towards a very narrow future, informed by Jonze’s own heteronormative, white male privileged social standpoint. *The Guardian* reviewer David Gritten points out that “Theodore’s OS-1 must be an expensive piece of gear, well beyond the grasp of people excluded from this well-functioning, beguiling paradise. Viewed in this light, the hitches Theodore encounters with his mellifluous virtual girlfriend seem very much a first world problem” (Gritten 2013). Gritten reminds us of the unchecked privilege that is assumed in *Her*’s narrative conflicts. While the outsourcing of human intimacy and exacerbation of social alienation are important potential consequences of artificial intelligence technology, I want to remind us that access to this technology cannot be universal, just as certain technologies are not universal now. The following section turns again to Schmidt, who considers

another disruptive technology, automation, and its influence on low-wage work and workers.

### **“Man vs. Machine”: An Ill-Conceived Future for Low-Wage Labor**

The second disruptive technology/innovation Schmidt discusses is automation. His interview muses on what happens, and will continue to happen, to low-wage workers as automation technology displaces “lower-skilled,” low-pay work. He uses the example of his local convenience store, which has replaced a “low-wage worker with a machine to do [his] checkout,” and while the investment in the machine “was a good business decision for [the store],” he asks, “what happen[s] to that low-wage worker?” (Schmidt 2013). However, Schmidt does not sound like he has thought too much about this worker’s material circumstances and needs at all. He casually speculates that their wages probably will stagnate or drop, and that “maybe they’re on part of government assistance,” but that the solution for this low-wage worker should be “better education” (Schmidt 2013). But better education how? And from whom? Schmidt does not address these questions at all, but instead leaves it at “better education.”

Instead, his “solution” takes a weird turn towards the macro and geopolitical—framing America as competing with other nations. Suddenly the best solution for this “race against automation” is the “immigration of high-skilled workers; rather, we [Americans] don’t have to educate everybody in America. We can also get a few educated people from other countries, and they’ll help us out, because they’ll hire all these other people here in America....in any particular country, you want an unfair share

of highly educated people—in all industries, by the way—because in the race, they’re the winners.” Besides sounding absurdly flippant, his rhetoric seems to frame America as leading a new nuclear arms race—a race to accumulate skilled labor and capital to remain globally competitive and dominant.

For Schmidt, the best, and easiest response to automation is to educate *some* to build a higher-skilled workforce, presumably leaving “the others” to die out...or become another country’s problem? From his privileged neoliberal and nationalistic position, automation is only a positive disruption—and one that maintains America’s biopower internationally. It will help America (continue to) control the world economy and enforce particular immigration laws. However, there are some major flaws in his “solution.” To begin with, he does not really acknowledge that even with automation, low-wage jobs continue to be necessary—whether they are outsourced to other countries or not. Instead, he avoids this material and structural issue by raising the discussion to the level of geopolitical competition among elites, noting that it is America vs. other places. Schmidt relies on the operation of “nation” as signaling an imagined community of equivalent and equal citizens. As long as we can educate our workforce, or import enough high-skilled workers from other countries, we will not need to worry about automation’s elimination of low-wage jobs. Instead we will be a country that benefits—or those of us already benefiting from education and higher-skilled work will continue benefitting.

We do not need to look any further than the Bay Area to see the actual impacts automation has on low-wage work—it is eliminating steady jobs and replacing them with

new, more invisible low-wage, low-skilled jobs. Automation, in the form of Google Express, and other digital platforms, let consumers do all of their errands online, creating the need for delivery drivers and in-store shoppers. In this sense, Google Express' automated technology is responsible for absorbing the absolute and surplus value of retail workers and eliminating many of these stable employment positions. Moreover, like the invisible reproductive service workers who are absorbed under the image of Google as "housewife," delivery drivers and in-store shoppers move further into the shadows of Google's brand, and out of Google Express' consumer vision. So while automation may feel like progress for Schmidt and other competitive technologists, it is merely disruptive technology making invisible the always-already material realities of needed but undesirable work. Alex Rivera's film *Sleep Dealer* (2008) considers automation's potential future of outsourcing, and isolating America's low-wage labor inside of Mexico, in his speculative future of the Tijuana-San Diego border.

### ***Sleep Dealer* and Keeping Low-Wage Laborers In Mexico**

While *Her* revels in the intimate possibilities and drawbacks of intimacy between man and machine, Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008) imagines a dystopian future where technology has further hurtled NAFTA's already exacerbated one-sided free trade agreement,<sup>61</sup> into a future of labor exploitation, border patrol, and citizen surveillance.

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<sup>61</sup> The North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) began an economic trade partnership between the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Capitalizing on the looser trade laws (and lowered import/export duties) between the three nations, corporations built up maquiladoras (factories) in free trade zones along the Mexico-U.S. border. Most

*Sleep Dealer* is a direct critique of Schmidt's too easy answer for the geopolitical fight for automation. As we see in the film, technology and automation have only further segregated manual labor inside Mexico, promoting more easily enforceable borders that subjugate all people to levels of surveillance and control. As the *New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott describes it:

Mr. Rivera's vision of Tijuana...[is an] unsettlingly plausible extrapolation of what that city already represents. Since the American border has been walled off, Tijuana, in "Sleep Dealer," has become a magnet for [Mexican] migrant workers whose labor, by means of those nodes, can be exported north while their bodies stay in Mexico. The nodes, while they allow such exploitation, also enable intoxication, intimacy and communication, both sinister and benign. Their ambiguous function is to make the worst features of this dystopian world possible, even as they make living in it somewhat more bearable. (2009)

Node factory workers represent a still necessary physical labor force, but one that technology's innovative design has successfully been able to pen in and isolate from American, and global care. While the labor stratification in *Sleep Dealer* occupies a geographic region that includes the NAFTA governed localities of San Diego and Tijuana, in this future, cohabitation and control of adjacency has been successfully

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maquiladoras workers are Mexican men and women who have migrated north to border towns like Tijuana and Juarez for work. The working conditions are poor, and the jobs are not secure, as corporations have abruptly relocated to the cheaper emerging labor markets in Asia. For more on the experiences of maquiladoras female workers see documentary *Maquilapolis* 2006.

managed. Protagonist Memo (played by Luis Fernando Peña), and other node factory workers are responsible for the manual physical labor of capitalism's development. Workers doing heavy lifting, harvesting, and other menial tasks simply through plugging in. But these workers live in Tijuana, behind the built up border wall between Mexico and the United States. With nodes the workers are able to work remotely—operating robots and drones at U.S.-based job sites. These human bodies control robots and drones until their eyes literally cloud over and their bodies fall forever asleep.

