

# INSUFFERABLE TOOLS

FEMINISM AGAINST  
BIG TECH



**SARAH**



**SHARMA**

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**BUY**

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**SARAH SHARMA**

**DUKE**

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**For Aishat, Dana, Rawan, Tala, Talla, and Yasmine**  
as you flourish and fight

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# Contents

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Introduction.	
“The Sex Organs of the Machine World”	1
1. The Woman in Tech: A Useful Device	31
2. The Tools in Mommy’s Basement	66
3. And the Machine World Will Deliver Him His Wealth	99
4. Broken Machines: Toward a Feminist Technological Determinism	123
Conclusion. A Techno-Feminist End to the Insufferable Tool	151

*Acknowledgments* 157

*Notes* 161

*Bibliography* 171

*Index* 205

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# Introduction

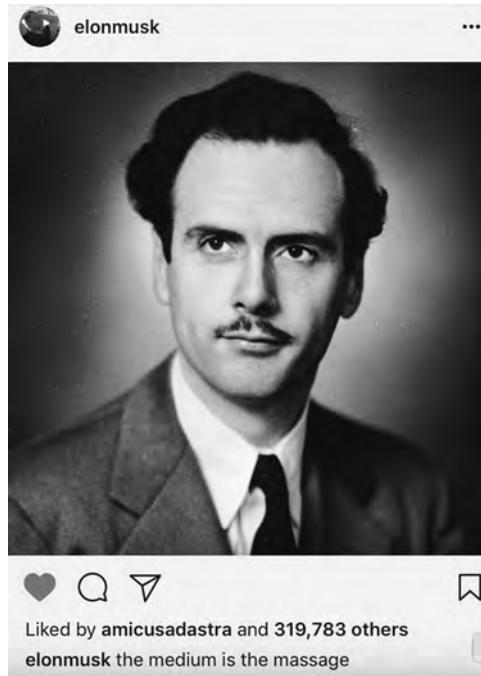
“The Sex Organs of the Machine World”

## But Never the Tool

Shortly after Elon Musk launched his Tesla Roadster into outer space on February 6, 2018, via his SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket, he tweeted an uncaptioned author photo of *Wired*'s patron saint of the internet and anointed father of media studies, Marshall McLuhan (fig. 1.1). In 1964, the University of Toronto English literature professor had risen to mainstream fame for transforming academic and popular understanding of media. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan stated, “Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. The machine world reciprocates man’s love by expediting his wishes and desires, namely, in providing him with wealth.”<sup>1</sup> McLuhan’s proposition that man becomes the sex organs of the machine world was meant to describe the animating and coproductive nature of technology and human life. Man might be the driver of technology, but neither technology nor man could exist apart. This media insight has become rather perverted when it comes to the distorted vision of the world’s richest tech giants, who have seriously taken to their roles as the sex organs of the machine world and are overt in their patriarchal impulses to occupy the frontiers of technological innovation.

Elon Musk, along with Jeff Bezos, an American businessman best known as the founder of Amazon, the world’s largest e-commerce and cloud com-

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**FIG. I.1** Elon Musk posts author photo of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan from *The Mechanical Bride* on Twitter and Instagram, June 25, 2018.

puting company, and second richest person in the world, and Richard Branson, English business magnate, have been engaged in a years-long “my spaceship is bigger than yours” competition. In 2019, Jeff Bezos unveiled Blue Origin’s Blue Moon lunar lander, which was designed to deliver cargo to the Moon. Bezos has long maintained that we must leave Earth in order to save it, and that his plan to develop space colonies for millions of people to live and work in, while developing new resources to meet growing demands, is the only way to protect Earth. He claims he will move all heavy industry off planet, and that Earth will be zoned residential and industry light.

Elon Musk, who is often referred to as the inventor of the future, with his founding roles at SpaceX, OpenAI, Tesla, and Neuralink and at one point Trump’s senior adviser at the helm of the brand new 2025 Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), has suggested the only way to overcome a mass extinction event is to inhabit outer space. The gravity of this situation doesn’t deter him from making a few little penis jokes along the way. After Bezos landed his lunar lander, Musk tweeted at Bezos, “Oh stop teasing, Jeff.” His tweet included a winky face emoji with a photoshopped image of

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**FIG. 1.2** Elon Musk tweet where the company name of the Blue Origin lunar lander is edited to say “Blue Balls.” Tweeted with the comment, “Oh stop teasing, Jeff,” followed by a winking emoji. Source: Mashable India.

Blue Origin renamed “Blue Balls” (fig. 1.2).<sup>2</sup> In 2021, when NASA awarded SpaceX the contract to land on the Moon over Blue Origin, Musk teased Bezos again: “Can’t get it up (to orbit)” (fig. 1.3).<sup>3</sup>

For Richard Branson, the British business magnate, entrepreneur, adventurer, and founder of Virgin Group, his interest in space is commercial and experiential, less about escaping Earth in order to save humanity and more about pleasure. His website for Virgin Galactic shares with McLuhan the sentiment that man is free to encounter a world of unending technological possibility once he accepts himself as an object of media. Branson’s company boasts, “Spaceflight has the unique ability to shift our perspectives, our technology, and even our trajectory as a species.” His own iconic approach, more poetic and subtle than those of Bezos and Musk, has him mounting varied landscapes with one of his chosen vehicles. He is often holding champagne at the same time. In 2021, he drove an amphibious car across the English Channel while wearing a tuxedo. This was reminiscent of a prior publicity stunt for Virgin Cola in 1994 when he drove a tank

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**FIG. 1.3** Elon Musk mocks Blue Origin losing a NASA contract to SpaceX by implying that Jeff Bezos is impotent in Twitter thread with text “Can’t get it up (to orbit) lol.”

through a wall of Coca-Cola cans. Fancying himself a bit of a James Bond, he rappelled down the Virgin Galactic hangar in New Mexico while drinking out of a champagne flute.

Jeff Bezos took frontier mythology to a new level when he donned a cowboy hat and boots for his mission to outer space (fig. 1.4). During this expedition in 2021, he was the subject of intense internet ridicule due to the unusually extra-phallic rocket he had used to travel to outer space. *Slate* interviewed a rocket scientist to inquire whether or not Bezos’s hyperphallic rockets were necessary. The interview determined that the rocket shape was coincidental, a mere matter of function.

Of course, I myself could go on, just as many commenters and feminist critics are wont to do on the internet, and fall into the gender essential-



**FIG. 1.4** Jeff Bezos wears a cowboy hat on his suborbital flight. Source: AP News.

ist trap that equates the phallus with tech masculinity. It wouldn't be that hard. But in the interest of my desire for a techno-feminist perspective that aims to delink essentialized and binary gender from the design of the world, I want to leave this easy critique behind. It is important to note, however, that Musk and Bezos do launch their rockets and rovers as an exercise in reproduction, as a means for producing a new multiplanet species.<sup>4</sup> But this reproduction has nothing to do with a natural or essential quality inherent to the category of men in tech in the same way that there is no natural feminist politics inherent in the category of women in tech that could put an end to tech patriarchy.

The patriarchs of Big Tech, the sex organs of the machine world, may appear to be driven by an essential masculine impulse that they cannot help because of their gender, but we must think rather in terms of how they can very much help it and that there is instead a very powerful structure of tech patriarchy that is tied to an overall ethos of the extractive utility of people, of the Earth, and now of the entire universe. This is consonant with German philosopher Martin Heidegger's notion of standing reserve, where Earth and its inhabitants are valuable only in terms of utility. This conception of utility is oriented toward making utopian technological worlds flourish, but flourish only for them.<sup>5</sup>

When Jeff Bezos completed his first space mission, he acknowledged the lucrative role of the machine world in expediting his wealth: “I want to thank every Amazon employee and every Amazon customer because you guys paid for all of this.”<sup>6</sup> Amazon has long been under investigation, with 70 percent of its workers complaining of physical injuries and mental stress as a result of Amazon’s intense working conditions that depend upon both speed and surveillance of its workers. When McLuhan states that the machine world exists to deliver man his wealth, we might pause and consider what it is that actually falls under the category of machinery. In the case above, it is clearly Amazon’s workers and customers. Bezos’s wealth has been delivered by Prime. So of course we could simply surmise the Big Tech giants are brash and insensitive to the needs of others and often malicious in their designs—very much dicks. The end. But thankfully for all of us, counting Big Tech phalli is not the focus of my book. That would be too easy, and it would come to a rather unsatisfying end. The most popular image of the 2025 inauguration of Donald Trump makes very clear that these insufferable tools do reign (fig. I.5).