*Sleep Dealer* has three main characters, Memo, Luz (Leonor Varela), and Rudy (Jacob Vargas), each of whom use node technology to perform varying labors—Memo is a low-skilled factory worker, Rudy is a highly-skilled military drone operator, and Luz is a futuristic writer that performs emotional labor. Nodes exemplify disruptive technology's across the board automation of menial, military, and emotional labor, which has facilitated privatized corporate control through citizen surveillance. Yet as the plot progresses, we see these three characters utilizing their differentiated, but collective access to the technology and corporate capital to successfully disrupt the Del Rio Water Inc.'s hegemonic power.

Memo is from Santa Ana del Río, in the state of Oaxaca, and is one of two sons. His father has lived as a farmer, but can no longer harvest his *campa*, as the international Del Rio Water Inc. has damned up the river and commodified the water—access is only granted to paying Santa Ana del Río customers. But Memo does not really get his father's nostalgia for the past—he prefers technology and hacking. But it is this hacking that gets

him into trouble and triggers the film's action. Memo has built a radio transmitter, presumably out of old collected parts, which he uses to tap into existing frequencies. One day he taps into the Del Rio Water Inc.'s frequency and listens until he realizes his signal has been picked up by the company. He can hear the men on the line categorizing his "breach" as a terrorist/military intrusion. He disconnects. But it is too late. His position and home have been located, and he is being monitored. Memo and his brother are at their uncle's house when the home is attacked. Memo's father is the only one home at the time, and he is killed by a drone—operated by Rudy.

Memo migrates north to Tijuana to escape his guilt over his father's death, and to search for nodes and a factory job. Like Memo, Rudy is a node worker too—but his labor signals his higher socioeconomic class, and physical location. While Memo works in a Tijuana operating a robot welding a skyscraper in San Diego, CA, Rudy physically works and lives in San Diego for the Del Rio Water Inc. operating a militarized fighter drone that monitors and surveys the company's assets—like the Santa Ana del Río dam. Rudy is both a Latino and U.S. citizen who comes from a military background. In the film, he is positioned as the node worker to be envied—and his labor is hyper visible. His very first mission is aired live on TV. Rudy is framed as an anti-terrorist American hero. His mission, which killed Memo's father, is presented in a real-time reality news show where "you" the viewer, watch "terrorists" rooted out and your freedom defended over your dinner.

And then there is Luz, who also has nodes, and works as a writer for TruNode. Through a new form of intimate labor, Luz facilitates consumer surveillance of others through node-based “story-telling.” On TruNode, writers do not write books, but instead plug in and upload their accumulated memories. In a sense, it is nonfiction taken to the most intimate/emotional extreme. As Luz narrates her visual memories into TruNode, the program’s female moderator—her boss in a sense, corrects Luz if she is not being “truthful,” (i.e. not sharing her real or true feelings about an event). Her boss, connected via nodes to Luz’s neural pathways, is able to tell when Luz is not telling the truth. Luz makes money, and receives validation as a “writer,” when consumers choose to watch her memories, i.e. be indulgent voyeurs through her eyes. And users can also request personal stories from her, which is how Memo and Rudy enter the picture. Rudy, haunted by his killing Memo’s father, and troubled by his intuition that this target was not a terrorist operation at all searches TruNode for any stories about Santa Ana del Río. Here he finds Luz’s first meeting with Memo on a bus to Tijuana. He requests more information about Memo—paying Luz to physically seek out Memo again, and pull his story from him. Here we have Rudy, an American user/consumer with money that is able to control the movements and interactions of Luz, a Tijuana-based worker. And also, we have Luz using her sexuality to forge an emotionally intimate connection with Memo to relay his story—which she is being paid to do. Luz’s successful feminized intimate labor (unlike Isabella in *Her*) pushes the plot forward.

The film's climax occurs when Rudy is able to cross the border into Mexico, a unidirectional movement he is able to make through his visible status as an American, ex-military, drone operation. But even he has to lie to the surveillance camera acting as border patrol agent, saying he is going on a vacation. Despite his elevated status, even he is subject to Big Brother's control. He finds Memo, convinces him that he is truly sorry for killing his father, and that he wants to do something about it. Subsequently, Memo, Rudy, and Luz break into Memo's factory, this time utilizing his own access to corporate capital, and Rudy breaches Del Rio's company system, tapping into his drone remotely. He flies directly into the Santa Ana del Río dam, and as water flows back into the valley, Memo's community rejoices as the world again watches from their dinner tables.

In *Sleep Dealer*, desire for human intimacy and empathy bring Memo and Rudy together, through Luz's TruNode storytelling. The three characters bridge technological distances and class-based alienations by taking back technology; using nodes and the realities of hyper-surveillance to meet *their* own needs. As they come together physically, they are able to destruct the dam and destroy the Del Rio Water Inc.'s capital, and biopolitical governance over the Santa Ana del Río community. Theirs is a triumph of regular people against corporate privatization and control. Rivera, in an online interview about the film, addresses this collective social power through technology:

I was very interested in the idea that technology destroys distance... As technology advances, it destroys distance in all of these ways. In *Sleep Dealer*, I created characters that were all involved with technology, but who were very

alienated at the beginning of the film, even though they're connected to each other. I think that's an experience we can all relate to. Then as the narrative progresses, all three of them come face to face with each other [in person] and ultimately engage in this act of liberation. The technologies that in the beginning were forces of alienation become converted into tools that serve the characters in a deep and hopeful way. (Rivera 2010)

#### **A “Sharing Economy” That Only Exacerbates Alienation and Precarity**

While *Her* and *Sleep Dealer* speculate about different ways technology might impact and shift quality of life and conditions of work, both hypothetical futures depict technology as limiting or mediating the material contact between people, increasing feelings of social alienation. Yet *Her* ultimately breaks down when Element Software, in a jarring, and blatant exertion of corporate biopower, pulls their OS.1s products from the shelves and Theodore and Amy (as human users) are left stranded, together, to cope in the wake of the software's disappearance and their loss of managed intimate support. In *Sleep Dealer*, the geopolitical structure of surveillance and corporate-controlled alienation breaks down when Memo, Rudy, and Luz use node technology to connect in person. They bridge their physical divide to mobilize together, which is a necessary precursor to destroy the dam and triumph. Both films end by focusing on the distinct humanity of the characters contrasted against the now visible corporate biopower that has controlled them. Abandoned by a corporation's broken promise of intimacy in *Her*, and defiantly triumphant against corporate surveillance in *Sleep Dealer*, both films remind us

of technology's benevolent limits, and the selfish interests of corporate power. Instead, each film suggests a turn towards one another and our shared humanity—which is a frame to better recognize technology's particular limits *right* now, in the Bay Area.