So what, then, is my big feminist problem with all of this if it is not just the toxic masculinity of Big Tech with all of its frontiers and phalli? This book makes two overarching interrelated arguments. The first argument is this: The patriarchs of Big Tech have a curious relationship to media theory that we need to pay attention to. The patriarchs of Big Tech do more than just lightly dabble in media theory, but rather operate with an intelligible facet of media theory that they wield strategically in order to maintain a governing form of power that I term the *patriarchal techno-logic*. The way the Big Tech patriarchs understand technology is tied to the way they conceive of gender and other forms of social difference. As I will elaborate throughout, Big Tech patriarchs discursively adhere to a tool-based approach to technologies in a way that corresponds to an extractive understanding of most of the world’s population in terms of their utility. This tool-based understanding of technology is tricky, however. That technologies are tools is usually a commonsensical notion that dominates the popular imagination and most discourses about technology; however, this tool-based notion of technology, I argue, obscures what the patriarchal tech giant is actually up to.

On the heels of one of Trump’s first executive orders aimed at ending “Radical and Wasteful” DEI programs and preferences, Mark Zuckerberg, cofounder and chairman, CEO, and controlling shareholder of Facebook-Meta, opined on the need for more masculine energy in tech as he scrapped Meta’s fact-checking content moderators and Google scrapped



**FIG. 1.5** “Trump’s ‘brogarchy’ turned heads at the inauguration. It sends a powerful message.” Tech CEOs Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai, and Elon Musk. Source: *USA Today*. Image: Julia Demaree Nikhinson via Reuters.

their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, citing Trump’s orders.<sup>7</sup> As we take a deeper look at their machinations, what we find is that they favor and cultivate media environments that permit them to wield tools where they themselves are never at risk of becoming the tool. In other words, the Big Tech patriarch doesn’t really think of technologies as tools, but rather, as I’ll explain below, they imagine technologies as environments in which to cultivate, manage, and extend their power. But you and I, we are the tools.

This patriarchal techno-logic is inherent in the materials that have been extracted to make our technologies (e.g., copper mining for our smartphones), and it is omnipresent in the way our everyday devices have been designed to remote-control the lives of others in a click. All of these devices, gadgets, apps, and media we hold closest to our bodies are also technologies that instigate worlds of dependent labor. Our governing tech, or what we might call dominant tech, refers to common technologies that are ubiquitously embedded and structured into the flow of everyday life. They are so basic as to be unassuming and often not even recognized as technologies. This power that an everyday user of such media beholds is largely unacknowledged.

The concealment is evident in the fact that Uber doesn't register within the popular understanding of the service as a mobile factory of dispersed remote workers and their vehicles. Instead, the official designation is one of a tech company with enterprising and entrepreneurial drivers who come to work with their own tools (automobiles, GPS, and smartphones). Our personal devices are tied to the whiz and whirl of Ubers and Lyfts as they make full stops in traffic, block bike lanes, and have near misses with e-bikes, while all of the delivery trucks are forced to perch on sidewalks, trying to fulfill orders on porches monitored with live-feed video doorbells affixed to doors that will soon be opened by a hand whose wrist is adorned with another tracking device that is monitoring health, sleep, children, hydration, and messages from work. Together these technologies compose a world of tacit acceptance of surveillance, control, discipline, and consumption, but also they reflect and create a world of seemingly endless and abundant assistance made all the more attractive for the algorithmic return on one's investment—enter into this domain, and you will be part of a recursive net; you will be seen and taken care of. All of life is delivered straight to your door. All of these orientations depend upon relations of capitalistic and individualized notions of time, and with this comes a dependency on the inequitable gendered, raced, and classed labor of others in order to get through the day. As I will elaborate more fully throughout, this patriarchal techno-logic I have my eye on, as described above, isn't necessarily ascribed to bodies and/or subjectivities but compulsively oriented to time saving, productivity, family life, essentialized gender identity, heterosexual economies of exchange, and the masculine inclinations to exit out of the social. It is extractive, racist, consumptive, and classist. The list goes on.

I have a growing and palpable feeling of an impasse when it comes to thinking through the gendered politics of this current technological landscape. Is this really what we all have? Was this all there was to design? These insufferable tools limit other ways of being in time and social space, in relation with one another. These tools depend upon extractive economies that target bodies and lands and create insufferable living conditions for so many. This nagging techno-feminist disquiet with the technologies that surround me is what fuels my desire to write this book. Where exactly can techno-feminism intervene in all of this? It is not always obvious where the politics of gender reside in this structure.

We can sense that the hubris of space flight is masculinist in its bravado and grandeur, but what is less obvious is how this is connected to the mun-

dane technologies that shape the contours of our days and our relations with one another. The intricate relationship between gender and technology, I have come to believe, is deeply and purposefully obscured as conceptual categories, so much so that the two seem unrelated. But the power of patriarchal techno-logics gains momentum when it is able to negate attention to the actual gendered dynamics of racialized techno-capitalism.

I also often think there is some reticence to really connect the Big Tech patriarchs' grandeur with the technological massaging of everyday lives because of how this implicates so many of us, in our daily quotidian practices and ways of negotiating the day, as being part of a technological injustice and inhumanity. It demands recognition that one might be dedicated to social justice but still living a life commensurate with patriarchal techno-logic. This is not a mere matter of the inevitability of living under the contradictions of capitalism but also due to what I see as the absence of a techno-feminist media theory to adequately guide struggles for social justice. In a world cluttered with constantly upgrading gadgets and seemingly infinite ways to download a new orientation or program for living, the centrality of patriarchy to the technological design of the world recedes from view. For McLuhan and the Big Tech patriarchs, understanding the recursive dynamic of media has been essential for understanding all forms of power and all forms of social organization. To understand media can change not only how to understand power but how this power is exercised and how this power can be challenged. Struggles for social justice are also bound to a technological field of possibility.

And so what is a techno-feminist to do under these circumstances? I suggest we need a forceful and unified techno-feminist media theory that can take on this patriarchal techno-logic, one that can act as a guide for multiple techno-feminist projects and new orientations. Theory? We need a theory to take all of this on? And a unified one? Yes, I believe so. This is my second argument.

The precise techno-feminist media theory I have in mind I call *feminist technological determinism*. I name this theory immediately while I recognize that the terminology of determinism some will find unsettling from the outset. I offer a more precise elaboration in the pages that follow as I take a wider techno-feminist lens in order to gather and develop this feminist media theory. This techno-feminist media theory does not demand a unified subject or singular feminist struggle, but it is unified by initiating a media study that forefronts and focuses attention on the technological structure of power. The baseline assertion of feminist technological determinism is

that technologies structure and alter what is possible for feminist struggle and politics. Not everything is possible under every and any technological environment. I am suspicious of the ways struggles for gender equality are currently cast within the tech world and the ways the problem of gender in tech is culturally understood. For example, the well-known plight of women in tech dominates the popular and scholarly conversation concerned with tech's enduring gender problem. I have grown rather suspicious of "the woman in tech" and how her struggle masquerades as a feminist struggle at the expense of advancing a political techno-feminist project. This argument doesn't just arise out of a need to counter the patriarchal technologic, but it's rather in response to what I argue is an impasse in attending to the relationship between technology and gender.

Let me be clear. It goes without saying that feminist scholarship on technology remains the most critical and pivotal when it comes to revealing how Big Tech ushers in a world of social, environmental, and economic harm, to the detriment not only of women but of all subjugated populations. The mutual entanglement of technology and the experience of social difference is a core concern of feminist media and technology studies. It is also feminist scholarship on technology that has been at the forefront of insisting upon a more just, humane, and livable world. But I would still submit that there has been a tendency within feminist approaches to the modern technology-based culture, and with it the digitally dependent workforces, to turn away from a philosophy of technology or media theory. I would also submit that a philosophy of technology or media theory is crucial to wrest us free from the grips of the patriarchal techno-logic.

This turning away from media theory is perhaps the result of the exhausting work of simply having to contend with the patriarchal techno-logic on a daily basis. The sheer reality of living under the techno-logics of patriarchy has meant that feminist thinking about technology, as well as feminist struggles in and around technology, too often remain locked within the confines of the patriarchal techno-logic. In the name of techno-feminism, we are led down exhausting paths concerned with calling for repair, regulation, self-care, better working conditions, and inclusivity. The ideological operatives of patriarchy are revealed and called out. Arguments are made to seize the tools for feminist ends. Hidden figures are located, and the history of women's pivotal role in tech is rewritten. But there is an a priori media question that must be reckoned with. Understanding how our technological forms are the condition of possibility for social change is a question of

media that, I argue, needs to preclude these other questions of media that are concerned with policy, ethics, political economy, ideology, play, and representation. Recognition that media do in fact determine (orient and alter) the parameters of possibility for social change, and how we come to know ourselves and understand technology, is paramount.

This book advances feminist technological determinism as a techno-feminist media theory that is attuned to the technological conditions of possibility for social justice struggles. At the crux of feminist technological determinism, what I have in mind is a desire to cultivate and devise feminist techno-logics purposely at odds with the dictates of a racialized and capitalistic institutionalization of time and space. Feminist techno-logics are oriented to cultivating the temporalities, spatialities, rhythms of relations, capacities, and mobilities that are incompatible with one's utility within the normative family, the workplace, and the marketplace. I have such high hopes for a techno-feminist media theory that could reinvigorate feminist struggles in and around technology. This would be a techno-feminism that eschews essentialized notions of binary gender identity as it operates as a guide through the contradictions of racialized capitalism.

I argue that struggles for justice and political theories related to refusal and resistance require media theory. I turn toward the media theory of the Big Tech patriarch in order to devise a techno-feminist media theory oriented toward the eventual cultivation of a feminist techno-logics. Why must I turn to the media theories of the Big Tech patriarch? I will make this increasingly clear, but for now I will simply say that a techno-feminist media theory needs to be able to recognize the media milieu it exists within in order to break away from it. And this media milieu, unfortunately, has been ushered in by that man over there in the cowboy hat next to his rocket and that other man over there with his Nazi salute, driverless car, and plethora of dick jokes. Yes, the one who is also responsible for all those wilted corrugated cardboard boxes stamped with the Prime logo that are overflowing from recycling bins. This book also makes clear that the relevance of this techno-feminist media theory I put forth exceeds the purview of any particular technology or of the tech world writ large. It exceeds the confines of discrete binary categories of gender oriented to the patriarchal rhythms and relations that currently dominate the popular cultural narratives and their attendant norms.

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“THE SEX ORGANS OF THE MACHINE WORLD” II

## Profiling the Big Tech Patriarch

Before I delve further into the two overarching arguments and goals of this book, I need to make clear who it is exactly that I call upon here and gather under the moniker of the Big Tech patriarch. He is the man of the alt-right, the misogynist tech bro, the proliferator of horrific working conditions, and the masculinist with a universalizing but also miniature theory of media. Big Tech patriarchy is not always necessarily embodied in male tech figures but is extended by various actors in tech. It is not about an essentialized male, but rather how essentialized understandings of binary gender are utilized in the interests of Big Tech. For example, consider the infamous leaked Google memo written by Google engineer James Damore in 2018 and officially dubbed “Google’s Ideological Echo Chamber.” This screed argued that diversity-based hiring would be bad for business. Damore suggested that women’s biological differences make them less capable of working in tech than men. When Ellen Pao, computer programmer, former CEO of Reddit, and cofounder of the nonprofit Project Include, filed a lawsuit against her former employer Kleiner Perkins for sexism and racism, she argued, “Like many groups of young men whose misogynistic beliefs gestate online, Incels often work in the tech industry and in engineering—and because of tech’s long-standing, well-quantified lack of women and other underrepresented groups, it’s a natural fit.” Damore flips the culture of inhospitality as a matter of nature and asserts that it was men’s “higher drive for status” that explained why women were underrepresented in leadership positions at Google.

The Google memo didn’t reveal anything feminists haven’t already long contended with. Decades before, feminist scholars had already located this naive Cartesian, now Damorian, split between men/women and their technical aptitude as part of the overall patriarchal social construction of gender and its corollary binary splits of reason/emotion, culture/nature, body/mind, and so on. But tech bros aren’t going to be swayed by references to feminist theory that point out the untenable ground upon which they lay their claims. Our feminist analysis, which lists all the false dichotomies that uphold the social construction of the gender binary, just reveals all the sites where patriarchy will guard the boundary. I’m not sure it even matters if Damore would acknowledge these are socially constructed categories. The boundaries aren’t guarded because they are natural, but rather because the imposition of these binaries upon our popular technology through imaginary categories allows tech to stay in the domain of men. All Zuckerberg

is doing is confirming that the patriarchal techno-logic reeks of masculine energy. Touché, Zuck!

The Big Tech patriarch is the one who recognizes the technological as a form of power and exercises it in his own interests. He has a media theory, and he uses it like a tool.<sup>8</sup> He has a platform where he theorizes about the platform. He also loves to explain the power of technology—rhapsodize when given the chance. The Big Tech patriarch we must contend with includes our Musks and Bezos, but also the patriarchal tech types in everyday life who like to explain technology and define the way culture reacts to technological change. This includes the canonical and contemporary media theorists who exclude the contributions of feminist and critical race approaches to technology, not only the self-anointed and the peer-reviewed type, but also journalists and technologists with their blogs, columns, and podcasts.

I want to be clear that patriarchal power doesn't just operate in and through technology or through men, it also operates through cultural understandings of media. These understandings of media, I argue, are popular and scholarly, but they are also politically strategic and wielded as forms of patriarchal power. It is important to acknowledge and see that understandings of media are the result of the dominating media forms that circulate in culture—media forms that determine and alter how we come to know ourselves. In the current technological moment, punctuated by our Big Tech patriarchs' extension across all media platforms and into outer space, it does appear as though we are stuck in a recursive circle jerk of galactic proportions. I am thus indebted to not only decades and decades of feminist scholarship on the topic of patriarchy and technology, but also the decades of unacknowledged labor undertaken by feminist technology scholars who have had to have technologies explained to them. It is a sector-specific job hazard to be a feminist media scholar. You are often on the receiving end of the banal nuggets of media insight doled out by a person who understands that a really good place to derive their patriarchal power is to dabble in media theory. We have perhaps focused for too long on tech's gender problem when it is time to take on gender's tech problem.