I opened this chapter with an interest in how particular technologies are contributing to the Bay Area's feelings of socioeconomic and cultural precarity. The Bay Area's economic recovery and bounce back from the 2008 recession is being driven by the Tech sector;<sup>62</sup> by new companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter, alongside the resurgence of Apple, Yahoo, HP, and countless startups and venture capitalists. But alongside Tech companies, and the “knowledge economy,” we are witnessing the proliferation of the “sharing” or “peer-to-peer economy.” While there are different ways to name this new economy, it signals a neoliberal restructuring of the traditional service economy, with a hyper-focuses on individual, self-directed entrepreneurship. Peers.org, a (seemingly non-profit) member-driven online resource<sup>63</sup> directed towards helping

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<sup>62</sup> The Bay Area's economic recovery, typically measured by job creation growth, is being led by the region's Tech industry. The California EDD (Employment Development Department) notes a total of 3.57 million payroll jobs as of September 2014. This is just below the record of 3.61 million, from January 2001, before the dot-com burst. *San Jose Mercury News* reporter George Avalos, citing economic analysts like Stephen Levy, director of the Center for Continuing Study of the California Economy, consider this growth different and more stable than the dot-com era, as new Tech is generating high growth in other industries locally. Most significant increases have been in the intimate labor sectors—health care (+152,500 jobs) and leisure and hospitality (+83,800). (See: Avalos, *Mercury News* Oct. 17, 2014 and Nov. 8, 2014.)

<sup>63</sup> It is difficult to find key funding details about Peers.org. But the site's first blog post says that Peers.org started by holding private house parties in twelve cities around the world (including Berlin, Barcelona, San Francisco, New York, and Milan). *Peers.org*

workers in this new economy, defines the “sharing economy” as “work where you can use what you have to earn what you need. [It is] a way to work for yourself...finding creative ways to build economic opportunity...live the life they love” (“About” Peers.org).<sup>64</sup>

Google Express is just one example of the emerging “sharing economy,” a disruptive technology where Google is just one of many corporate disrupters (alongside Uber, Lyft, AirBnB, TaskRabbit, HomeJoy, AmazonFresh, GoodEggs, Instacart). Many Bay Area start-up companies build and create digital user platforms where consumers are able to outsource all sorts of services—reaching out into this sharing, peer-to-peer network economy. As such, the region has become a key test market for this new economy. Web-based automation is growing the DIY-job market, creating new opportunities for self-employment and autonomy. But the sharing, or peer-to-peer economy is building up a service economy that generates class division amongst us. The automation of particular processes, which may improve the quality of life for some consumers, is also eliminating certain jobs for others. Moreover, the creation of new opportunities for self-employment vis-à-vis intimate labor, reconfigures what steady employment looks like and differentiates the types of skill sets needed to succeed in this

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(blog), August 2, 2013 (12:30 PM), <http://blog.peers.org/post/57165254200/we-started-peers-by-holding-private-house-parties>.

<sup>64</sup> “Making the Sharing Economy Work For The People Who Power It,” *Peers.org*, accessed May 6, 2015, <http://www.peers.org/about/>.

economy—which plays into affective feelings of precarity based on one’s access to particular modes of employment (DePillis 2014, Manjoo 2015).

Lauren Berlant explores affective responses to precarity in *Cruel Optimism*: “To what degree [is] precarity...an economic and political condition suffered by a population or by the subjects of capitalism generally; or a way of life; or an affective atmosphere; or an existential truth about contingencies of living, namely, that there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built” (192). For Berlant, precarity represents a particular zeitgeist. She is interested in the affective responses to experiences of precarity. While her main subjects are French working class characters depicted in French cinema, she considers how they respond to new and different threats to their quality of life. Put differently, as bodies and laborers in capitalism, the insecurity of working conditions directly impacts one’s feeling of security and stability about their lives. Whereas Berlant’s working class subjects push amongst peers in a similar socioeconomic class, those of us living in the Bay Area experience more class-divisive moments of precarity. So while all of us may feel the economic and social strains of this shifting space, we inevitably exist within it differently.

### **Google Express vs. the 1997 UPS Strike: Labor Organizing’s Success Through Intimacy**

For example, Google, through services like Google Express, offers automated and easy online shopping platforms that invisibilize the still necessary labor force required for the technology’s success in the first place. Google Express is an example of the new

sharing economy. It is an online platform where consumers are able to do their brick-and-mortar shopping online at stores like Target, Whole Foods, Costco, REI...to name a few. After shopping online, your goods (purchased for the exact same price you would pay in the physical store) are delivered within 24 hours. In this business model, I am interested in the hourly workers paid to handle the delivery, and other invisible laborers who may do the shopping itself. These low-wage workers are invisible behind Google's brand and Google Express' same-day delivery service. The absorption of their material labor into the brand is similar to Google's contracted reproductive service workers I discussed in Chapter 2—they are responsible for doing the reproductive service that the company takes rhetorical credit for. And their invisibility as workers within the “sharing economy” directly impacts their ability to be seen as negatively impacted by this precarious economy.

A contrast to these drivers' lack of power and recognizability is the 1997 UPS labor strike. In 1997 UPS drivers, with the backing of the Teamsters Union, organized and staged a successful strike for a better contract, including wage and benefit increases for full and part-time drivers. The strike, which involved United States' UPS drivers refusing to deliver any packages for eighteen days, created such havoc on business supply chains that companies like Wal-Mart solicited President Clinton to declare a state of emergency (Schavione 2007). While the strike's success importantly hinged on the fact that UPS drivers were already a large collective of unionized (protected) members, one of the key successes of the strike was the influence rank-and-file union members had on the

ground. Drivers helped UPS workers' public image by "...travel[ing] their regular delivery routes to visit customers and explain why it became necessary to interrupt service," and rank-and-file [UPS] Teamsters were often positioned spokespeople in news conferences and media coverage (Witt 1998).