### **A Media Theory for the Tools**

Marshall McLuhan anchored his most famous media theory, and now popular dictum, that “the medium is the message,” in the simple media form of the light bulb. For McLuhan, the message of the medium was the change

in pace, scale, or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.<sup>9</sup> The light bulb, a content-free and, upon first glance, information-less medium, did have a message. It was the radical social and economic transformation that ensued when the definitional and experiential boundaries of day and night shifted with newly light-filled spaces. McLuhan's insightful turn to the light bulb's message was made during a time of great moral panic over the advent of the television and its domestication into the daily rituals and lives of the North American populace. McLuhan argued that the power of television was not actually in its programming, it was in the form of the medium and its formal properties. The technical details of one medium or the next would be a great place to get distracted from what McLuhan is actually trying to impart here. I prefer not to get distracted by the technical gaps in what a literature professor has to say about various media forms. I would rather focus on the larger context of the recursive power of media forms and what they mean for patriarchy. McLuhan argued, "If the student of media will but meditate on the power of this medium of electric light to transform every structure of time and space and work and society that it penetrates or contacts, he will have the key to the form of the power that is in all media to reshape any lives that they touch."<sup>10</sup> He will have the key to the form of power that is in all media! Is this not the exact penetrative pulse of media power that all of these insufferable tools, the contemporary giants of technology, the titans of tech, the tech patriarchy, the tech bros, or that guy over there who is online all of the time have their fingers on? It is no wonder why Elon Musk would have paid homage to McLuhan during his venture to create a space-faring, no longer limited to this one resource-depleted planet Earth type of civilization.

Musk recognizes his power to produce media forms that are transformative for how they can set new parameters of social, political, and economic possibility. Big Tech patriarchs have found a way to instrumentalize McLuhan's "medium is the message" theory of media as a technological strategy to maintain patriarchy, capitalism, and white ethno-nationalism. Musk's relationship to white nationalism was made blatant in his Nazi salute while professing support for Germany's far-right party. Consider how Joe Rogan, the infamous libertarian podcaster known for spreading misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine, the occasional racial slur, and smoking joints on air with Elon Musk, regularly opines, as McLuhan once did, that "man [is] the sex organs of the machine world." After all, regardless of its eventual diversity, podcasting as a grassroots space did attract, first and foremost, a very male and extremely online variety of self-appointed technologists

who recognized that this new amped-up and audio version of a blog held a new key to a new form of power.

In fact, another frequent fan of quoting McLuhan, Marc Andreessen, software engineer, one of the richest Silicon Valley venture capitalists, and author of the “Techno-Optimist Manifesto,” correlates the openness of culture with the openness of the internet on his own company webpage: “We believe technology is universalist. Technology doesn’t care about your ethnicity, race, religion, national origin, gender, sexuality, political views, height, weight, hair, or lack thereof. Technology is built by a virtual United Nations of talent from all over the world. Anyone with a positive attitude and a cheap laptop can contribute. Technology is the ultimate open society.”

It appears that we are living in a moment in which many insidious tech bros, tech journalists, and poster boys for the far right appear to be pseudo-media theorists. As a feminist concerned with technology, I continue to find it unsettling how easy it appears for a certain type of patriarchal figure to traffic in media studies, and in media theory more specifically. But rather than continue to be turned off by their content, we must begin to recognize this type of figure as a technological phenomenon, a technological social character who is intricately tied to culture’s dominant media forms.

The role of media technologies in determining how power is apprehended, maintained, and exercised is rooted in another Canadian and University of Toronto professor’s media theory—Harold Adams Innis. It was Innisian media theory that heavily influenced McLuhan’s own understanding of the significance of media forms over media content. In *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Innis connected the rise and fall of an empire to their dominating media forms, specifically the spatial and temporal properties of those media forms. Empires needed to be able to extend power across vast distances (space) and endure over history (time). Paper was space-binding, as it could be circulated across vast distances given that it was light and transportable. Clay and parchment were time-binding, as they were heavier and more durable. The basic premise of Innis’s media theory is that power is derived not from the content of the media but from a technology’s space- or time-binding capabilities. While Innis compared stone and clay tablets (time-binding) to the properties of newsprint and paper (space-binding), the contemporary digital context brings us spaceships, X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, BitChute, Parler, and Reddit.

While Innis didn’t have to contend with tech bros or internet trolls when he considered how trains operate as technologies for the maintenance of power, his insights on media are still helpful in understanding how peons

became pundits and presidents by way of access to Wi-Fi. It turns out that would-be tech patriarchs and those who gain power via media technologies do recognize the ability of technology's formal properties to determine the social experience of space, time, and the patterns of human organization. The correlation between misogyny, imperialism, and the technological power grab is not difficult to discern, but it is specific to its medium. A cultural history of fathers and their dominance over the television remote control has already been written.<sup>11</sup> More recently, smart home technologies appear at the forefront of domestic abuse cases as new weapons of gendered domination and control.<sup>12</sup> This includes not only tracking a partner's movements through home surveillance technologies but also controlling environmental conditions against the other's will (heating, lighting, and lock mechanisms).

What interests me even more is how space-binding forms of media progress into attempts at microempires of domination. Take a look at your newsfeeds and social media timelines over the past decade, and you will find self-anointed tech experts referred to as technologists because they were early adopters of particular platforms. Milo Yiannopoulos, the far-right British commentator recruited by Steve Bannon in 2017, enjoyed the formal title of tech editor and technologist at *Breitbart News*, without any tech training or experience. He was just a man known online for a lot of white supremacist, Islamophobic, and misogynistic views. Cultural understandings of media are themselves the result of the recursive, determining temporal and spatial dynamics of our dominating technology, and thus it always gives me pause when I encounter a technologist who has something like a blog or podcast where they then try their hand at media studies and use the platform to discuss the power of the platform itself and their own power.

On the world's political stage, the grab-them-by-their-pussy forty-fifth and forty-seventh president is prone to waxing poetic about the power of Twitter, now X. He attributes his first election win to the "tremendous platform." His strategy for world domination is simple and involves tweeting, which he refers to as "bings": "When somebody says something about me, I am able to go bing, bing, bing and I take care of it." Jordan Peterson, the infamous psychology professor at the University of Toronto, has garnered an alt-right cult following on both X and YouTube for his promotion of patriarchy and traditional gender dynamics. He uses these platforms to share his thoughts on the dangers of feminism and gender-neutral pronouns, as well as the benefits of patriarchy and an all-beef diet. Peterson seemed to understand the spatial bias of his chosen media form when he was asked

to explain why his following is largely composed of young men: “It’s an astounding platform . . . a Gutenberg revolution, as far as I’m concerned. It’s expanded [my audience] to a degree that is almost unfathomable. I convey very large volumes of very philosophically interesting and practically useful information. . . . You see that men are higher interest in ideas and women are higher interest in aesthetics.”<sup>13</sup> Peterson attributes the power of his words to the ability to extend them faster and further—a process that is not about content but about the capacity to reach an audience that is predisposed to the circulation of ideas.

These microempires and attendant imperialist impulses can be explained by what media historian and communication theorist John Durham Peters refers to as “media theory’s low bar for entry”: “Media theory has almost no barriers to entry—you’d be amazed at how readily some people opine on media without any sense of the field’s traditions or concepts—and almost anyone can call themselves a media theorist; as beings who live in the middle, in medias res, I think that every human being is potentially such a creature. Media theory, at its best, is a means of seeking greater awareness of the basic conditions in which we live.”<sup>14</sup> Professor of German studies and comparative literature and tech critic Adrian Daub has also traced this strand of faux media theory intellectualism in his book *What Tech Calls Thinking*, where he locates within Silicon Valley a pattern of “Stanford dropout becomes technologist.”<sup>15</sup> The Stanford dropout employs the cursory basics of the field, coupling easily digestible media theory with a desire for technological power grabs—a combination that lends itself well to thriving in Big Tech. When it comes to impressing upon others one’s media genius, Evgeny Morozov, public intellectual and technology critic, argues that popular tech ideas are often served as snacks, or the TED Talk way of understanding media. He suggests this version of tech has been a perfect shield for pursuing entrepreneurial activities under the banner of intellectualism.<sup>16</sup> The snack version of media theory seems to satiate the tech investor or the organizer of a tech summit just enough.

But I want to extend what Peters, Daub, and Morozov have so wonderfully captured here to consider the implications of this in terms of how a techno-feminist analysis might add an additional caveat. Beneath the faux intellectualism of these popular attempts at media theory there lies a patriarchal strategy. It is helpful to take a little detour through McLuhan’s media theory of extension. McLuhan opines that all media are extensions of human sensory or bodily capacities. From where you sit, you might be able to see how the wheel is an extension of the foot. The desk is an exten-

sion of the lap. The blinds on your windows are an extension of eyelids. The television is an extension not of a single sense or capacity, but of the entire central nervous system. We could continue to play this game of “name that media extension” all day. But the critical point here is not so much in the precise technical details of this extension but rather in the recursive dynamics between a media technology and its attendant social body. Technology reproduces the social, but in a very medium-specific way. McLuhan’s television set, his media muse at the time, was of the pre-high-definition variety, with a very low visual quality. In this way it demanded a very involved viewer to do the work of filling in the images, to fill in the dots. This interaction between the individual and the television set was thus highly participatory. For McLuhan, this process of media participation could cultivate a new interactive social body. In other words, far from the caricature of a viewer as a couch potato feasting on a buffet of media messages, alone and isolated and removed from culture, he offered a highly active viewer immersed in the medium and the creation of a new social character: Electronic Man. This immersion and integration with the medium had the potential to create a new social character and a unified and cohesive form of political and social organization: a global village.

Fast-forward from the television set to Musk on the potential of artificial intelligence (AI), and we have Musk invoking extension and unity as he surmises the potential for a multiplanet species and global AI collective: “I think if we can effectively merge with AI by improving the neural link between your cortex and the digital extension of yourself which already, like I said, it already exists, it just has a bandwidth issue. And then effectively you become an AI human symbiote and if that then is widespread with anyone who wants it can have it, then we solve the control problem as well. We don’t have to worry about some sort of evil dictator or AI because we are the AI collectively. That seems like the best outcome I can think of.”<sup>17</sup> I wish not to get stuck on McLuhan’s utopianism or the grandeur of Musk’s many visions; instead, I have my eye on something else that underlies their grand designs.

What Musk and McLuhan are concerned with is how technologies behold a particular machine logic that gives way to forms of life that are more amenable to certain modes of organization over others. For both Musk and McLuhan, the evolutionary potential of humankind depends upon a particular kind of extension of man via technological reproduction. For Musk and Bezos, they both insist this extension requires one to now escape Earth.

This escape as a means for extension can also be located in the everyday practices of the involuntary celibate (incel), who we now know has a long-documented relationship with Silicon Valley.

After Ellen Pao waged her lawsuit against venture capitalist firm Kleiner Perkins for sexual harassment, she penned a tell-all memoir titled *Reset*. Her book chronicles a growing population of incels in Silicon Valley who have a peculiar escapist relationship with technology. Pao states, “Technology plays a central role for these hate groups, as a career and as a weapon.”<sup>18</sup> We are far from the simple innocence of the light bulb and its content-free message, or the television set and its promise of a participatory social body. The contemporary tech giants do not hide what they are extending, nor do they hide their inspiration.

One of these effectively harnessed machine logics is the masculinist desire to extend one’s power across space and time. This is a formula that requires tinkering and calculation—what must be achieved, if we follow Innis, is the proper balancing of space and time for the extension of patriarchal power. This must be strategically cultivated. This patriarchal desire for influence might explain how the MIT Media Lab ended up as research bedfellows with sexual predator, pedophile, and tech entrepreneur Jeffrey Epstein. When I first read about Jeffrey Epstein, it was hard not to be distracted by the various media moguls and tech investors he kept as friends. These included Elon Musk; Bill Gates, Microsoft’s cofounder; Boris Nikolić, who was the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s science adviser; Marvin Minsky, AI computer scientist; Scott Borgerson, CEO of CargoMetrics; Joi Ito, entrepreneur and venture capitalist; and Reid Hoffman, LinkedIn’s cofounder, to name a few. Of course it was a list of the wealthy and the powerful, and today that would also simply mean those who can invest in tech. But we shouldn’t miss the connection—this is not a coincidence related to economics but rather a technological social character that we are dealing with here. Epstein was fascinated with transhumanism, which includes not only artificial intelligence but also genetic engineering of the human population. His long-term plan was to impregnate women at his New Mexico ranch so that he could seed the human race with his DNA.<sup>19</sup>

In McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, he argues that the modern man is who he is because of the dominant technology of the time—the printing press. The printing press, according to his main argument, provided a means of communication for the population, but it also determined how one thinks, the forms of thought possible, and

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UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

“THE SEX ORGANS OF THE MACHINE WORLD” 19

the types of social organization that result from the internalization of a medium's formal properties. The Typographic Man is marred by print-age forms of thought and politics: linear thinking and compartmentalized logic, which lead to an extractive and reifying relationship to nature and others. The electronic universe could deliver the Typographic Man into his full potential of a connected and worldly humanity, characterized by care and concern for others. But alas, it has not. Instead, we have space conquests and the DNA-spreading Typographic Man on Mars and in the metaverse. The patriarchal tech giants we must now contend with are the ones who want to terraform Mars, build sea-steads, and move into apocalypse bunkers where their hot rod cars currently live, living off alternative currencies in a quest to live forever, underground and away from the expendable plebs. We are dealing with a technological social character who theorizes why he has the power he has. Marc Andreessen said it himself when he said anyone can have this power given a cheap laptop, but what he doesn't seem to understand is that it is he who is perhaps the ultimate extension of the cheap laptop—a tool.

The reality is that our tech patriarchs—our Bezos, Damores, Epsteins, Musks, Thiels, Zuckerbergs, Trumps, Petersons, Rogans, and that guy over there who is extremely vociferous online—are themselves the technological phenomenon that the media theory they seem to be most enamored with actually accounts for. They are as enamored with the penetrative pulse of media as they are with explaining the power of technology. And this is central to their identity construction. The hubris of the tech giant and the minor technologist inheres in both rocket ships and podcasts. At the core of their technological designs, both the grand ones like terraforming and the more minor ones like PayPal, Amazon Prime, Alexa, and Uber Eats, is a consistent media strategy built around a shared and unified understanding of media and the overall project of maintaining the patriarchal technologic. To treat the patriarchal tech bro as a technological phenomenon, an enduring remnant of the Typographic Man, is to begin to circumvent his strategies. Within the patriarchal techno-logic there is a deep fear that the tools will eventually come to rule, that the tools will refuse to reciprocate, or that the patriarch will become the tool. Throughout this book, I show that alt-right understandings of gender and alt-right formulations of technology are tied together by an ambivalent and fraught relationship related to maintaining the submission of the tool. It is this shared understanding of gender and technology to which techno-feminism must continuously attend.

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## A Techno-Feminism for the Insufferable Tools

I find inspiration for a media theory capable of taking on the insufferable tools of big technology through the work of science and technology studies (STS) scholar and techno-feminist Judy Wajcman, who in 1991 wrote, “Insofar as technology critically reflects a man’s world, the struggle to transform it demands a transformation of gender itself.”<sup>20</sup> Her work is often read to be in slight opposition to the specific umbrella term within feminist technology studies known as cyberfeminism.<sup>21</sup> The term *cyberfeminism* was coined by feminist philosopher Sadie Plant in 1994 to capture feminist critical engagement with the design and making of technologies, and also the analysis of how technologies are entangled in power dynamics and forms of systemic oppression. But cyberfeminism since, many would agree, consists of far too many threads to try to condense into a coherent discipline or school of thought. When Wajcman invoked the term *techno-feminism* in her 2009 book of the same name, she was insisting on a counter to some of the strains of cyberfeminism that were too optimistic about the liberatory potential of technology, namely the sentiment that women should/could seize technological tools for feminist ends. For Wajcman, techno-feminism instead “conceives of a mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology, in which technology is both a source and a consequence of gender relations.”<sup>22</sup> She further posits that techno-feminism does not identify technology itself as the source of positive or negative social changes, but instead concentrates on the changing social relationships, which technologies are embedded within, and how technologies may facilitate or constrain those relationships. Thus, instead of advocating for the inclusion of women in tech in order to challenge the male culture of technology or suggest that one must seize tools or rewrite policies related to technology, Wajcman forces us to reckon with how the world is being made. She notes, “Men’s affinity with technology is central to gender politics.” She further states, “While there has been a problematic alliance between technoscience and male power, there still needs to be a more radical critique of technology itself.”<sup>23</sup> Wajcman’s insistence on the need to form a radical critique of technology while being oriented to a transformation of gender itself is at the heart of my desire for this book to advance a unified techno-feminist media theory fit for this contemporary landscape. I acknowledge Wajcman is usually labeled a social constructivist, and I am advocating in this book for a type of deterministic feminist media theory. But what is crucial for me and also reads as slightly unconstructivist in some ways is that Wajcman’s

is a feminist theory of technology that does not imagine everything is possible; instead, it argues one must reckon with what technologies foreclose and what they open up.