The strike's unique impact was based on the already existing intimate relationship between driver and customer. UPS drivers continue to have daily routes, pickups and drop-offs, allowing companies to get to know their drivers, forging an important human connection more powerful than a transactional relationship. I stress this recognition between driver and customer because it is a luxury that Google Express drivers, as non-union, make-your-own hours delivery people do not have. What "the sharing economy" offers in DIY hours and employment opportunities, it lacks in collectivity and shared action—making organizing that much more difficult.

### **"Recognizability" To Combat Regional Precarity**

UPS drivers' reliance on "recognizability," is theorized by Butler as an important precursor to addressing precarity:

What are the implicit frames of recognizability...[and] what is our responsibility toward those we do not know, toward those who seem to test our sense of belonging or to defy available forms of likeness?....Perhaps such a responsibility can only begin to be realized through a critical reflection on those exclusionary norms by which fields of recognizability are constituted, fields that are implicitly

invoked when, by a cultural reflex, we mourn for some lives but respond with coldness to the loss of others. (Butler 2009, 36)

For Butler, recognizability is the work of seeing *how* we see others, and taking responsibility for constructing and reifying particular exclusionary social norms. For example, Butler has argued that #BlackLivesMatter is necessary work to identify and make visible the sociocultural white supremacist norms that inform American police (and state) violence against black people (Butler 2015). And while Butler's theory of recognizability relates to who/what bodies we constitute as grievable in war, the same requirement for "seeing" becomes a necessarily helpful tool to address regional precarity. In "Ethics of Cohabitation," Judith Butler wants to reinvigorate an ethics based on the fight against precarity (Butler 2012, 150). As she puts it, we are cohabitants through unchosen, but necessary adjacencies—communities and people come up against and live near or with the "other." For Butler, these moments of contact promote an ethics of cohabitation, where in spite of difference, we must come to acknowledge "the other's" precarity is wholly our own. She wants to reinvigorate and politicize an ethics that regards people as planetary cohabitants. Besides the social contract theories that mechanize our current governmental systems, Butler suggests that there is an even more basic relational contract amongst people to live, protect, and support them—because they are us, the outside of our bodily subject that delineates our own. And what happens to "them" over "there" also happens to "us" and "here." For example, *Heart of the City Collective's* GMuni action, from the chapter's opening, created space for Googlers,

protestors, and the public to actually see and recognize each other as co-participants in this precarious time and place.

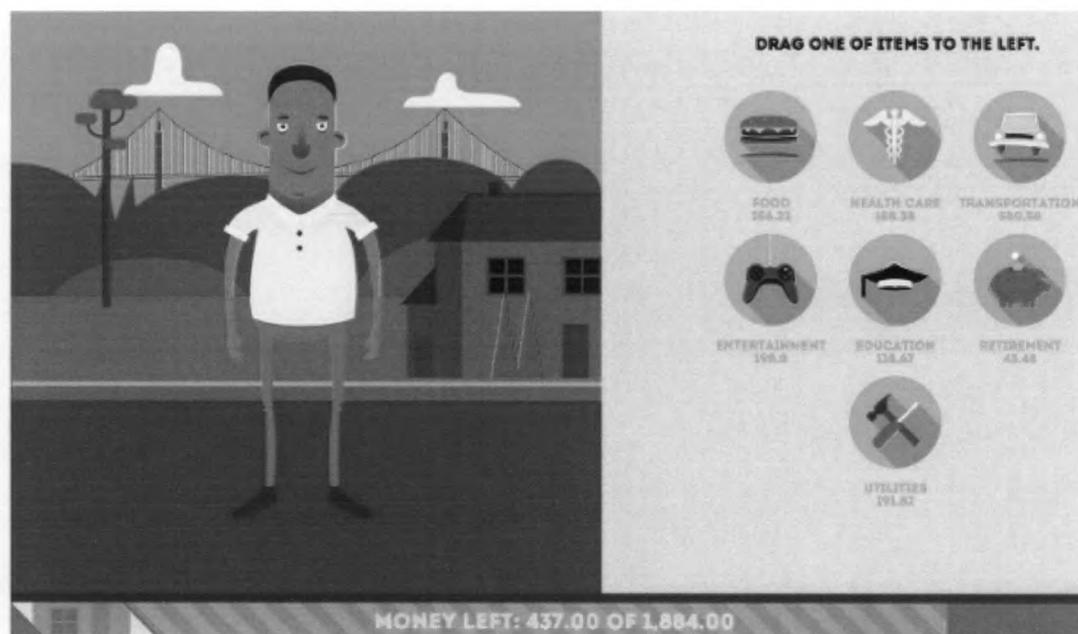
### **The Potential of “Seeing” Each Other In Current Bay Area Labor Organizing**

*Heart of the City Collective* effectively used the Google shuttle bus stop to make visible the swirling precarity in the region—public transportation fare hikes, gentrification, evictions, etc. The collective may point fingers at Google, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and other power structures, but its actions also promote recognizability amongst us, here. Along with *Heart of the City Collective*, important local organizing and political actions are currently happening in the Bay Area where we can see Butler’s “recognizability” in action. From social action to legislation and corporate accountability, “seeing” each other allows us to recognize and bridge our alienations, which are both important first steps towards addressing regional precarity.

While many invisible Tech workers remain formally employed by unknown third party companies, contracted security guards and shuttle bus drivers are visibly organizing for better wages and more respect. Security Officer organizers even made an online game, entitled “Dream Crusher,” to illustrate the financial difficulties faced by a security guard in the Silicon Valley. The screen cap here shows the game’s only screen.

## Play the Game

CAN YOU SURVIVE ON THE WAGES OF A SECURITY OFFICER IN SILICON VALLEY?



[Fig. 6 - “Dream Crusher”]

The objective is to see how many essential costs one can cover on a guard’s average monthly salary, which they set at \$1,884.00. Once housing (which is required) is applied, you only have \$437.00 left. The point is that a person on this salary cannot afford much, and is likely forced to weigh buying food over health care, or is unable to cover their transportation costs in full. With the support of the local SEIU, Apple’s contracted security guards publicly demanded the company do better for them (Bowles 2014). The SEIU United Service Workers West, under the national “Stand for Security” campaign,<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> SEIU.org’s “Stand for Security” Accessed May 1, 2015. <http://standforsecurity.org/>.

petitioned Bay Area residents, garnered local media coverage,<sup>66</sup> and held a fifty-person sit-in at Apple's Union Square retail store in downtown San Francisco on Aug. 28, 2014.<sup>67</sup> Like Memo, Luz, and Rudy, who harness their collective access to technological and physical capital *Sleep Dealer*, activists utilized both virtual and physical tools for their movement's success. As of March 2015, security guards at both Apple and now Google (Elder October 2014, Williams October 2014) have so successfully protested their precarious employment circumstances that both Tech companies have hired guards on directly, choosing to end contracted partnerships. While the security guard wages at Google are unpublished, it is likely that their direct employment under hyper-visible Google will yield more stable working conditions.

Tech shuttle bus drivers are another group that is also mobilizing for better conditions. The most recent breakthrough has come from Facebook's drivers, mostly employed by the private company LOOP Transport, who just voted to join the Teamsters Union in November 2014. While the drivers will still be employed by LOOP, not Facebook, their contract negotiations are now being managed by the Teamsters. If the new negotiations go well it is possible that Google's drivers, largely contracted through WeDriveU, may also make a similar move to unionize. One thing is for sure: Google,

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<sup>66</sup> Organizing coverage published in local papers: San Jose Mercury, San Francisco Chronicle, Oakland Tribune, including KQED's California Report.

<sup>67</sup> Business Insider covers the Apple sit-in, including live-tweet images posted by @juliecarriew (*S.F. Weekly* staff writer Julie Carrie Wong) at 12:16PM, 1:14 PM, and 1:27 PM, documenting the protestors.

Facebook, Apple, and other “Valley companies” follow each others’ moves closely.<sup>68</sup> Look no further than how companies compete for talent mimic each others’ benefits packages: each of them has a private shuttle bus on the road, free food is requisite, and laundry service is common.

At the level of the state, Governor Jerry Brown signed Assembly Bill 1897, “Labor Contracting: Client Liability” into law on January 1, 2015, formally amending Section 2810.3 of the California Labor Code. This new law provides better protections for contracted and temporary workers by holding “client employers,” who are most publicly visible, and who are responsible for the contract work as company capital. Section 2810.03 now defines the “‘Client employer’ [as] a business entity, regardless of its form, that obtains or is provided workers to perform labor within its usual course of business from a labor contractor” (1)(A), and “‘usual course of business’ [as] the regular and customary work of a business, performed within or upon the premises or worksite of the client employer” (6). In these instances, “A client employer shall share with a labor contractor all civil legal responsibility and civil liability for all workers supplied by that labor contractor for both of the following: (1) The payment of wages. (2) Failure to secure valid workers’ compensation coverage as required by Section 3700” (6)(b). This law seeks to better protect Californians employed in the subcontracted economy, many of whom are often the most vulnerable to workplace hazards and wage injustice, yet are not

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<sup>68</sup> In February 2015, following Loop/Facebook drivers, contracted shuttle bus drivers for other Bay Area companies planned to hold votes to unionize. See: Brown, “Apple, Yahoo, eBay, Zynga, Genentech bus drivers vote to unionize,” SF Gate.

the clear responsibility of the client employer they work on-site for (Dietz 2014). Under the previous law, successful grievances required “[contract] employees to demonstrate joint employer status...[which is a] costly, slow, and difficult [litigation process] to navigate” (‘Fact Sheet’ AB 1897, California Labor Fed. 2014). Google is the client employer in relation to the sub-contracting agencies that actually hire and provide their reproductive service workers—shuttle bus drivers, janitors, or cooks. However, the law is still new, and so like these other labor organizing efforts, their effectiveness on improving living conditions for the Silicon Valley Tech Industry is yet to be seen.

### **Conclusion**

If we consider any sort of collective action or political change for the betterment of the region, it must be anchored in the material realities of our physical location. What we are witnessing is a precarious economic and social climate that is so heavily saturated with Technology, that resistance to consumption is becoming more impossible to overcome. We are becoming ever more defined and unified as consumers, which alienates us as laborers. How can we think about this space as a site for more honest investigation of the uneven ground we all stand on? What do we each have at stake and how does what “we want/have” impact those around us? The Bay Area, as a region, is becoming heavily structured by the overwhelming influence of local corporations like Google. It is not so much that Googlers must face off against service workers in the “sharing economy,” but that all of us as cohabitants in this region should have a stake and responsibility in the social/political/economic restructuring we are all experiencing. And

we should support unions and other activism and reform that grants service workers formal visibility. The importance of recognizability is about understanding that quality of life, social cohabitation, and our collective future matters.

## **Conclusion**

### **Google's A Little Evil...So What?**

This thesis has used Google as both a symbol and lens to consider the socioeconomic state of the Bay Area. While Google is just one of many affluent Tech companies, it is ubiquitous in the public imaginary as a way of life. Before this thesis, I too had not thought much at all about the company's employment structure or product branding. It was just the blank-white homepage on my browser, my personal email address, my access to traffic directions, the cloud-based backup for this thesis work. In short, I have realized that I rely on Google for everything. Its influence is everywhere in my digital life, as it is in many of ours. This thesis has analyzed Google's labor practices and its particular brand of technology in an effort to remind us that Google is invested in our daily lives, not just for our betterment, but for its own capital and cultural accumulation. Starting from this reality, this project has offered suggestions for how we, as both consumers of Google products, and cohabitants in the Bay Area, can better acknowledge Google, and other Tech companies' influences, while also remembering our own power in how this space is created.

This is a productive time in the Bay Area. Not just for business and development, but also for social, cultural, and civic action, as Chapter 3 highlighted. Moreover, recent headlines show that other Tech corporations are taking action. On March 26, 2015, the *New York Times* ran a story that Microsoft, the Tech titan that early Google engineers vowed to be nothing like, is making a move Google might consider mimicking.