Another key and formative text is feminist philosopher and historian of science and technology studies Donna Haraway's 1991 essay "Cyborg Manifesto," where she points out how the blurring lines between machinic life and human life offer an emancipatory politics for women and other subjugated populations. She also insists on the urgent and absolute necessity for feminism to keep up with the changing technological landscape and become proficient, technologically speaking, to develop new tools, new politics, and new strategies. Her insistence on new strategies as technologically informed strategies should not be forgotten. If her particular description of a cyborg fails to account for some contemporary techno-realities, her theory of cyborg feminism as a strategic politics withstands time. The history of feminist approaches to technology is rooted in a shared resistance to the notion that the field of technology and technology studies was the natural domain of men, and, as such, antithetical to feminist politics.

The ongoing potential of techno-feminism is that it is able to attend to the changing technological scene because of how it insists that gender cannot be unhinged from technology. Moreover, it is not imagined as superseding any feminist school of thought, umbrella term or otherwise. I thus take another important cue from Wajcman—her suggestion that techno-feminism does not supersede cyberfeminism but rather aims to "advance theorizing and action in relation to technology, and to do so in ways informed by, rather than simply positioned as superseding, previous feminist analyses." I would, however, maintain right from the start that what is unique about Wajcman is her refusal to delink any understanding of gender from technology. Gender is not a singular category against or an addendum to the conceptual category of technology, but rather mutually affirming.<sup>24</sup> This understanding of gender as always already technological is central to the contemporary theorizations of gender and technology I utilize below. But first, it is important to note how the work of Anne Balsamo, as a feminist technologist, designer and theorist, is also distinct in this regard for her theorizing on the frustration of gender as a boundary concept.

Balsamo argues that gender has always been transformed by technology and yet gender as a technological construct continuously fails to be reconstructed in the social and political imaginary as such. In 1996, Balsamo notes how the gendered boundary between male/female remains heavily guarded despite new ways to write the flesh.<sup>25</sup> Think antibiotics, weight-

lifting, prosthetics, and Botox. Resonating with Haraway's question of why bodies should end at the skin, Balsamo questions where exactly gender is located on the body. While my focus in this book is not on this material technological refashioning, what I want to maintain from Balsamo is how the discursive dominance of the normative essentialized gendered body, or what Balsamo calls technologies of the gendered body, remains heavily guarded within the patriarchal techno-logic, even in the absence of gendered bodies. As I address in the chapters that follow, the technologies that flow from the patriarchal techno-logic are endemic of the natural, sexual, and reproductive systems that re-create this binarized gendered dynamic. This apparatus of binarized and normative gender still organizes power relations at the level of automation, gig work, and AI assistance. There's a reason it is so hard to figure out exactly where and how to wage a techno-feminist fight. Where gender is in this dynamic is never exactly clear. If it is hard to locate where gender exists on the body, it becomes harder even still to consider how gendered power is operating in a culture that is structured through the dictates of the Big Tech patriarchy.

These earlier techno-feminist works, concerned with the mutually affirming relationship between gender and technology, propel and inspire the feminist strategic media theory that is at the core of this book. Because where should we attend to the politics of gender in this current insufferable nightmare that we are all differentially enduring but uniformly witnessing? Where is gender in Musk's being given an advisory role in the Trump administration's DOGE? Where is gender in Musk's invoking of the far right in Germany? How should a techno-feminist respond to Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg when he appeared on the *Joe Rogan Experience* in January 2025 and stated that corporate culture needed more masculine energy and had been suppressed in the last decade due to being forced to include feminine energy? How should one attend to this violent and imposing gender binary while also attending to the violence of the statement? Locating gender and technology's mutual imbrication without re-entrenching gender normativity is precisely what a contemporary techno-feminism must attend to both theoretically and practically.

The technological culture that these feminists mentioned above were responding to in the 1990s could certainly feel the potential impending violence of the Big Tech patriarchs of today. There was already some writing on the wall in terms of what the technological would look like if power was consolidated in the hands of a few. But just as gender and technology are mutually reinforcing, we must continue to do this work. It is ongoing. This

book asks against the contemporary historical techno-scene: How do we take on the politics of gender and technology while (1) demanding a radical rethinking of technology in the processes of patriarchy and feminism, (2) while also being able to address how technology has been central to the historical processes and techniques that have subjugated and systematically oppressed women, without (3) endlessly expanding the category of what counts as the domain of woman, and while (4) staying attuned to the fact that we are concerned with a patriarchal techno-logic that is also always tied to racialized capitalism?<sup>26</sup>

The techno-feminist media theory I have in mind now turns to trans, queer, and Black techno-feminist scholars, some of whom were working alongside the above theorists and others whom I want to bring into the conversation in a deeper way because they share an unacknowledged, and I would argue a quite palpable, even if strange, affinity with the media theories of McLuhan and Innis that I presented above. In addition, I turn to critics of technology who are unabashedly comfortable with the refusal of technology, not wanting to reform technology but rather altogether delegitimize the insufferable technological tools that compose the techno-scene. What all of these thinkers, these strange bedfellows, share is an acknowledgment that there are indeed formal properties of media technologies that can alter and determine the social experience of difference. There is a recognition that any political struggles related to race, gender, sexuality, ability, and so on, are always already tied to a technological field of possibility. In sum, they are all joined by the inclination to ask the a priori media question before they entertain repair or reformation. And moreover, the recursive understanding of media they share with the masculine media theorists ultimately refuses to align with the patriarchal techno-logic. I want to make a brief pass at revealing some of these connections here, but they will also be elaborated more fully throughout the book.

McLuhan's and Innis's insistence on an understanding of the onto-epistemological power of media resonates with the trans feminist scholar Sandy Stone, who argued in 1995 that "it's hard to see what [social technologies] do, because what they do is to structure seeing."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Os Keyes, science and technology studies theorist with a focus on trans medicine and care, argues nearly twenty-five years later against adding new categories of consent to things like facial recognition technologies and suggests instead that these technologies should be rejected altogether. To fine-tune them is to accept their development. They argue, "We should focus on delegitimizing the technology *altogether*, ensuring it never gets integrated into society."<sup>28</sup>

Keyes states, “Any measurement system, once it becomes integrated into infrastructures of power, gatekeeping, and control, fundamentally changes the thing being measured. And these outcomes become naturalized: we begin to treat how the tool sees reality as reality itself.”<sup>29</sup>