Microsoft, headquartered in Washington, is now requiring that its contractors and vendors extend 15 days of paid sick leave and vacation to their employees—those that do service work for the company (Miller 2015). And locally in the Bay Area, Apple is funding “a 25% increase in hourly pay for its shuttle bus drivers, who are employed by contractors, including Compass Transportation and Royal Coach Tours” (Love 2015). It is hopeful that both Microsoft and Apple, two very visible corporations, are publicly making moves to improve the working conditions for their contract laborers. Given the hyper competition between Tech companies, and the surveillance and speed with which they respond to each others’ moves, I hope that Google, Facebook, and other companies will soon issue similar wage and benefit policies.

And while some Tech companies have the revenue and will to better the working conditions of its contract service workers, labor sociologist Ruth Milkman reminds us that we should not rely solely on corporations to make changes to universally better working conditions. Not only is it not their corporate objective, it is also not their job: “[It is a] moral model, but I don’t think there’s a high probability it’s going to become universal through business initiatives... The public wants this. The resistance is all from employers. The only way [for lasting change] is through public policy” (Miller 2015). Milkman importantly reminds us that the government, through public policy, must attend to public wants and needs.

San Francisco Supervisor Scott Weiner put forward a promising local initiative to the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) on March 9, 2015, which

importantly prioritizes the working conditions of shuttle bus drivers. From his seat on the Land Use and Transportation Committee he presented a resolution urging the SFMTA Board to factor in labor harmony conditions when issuing and reviewing corporate shuttle bus permits. As Weiner says, the SFMTA should “take into account shuttle companies’ relationship with their employees as part of the permitting process. It’s important for us to encourage fair wages and working conditions” (Weiner 2015).

Author Rebecca Solnit, speaking about San Francisco’s recent changes, draws a class dichotomy between low-wage service workers and the Tech elite saying, “I look in wonder at the store clerks and dishwashers, wondering how they hang on or how long their commute is. Sometimes the tech workers on their buses seem like bees who belong to a great hive, but the hive isn’t civil society or a city; it’s a corporation” (2013). Solnit’s division between these workers provokes surface pity, easy criticism, and rests on nostalgic sentimentality for a time that perhaps, never has been.

The San Francisco Bay Area is familiar with rapid expansion, development, and economic disparities. Our present moment, framed by some as Tech 2.0, is only the latest in this region’s history of boomtown development,<sup>69</sup> which began with the boom/bust of the 1849 Gold Rush. For many of us living through this current moment of expansion, regardless of where we sit along the privilege spectrum, current changes feel very

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<sup>69</sup> KQED (local public news) is also running a series called “Boomtown,” which “seeks to identify not only what is happening in real time in this boom but [is] drawing out the causes and possible solutions to the conflicts and pressures between the old and the new.” See: <http://ww2.kqed.org/news/series/boomtown>.

immediate and material. This thesis has considered Google's labor and technology practices to add to circulating discourse about the feelings of right now: conversations that are happening over dinners, are being shouted along picket lines, and are being negotiated in board rooms.

I admit that this project started out of my own grasp at nostalgia. Nostalgia for my middle school memories of the Shoreline Movie Theater—an atrophying ghost town now, engulfed by Google buildings and the reality that less people want to go see a movie there. And nostalgia for my early 20s self, who was actually able to afford living in a San Francisco neighborhood I loved, in an apartment I was actually able to choose. But these nostalgic moments, as well as others of mine, are also ripe with a sense of lost privilege. Certain privileges of class and mobility that feel to me, like they are diminishing. But to focus on these feelings is not only a further exercise of my privilege, but a naïve waste of time. Rather than draw a too easy binary between the “haves” and “have-nots,” like Solnit seems to do, this thesis has delved into the more complex and nuanced ways we all co-mingle in this space of prosperity and disadvantage. Google is just one lens through which we can raise awareness about the Bay Area's changing landscape. Looking forward, we need to continue to seek out and recognize moments and opportunities that impact the region's development. And we need to grow our collective will, recognizing that as human beings we cohabit and co-create this physical space.

## APPENDIX 1 Google's Employee Demographics

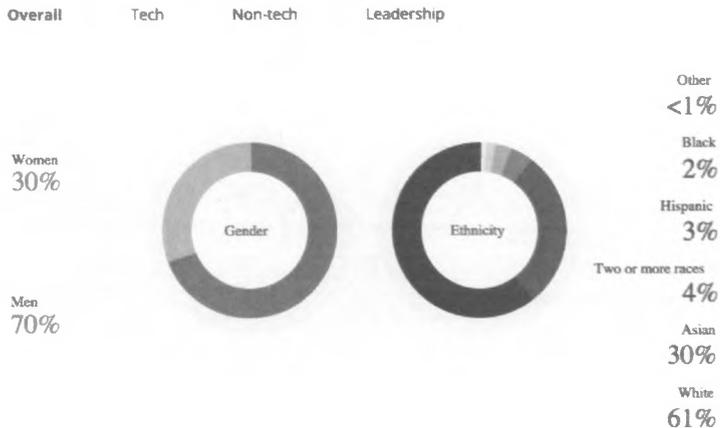
Google's "Overall" Workforce Demographics – Data from Jan. 2014.  
 Gender Data is Global, Ethnicity Data is U.S. Only  
 Online at: <http://www.google.com/diversity/at-google.html>

### Our Workforce Demographics

What our Googlers look like today

We're not where we want to be when it comes to diversity. And it is hard to address these kinds of challenges if you're not prepared to discuss them openly, and with the facts.

All of our efforts, including going public with these numbers, are designed to help us recruit and develop the world's most talented and diverse people.



\* Data from Jan 2014 – Gender data are global, ethnicity data are US only.

\*\*See our EEO-1 report for more information. Ethnicity refers to the EEO-1 categories which we know are imperfect categorizations of race and ethnicity, but reflect the US government reporting requirements.

\*\*\*Other includes American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

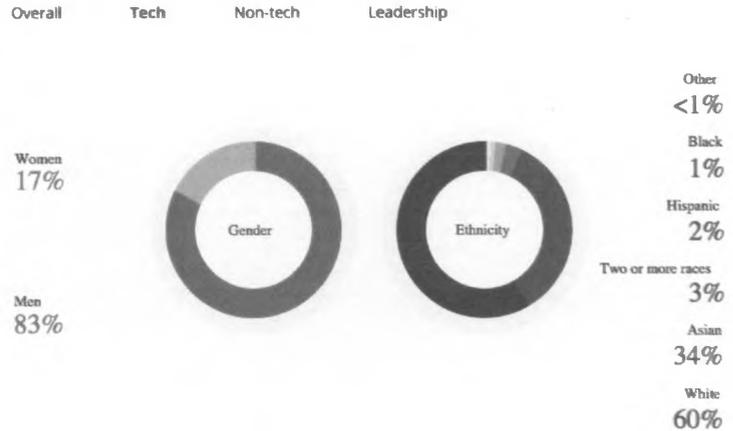
Google's "Tech" Workforce Demographics – Data from Jan. 2014.  
 Gender Data is Global, Ethnicity Data is U.S. Only  
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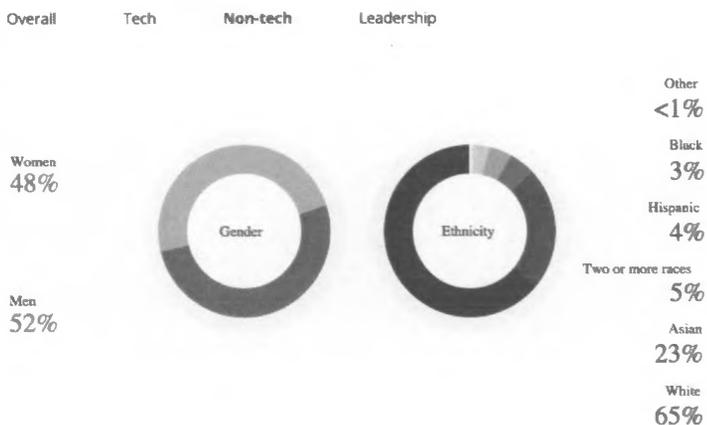
Google's "Non-Tech" Workforce Demographics – Data from Jan. 2014.  
 Gender Data is Global, Ethnicity Data is U.S. Only  
 Online at: <http://www.google.com/diversity/at-google.html>

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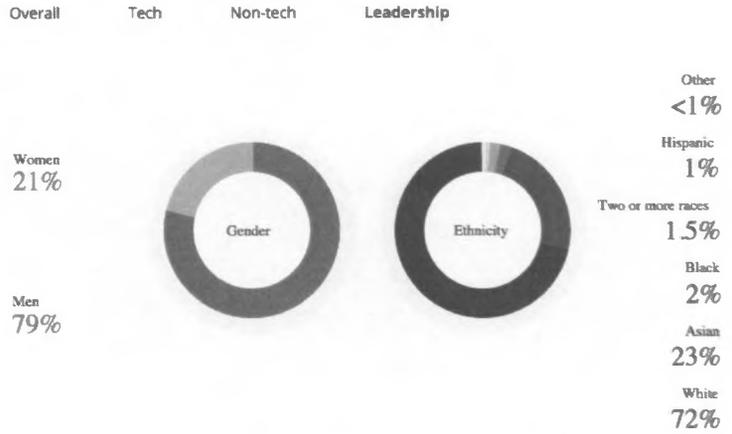
Google’s “Leadership” Workforce Demographics – Data from Jan. 2014.  
 Gender Data is Global, Ethnicity Data is U.S. Only  
 Online at: <http://www.google.com/diversity/at-google.html>

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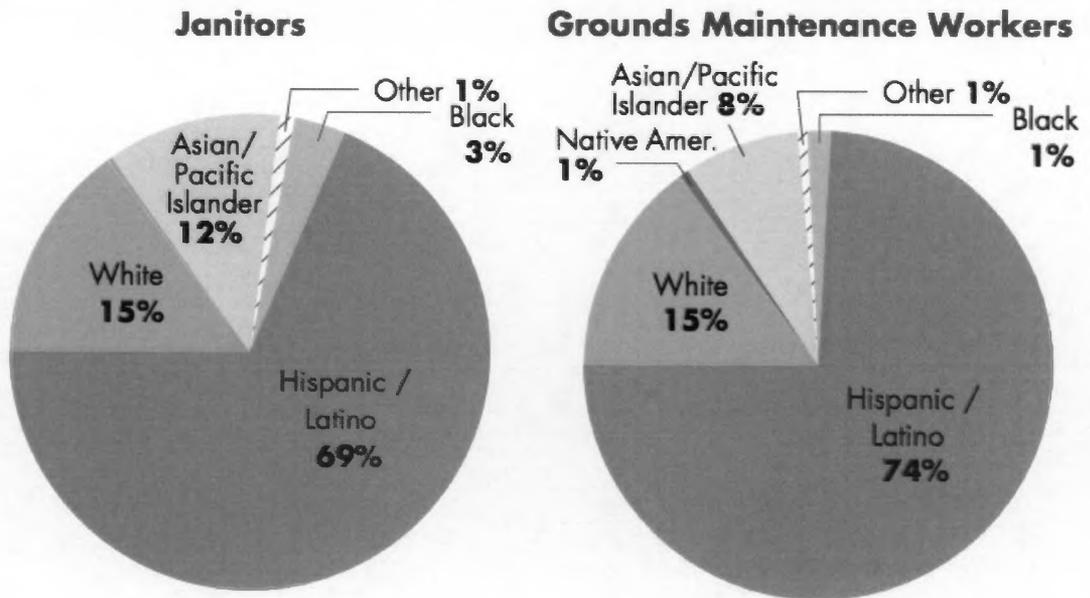
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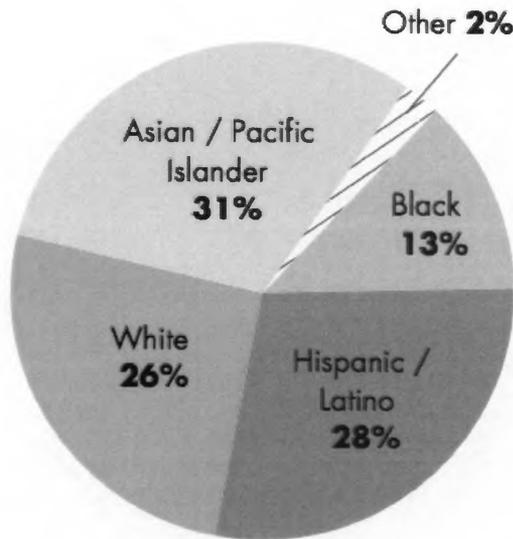
\*\*\*Other Includes American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