Yuk Hui, a Hong Kong philosopher of tech culture, who argues for a Chinese philosophy of technology to counter the imposition of North American tech culture, uses the term *mono-technological culture* to capture the current techno-culture I described, as one that ignores the necessity of coexistence and continues to see the world merely as a standing reserve. Hui argues that this mono-technological view of the world structures the technologies that are developed. He, too, turns to the imagined utility of technology and how it then maps onto how social relations are formed. While he does not connect this specifically to patriarchy, I would suggest this mono-technological view and the patriarchal techno-logic are actually one and the same. Nonetheless, in this context of mono-culture, Yuk Hui argues the question of ethics, policy, regulation, and inclusion always comes too late. As Hui argues specifically of ethics, “Ethics is an afterthought, another technological solution or technical corrective. It either comes too late or when it is included as part of a technology’s diffusion into society it is always rife for violation.”<sup>30</sup> Under the auspices of mono-technology, or the patriarchal techno-logic, there is no such thing as ethical tech. Through Hui’s argument then, we can understand that the tendency to turn to ethical tech as a solution would be as naive and as politically futile as an ethical capitalism or an ethical patriarchy—as absurd as an ethical racism. Instead of ethics, inclusion, representation, or regulation, what must come first is a break with the patriarchal techno-logic. Hui argues for a digital solidarity, which can only emerge by breaking away. He argues that this digital solidarity “is not a call to use more Facebook, Twitter, or WeChat, but to get out of the vicious competition of mono-technological culture, to produce a techno-diversity through alternative technologies and their corresponding forms of life and ways of dwelling on the planet and in the cosmos.” Hui shares with me this disdain and discomfort with the tech that we have.

While theorists like Innis and McLuhan were grand and universalizing and unconcerned with identity, their approach to media does in fact allow for a broader conception of techno-diversity. And in this way I see how their materialist approach can fuel the queer and trans critical scholars of technology that I am pulling out here and hoping to braid together as a basis for a techno-feminist media theory. This work is powered by what I see as an unstated refusal to engage in questions about technology where the cri-

tique of technology and gender depends upon reifying and renaturalizing a normative gender binary. This work is suspicious of the utopian dreams of representation, recognizing that the politics of techno-diversity are not going to be realized by counting representative bodies. It is also deeply suspicious of any conception of technology and capitalism that forgets the racialized dynamics that fuel this accelerated unevenly globalizing economic system. For example, American artist Martine Syms, on the fantasy of an all-Black space crew, argues, “Out of five hundred thirty-four space travelers, fourteen have been black. An all-black crew is unlikely.” She goes on to insist, “The dream of utopia can encourage us to forget that outer space will not save us from injustice and that cyberspace was prefigured upon a master/slave relationship.”<sup>31</sup> Syms’s point here is significant for how it makes clear that representation will not undo a power dynamic between master/slave, but also that space flight certainly has no plans to deliver justice but is in fact predicated on injustice. Syms isn’t just suggesting that representation is futile but rather that the inherent technological relation surpasses the politics of representation to the point that it is completely and utterly moot.

Feminist nonbinary internet scholar Legacy Russell, who also focuses on the relationship between technology and Black visual culture, states in *Glitch Feminism*, “When we reject the binary, we reject the economy that goes along with it. When we reject the binary, we challenge how we are valued in a capitalist society that yokes our gender to the labor we enact.”<sup>32</sup> The patriarchal techno-logic is composed of technologies that both reflect and organize an economy of care that takes as given the utility of others while it depends upon an ever-increasing demand for the labor of others. A feminist techno-logic would challenge this utility. For example, for Femke Snelting, a Belgium-based feminist technologist, a feminist internet is not a tool for feminists but rather a technology that fosters a particular logic. She has argued that a feminist internet server would “avoid efficiency, ease of use, scalability and immediacy because they can be traps . . . networking is parasitic.”<sup>33</sup> Snelting here, in a way that reminds me of Innis and McLuhan, urges us to see that the internet’s spatial and temporal politics of efficiency, scalability, and immediacy gives way to neoliberal forms of organizing one’s social life, such as networking, as the dominant way of relating to others. Further to this, we can ask what is networking other than sharing in a culture of utility—here is what I can do for you; what can you do for me? If we follow from the recursive media theories of thinkers like McLuhan and Innis, then what becomes most evident is the reality of a media environ-

ment where the world that is externalized is one that is extended via tech in such a way that it creates more and more conditions and means for servitude and indentured labor so that the world may deliver wealth to a few. The way one comes to know oneself and others is through these extractive logics of service and utility.<sup>34</sup>

There is a deep resonance here also with the work of Ivan Illich, an Austrian philosopher and priest who argued in *Tools for Conviviality* that Western societies made a fundamental mistake in conceiving of machines as a means of providing an alternative to indentured labor. This approach to technology as a replacement for the labor of others is detrimental to the design of the world. He argues that the more crucial question is the “need for technology to make the most of the energy and imagination each has, rather than more well-programmed energy slaves.”<sup>35</sup>

To return to her techno-feminist perspective, Judy Wajcman suggests that “opening up the processes of technical innovation to encompass a broader range of social realities and concerns is the only way to generate new devices for new times.”<sup>36</sup> In order to do this, the focus has to be on the corresponding forms of life and sensibilities of power that arise under certain technological environments. Machine logics remain central to a politics of techno-diversity, and these machine logics should be at odds with, as I’ve elaborated above, the dictates of racialized and capitalistic institutionalized time and space, oriented instead to cultivating the temporalities, spatialities, rhythms of relations, capacities, and mobilities that are incompatible with one’s utility within the normative family, the workplace, or the market.

A feminist techno-logic captures how the machinic can be attuned to feminist ends. Can we imagine a nonextractive notion of utility, for example? Can we redefine what a technology is and how it is understood? As I spend time on this relationship between utility and extension through these pages, the feminist techno-logic does not challenge the notion that technologies are extensions of our capacities, but it accounts for how, in this extension, the reorganization of labor and vulnerability are a part of the message of every medium. A feminist approach to the techno-logic is not only a theory about the extension of human bodily capacities into so-called innovations that reorder sensory apparatus and social life, it is also a media theory that recognizes and finally calls attention to the fact that one particular body has been extended. I have not been completely alone in this finding but have been thinking alongside a remarkable intellectual companion, filmmaker and writer Chase Joynt, since 2019. While I have been unable to let go of the notion that McLuhan was theorizing patriarchy in

tandem with technology, Joynt states, “where McLuhan saw the production of media, I see the production of masculinity.” In *Vantage Points: On Media as Trans Memoir*, Joynt states, “McLuhan argued we habituate to technologies to make them less painful, and I have found the same to be true of masculinity.”<sup>37</sup> To take my vantage point of patriarchy as my anchor over a focus on the production of masculinity, I suggest there is a gendered balance of feminized care and the misogynistic exit out of the social that is intertwined within technological objects used for navigating the day. Joynt goes on to say, “My family is a technology that produces me as both masculine and feminine in turns and I harness that instability of association, as well as my transition from female to male in my twenties, to think across gender and genre simultaneously.” For me this is not a genre or identity question but rather a materialist gender and technology question that allows us to get to the structural question of how the instability of association can be harnessed for an overall economy of gender. For now, we must keep our eye on how every new technology brings with it the question, and often the answer, of what or who this new technology will take care of, and who and what are relinquished from social responsibility. What gets harnessed are the gendered social relations that determine the rhythm of care and delegation across the social body.

## Chapter Overviews

In chapter 1, I consider how Big Tech’s in-house feminism has come to set the popular (and often the scholarly) agenda for what constitutes tech’s gender problem. Oddly, Big Tech’s feminism turns away from the question of technology and remains locked into the normative and confining media environment, determining its own set of questions and concerns about gender and technology. The result is that when it comes to feminism, Big Tech wields its women and other marginalized identities as if they were one of its very own technologies. Big Tech Feminism is a type of popular feminism that intersects with the logics of dominant technologies and a neoliberal conception of the self and is primarily concerned with keeping people and machines working well within the machinations of capital. The chapter chronicles how the plight of the “woman in tech” begins to intersect with the popular and academic concern over Amazon’s Alexa’s plight as a feminized and disenfranchised technology trying to make it in this misogynistic world.

In chapter 2, I outline how the masculine fantasy of exit, as it exists across the political spectrum, has come to define the technological design of the world. We can see that one of the most popular patriarchal space-and-time-binding endeavors is a relationship with technology where one can physically exit from society while maintaining and extending one's own power. This can be done via cryogenics or doomscrolling from bed for the day. Going to Mars (space) and long-termism (time) are so hot right now—as is any tech philosophy that forsakes today's world for a techno-utopian future. The escape fantasies from Earth coincide with the fascination and investment in machine logics that could allow one to live forever. For the right, exit is found in the alt-right sexodus movements, nationalist movements (Brexit), and Trump's invoking of new borders and bans. Exit on the right is imagined as a mechanism of establishing sovereignty. Across the political spectrum of the left, from "nice" liberals to neoliberal popular feminists, to strands of autonomist Marxists, there are variations on the theme of how exit via refusal is productive for the politics of maintaining autonomy; however, both exit and refusal have a significant gender problem. There is a gendered politics of utility that emerges, a disjuncture, to which I argue feminist refusal must attend. The masculine inclination to exit out of the social is inherent in the extractive, racist, consumptive, and classist technological design of the world.

In chapter 3, I trace how the impetus to pull out of the social, as it emerges in the previous chapter, depends upon a normative structure of care I refer to as the maternal mandate, an unacknowledged guarantor of the patriarchal social structure, which continues to provide sustenance in ever-more socially and technologically innovative ways. The domination of exit technologies maintains a world completely oriented around capitalist, racist, and patriarchal conceptions of the need for the utility and servitude of others. The mundane technologies (smartphones, apps, Fitbits, assistive devices, AI companions, chatbots, online friends, water bottles with digital reminders, and sleep monitors) that organize the temporal and spatial contours of the day are fundamental to the reproduction of patriarchy and together compose a media complex that includes machinic forms of care and intimacy, and constitute an unacknowledged gendered normativity tied to capital. While these technologies manage time and the mundane tasks of social reproduction, they also uphold a binarized and gendered division of labor as still necessary to social reproduction. The ultimate dominance of the gender binary is often obscured thanks to the way these technologies

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UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

"THE SEX ORGANS OF THE MACHINE WORLD" 29

and forms of labor seem to be untethered from discrete gender identities. What I see are technological gadgets, systems, programs, and devices that uphold established and devalued understandings of labor and gender. These insufferable tools are imagined to be oriented around the care of the self and others but ultimately function as narrowing worlds of care via an impetus to enclose one into a regime of privatized space and the control of the time of others. Within a normative structure of care, the dependence on a gendered and racialized economy of utility ensures that those who don't abide are rendered aberrations, broken and unfit machines unwilling to reciprocate man's love in this patriarchal machine world.

In chapter 4, I turn more explicitly to the outlines of the techno-feminist theory I refer to as feminist technological determinism and begin to outline how a feminist techno-logics of refusal might emerge from inhabiting the patriarchal conception of feminists and others as broken-down technological tools. A feminism of the broken machine accounts for the differential experience of being positioned and determined by patriarchal capitalism as a technology that doesn't work properly. This feminism, from which a techno-logics of refusal can grow, begins at the point of being incompatible with Big Tech. The techno-feminist power here relies upon a recursive understanding of technology. It demands recognition of a politics of difference that is keyed into the logics of the machine world. Ultimately, feminist techno-determinism provokes the following two questions—both of which can be applied to different historical formations and cultural contexts. It is a media theory that can be transported. First, what are the technological conditions of possibility tied to the terrain of feminist, antiracist, and anticapitalist struggle? Given this, how might we cultivate feminist machine logics? It insists that an understanding of the technological needs to be part of a strategy of refusal. Locating the current machine logics and holding open the possibility of new feminist machine logics is at once a practical matter and a political goal for feminist techno-determinists. A feminist technological future demands, then, not a life free from the logic of machines, but rather a different set of machine logics—feminist techno-logics.

This book is an attempt to provide a theoretical clearing and take a scan of the insufferable tools and their machinations in order to incite and inspire a future rife for feminist techno-logics.

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# Notes

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## Introduction

- 1 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 46.
- 2 Kharpal, “Elon Musk Pokes Fun at Jeff Bezos’ New Moon Lander.”
- 3 Marcus, “Elon Musk Trolls Jeff Bezos After SpaceX Beats Blue Origin.”
- 4 Dessem, “Why Does Jeff Bezos’ Rocket Look So Much Like a Penis?”
- 5 Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*.
- 6 Vigdor, “Bezos Thanks Amazon Workers and Customers.”
- 7 Trump, “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing.”
- 8 The popular circulation of McLuhan is evidenced in these articles that appeared in *Wired*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *LARB*, and the *Guardian*: Levinson, “Five Views of St. Marshall”; Thill, “July 21, 1911”; Wolf, “Channeling McLuhan”; Wolf, “The Wisdom of Saint Marshall”; Wolf, “McLuhan Lives”; Arlen, “Marshall McLuhan and the Technological Embrace”; Austen, “Early Media Prophet Is Now Getting His Due”; Farokhmanesh, “Marshall McLuhan, Man Who ‘Saw the Internet Coming’”; Klein, “I Didn’t Want It to Be True”; Naughton, “Thanks Marshall”; Pooley, “How to Become a Famous Media Scholar”; Ripatrazone, “A New Medium for Marshall McLuhan’s Message”; Ross, “The McLuhan Metaphor.”
- 9 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 39.
- 10 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 39.
- 11 Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.
- 12 Braithwaite, “Smart Home Tech Is Being Turned into a Tool.”

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- 13 Levin, "James Damore, Google, and the YouTube Radicalization of Angry White Men."
- 14 Hanrahan and Peters, "The Anthropoid Condition."
- 15 Daub, *What Tech Calls Thinking*.
- 16 Morozov, "The Naked and the TED."
- 17 Ford, "Elon Musk on the Future of AI."
- 18 Pao, "The Perverse Incentives That Help Incels Thrive."
- 19 Helmore, "Epstein Reportedly Hoped to Develop Super-Race"; Stewart et al., "Jeffrey Epstein Hoped to Seed Human Race."
- 20 Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology*, 166.
- 21 See Lucy Suchman's fantastic contextualization of techno-feminism in relation to cyberfeminism, technological determinism, and the shortcomings of STS in approaching gender as a conceptual category that needs as much rethinking as technology in Suchman, "Wajcman Confronts Cyberfeminism."
- 22 Wajcman, *TechnoFeminism*, 107.
- 23 Wajcman, *TechnoFeminism*, III.
- 24 Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*; Cockburn, "The Material of Male Power"; Hicks, *Programmed Inequality*; Oldenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*; Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology*.
- 25 Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*.
- 26 Lewis, *Abolish the Family*.
- 27 Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, 167.
- 28 Keyes, "The Body Instrumental."
- 29 Keyes, "The Body Instrumental."
- 30 Hui, "One Hundred Years of Crisis."
- 31 Syms, "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto." What does it mean that Silicon Valley's design for the future is to inhabit the destination on the other end of someone's escape hatch? While exit to another galaxy is an enduring trope within the speculative fiction of Afro-futurism (see Jayna Brown, "A World on Fire," on Sun-Ra), the launch of SpaceX and the Tesla Roadster to Mars indicates something of a competition over one's exit turf. As T. J. Demos argues in *Beyond the World's End*, "With the neoliberal corporate military-state complex determined to occupy and settle the very space that many Afrofuturists have long sought in science and sonic fiction as an emancipated destination to escape colonized Earth, such starry-eyed fantasies stand to become grim off planet industrial realities in years to come" (153). The world of competing exits revolves around a differential economy of utility where tech is envisioned to either alleviate or offer a way out of this economy.
- 32 L. Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 53.
- 33 Snelting, "Feminist Server."
- 34 J. Davis, "Draft of Empathy Manifesto #1"; L. Russell, *Glitch Feminism*;