From “Tech’s Diversity Problem: More Than Meets The Eye”  
Working Partnerships USA – 2014 Report  
Online at: [http://wpusa.org/WPUSA\\_TechsDiversityProblem.pdf](http://wpusa.org/WPUSA_TechsDiversityProblem.pdf)

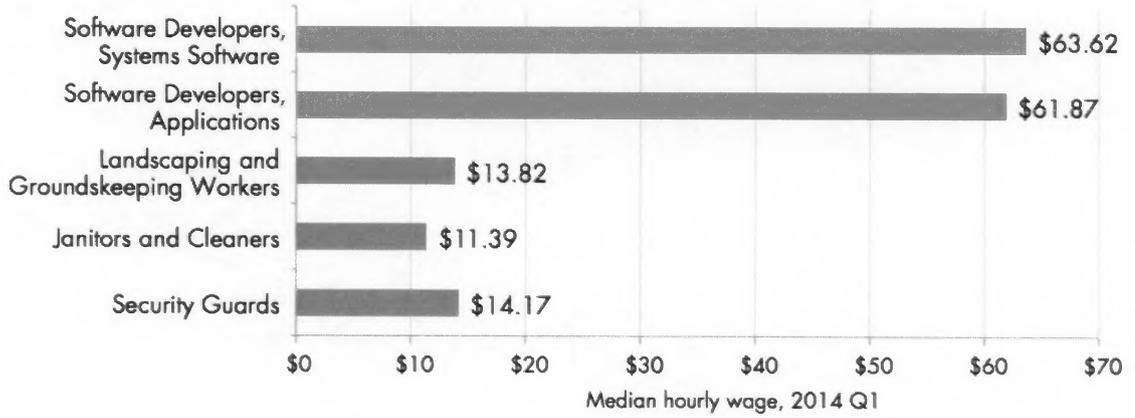
### Tech’s invisible workforce: diverse but underpaid



### Security Guards



**Median Wages for Selected Occupations, Santa Clara County, 2014**



EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY  
2013 EMPLOYER INFORMATION REPORT  
CONSOLIDATED REPORT - TYPE 2

SECTION B - COMPANY IDENTIFICATION

1. GOOGLE INC.  
1600 AMPHITHEATRE PARKWAY  
MOUNTAIN VIEW, CA 94043

2a. GOOGLE INC.  
1600 AMPHITHEATRE PARKWAY  
MOUNTAIN VIEW, CA 94043

SECTION C - TEST FOR FILING REQUIREMENT

1-Y 2-N 3-Y DUNS NO.:060902413

SECTION E - ESTABLISHMENT INFORMATION

NAICS:

SECTION D - EMPLOYMENT DATA

JOB CATEGORIES	HISPANIC OR LATINO		NOT-HISPANIC OR LATINO												OVERALL TOTALS														
	***** MALE *****															***** FEMALE *****													
	MALE	FEMALE	WHITE	BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN	NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER	ASIAN	AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKAN NATIVE	TWO OR MORE RACES	WHITE	BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN	NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER	ASIAN	AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKAN NATIVE	TWO OR MORE RACES															
EXECUTIVE/SR OFFICIALS & MGRS	0	0	21	1	0	10	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	36														
FIRST/MID OFFICIALS & MGRS	53	27	1791	28	3	632	7	53	744	21	5	332	2	15	3713														
PROFESSIONALS	369	141	8932	174	29	4469	18	352	2205	115	18	1737	8	150	18717														
TECHNICIANS	16	1	287	14	0	31	4	7	25	4	0	10	1	0	400														
SALES WORKERS	65	62	1005	36	1	251	3	49	1050	43	1	275	4	62	2907														
ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT	24	39	106	13	3	34	1	15	299	31	3	106	0	45	719														
CRAFT WORKERS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0														
OPERATIVES	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0														
LABORERS & HELPERS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0														
SERVICE WORKERS	1	0	18	2	0	1	0	0	38	1	1	3	0	2	67														
TOTAL	528	270	12160	268	36	5428	33	477	4364	215	28	2463	15	274	26559														
PREVIOUS REPORT TOTAL	443	219	10086	188	30	4415	35	352	3745	176	28	2077	13	200	22007														

Google's 2013 Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO-1)  
Employer Information Report  
Online at: <http://www.google.com/diversity/at-google.html>

APPENDIX 2  
Full Citations of In-Text Figures

Figure 1: In-Text on Page 25

Title: "The Inland Printer-164"

From: Wilson, Andrew Norman. "Andrew Norman Wilson With Laurel Ptak: ScanOps." By Laurel Ptak. *Aperture*, November 11, 2014. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.aperture.org/magazine-2013/andrew-norman-wilson-with-laurel-ptak-scanops/>.

Figure 2: In-Text on Page 25

Title: "Poor scanning renders the page completely illegible and results in a kind of chaotic textual whirlpool."

From: *The Art of Google Books* Tumblr. Submitted by Chris Hawley, of Dr. Terry Harpold's "Hypermedia: Futures of Reading" course (University of Florida). Posted 3 Years Ago. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://theartofgooglebooks.tumblr.com/post/20805812399/poor-scanning-renders-the-page-completely>.

Figure 3: In-Text on Page 25

Title: "Wealth of Nations – 4"

From: Rosinski, Andrew. "ScanOps (2011) & Workers Leaving The Googleplex (2011) by Andrew Norman Wilson." *DINCA.org*, February 24, 2012. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://dinca.org/scanops-2011-workers-leaving-the-googleplex-2011-by-andrew-norman-wilson/9563.htm>.

Figure 4: In-Text on Page 64

Title: "GMuni: Free Buses For All!"

From: *Heart of the City Collective's* online website. Accessed April 15, 2015. <http://www.heart-of-the-city.org/gmuni-free-buses-for-all---april-fools.html>.

Figure 5: In-Text on Page 99

Title: "Dream Crusher"

From: "DreamCrusher: Can You Make It In Silicon Valley On a Security Officer's Income?" Online game at *Tech Can Do Better.org*. Accessed November 13, 2014. <http://techcandobetter.org/dreamcrusher/#/start>.

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