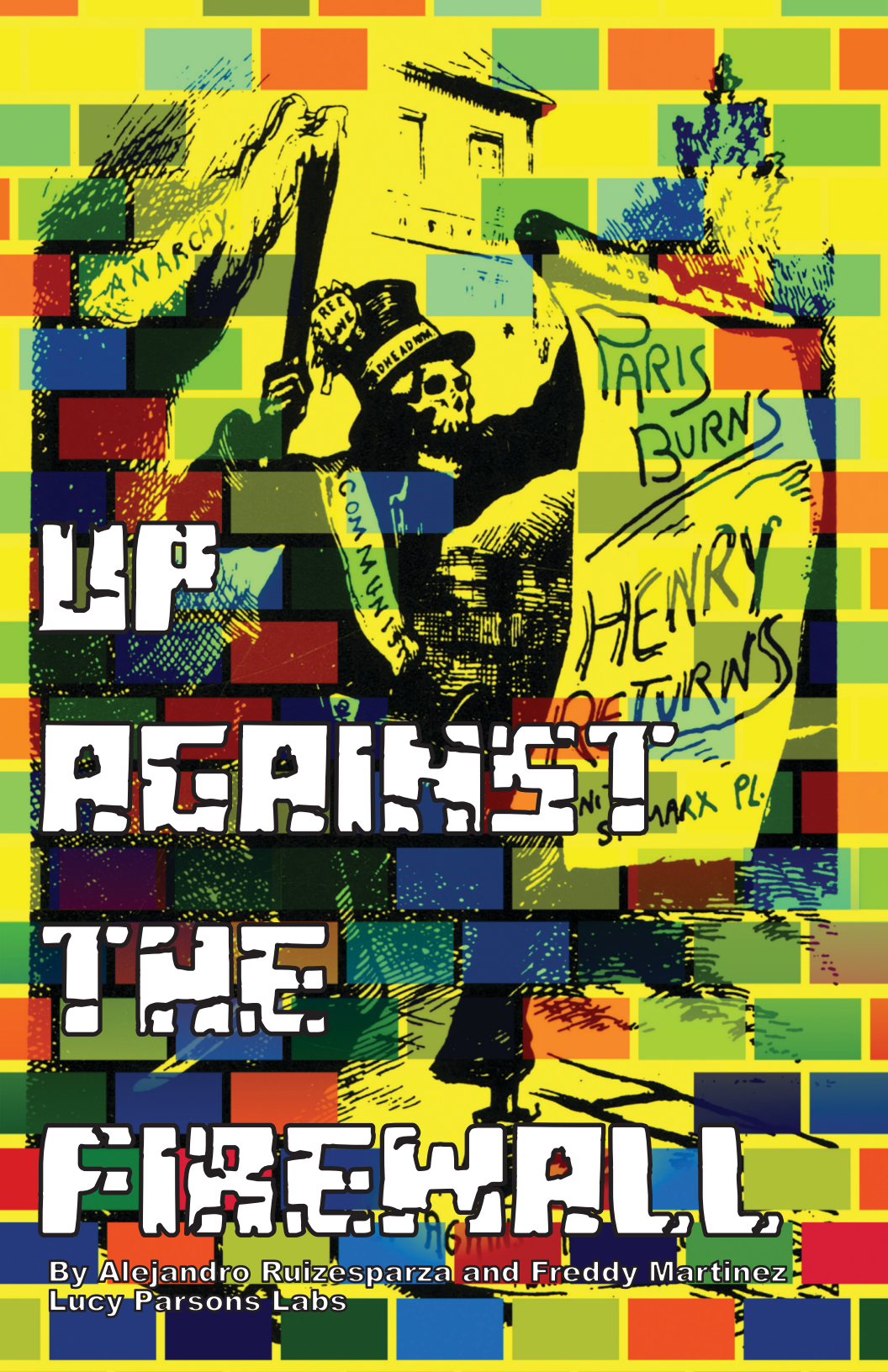

UP AGAINST THE FIREWALL

By Alejandro Ruizesparza and Freddy Martinez
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In a revolt against techno-optimism and the real-world violence it upholds, members of radical research collective Lucy Parsons Labs (LPL) call for an empiricism rooted in technopolitical critique. Drawing from their own years of labor in the struggles against racial and surveillance capitalism, current work in HCI, and radical theorists like Alfredo M. Bonanano and Modibo Kadalie, LPL invites us to incorporate an ethics of rebellion and progress our tech practices into principled, anti-authoritarian praxis.

By Alejandro Ruizesparza and Freddy Martinez

Our organization, Lucy Parsons Labs (LPL), is a collective of researchers, journalists, artists, and activists who challenge technologically-driven harm and state-corporate wrongdoing. Our namesake Lucy Parsons was a Chicago anarchist, labor agitator, and expert orator. The Chicago Police Department (CPD) once said she was "[m] ore dangerous than a thousand rioters" [1]. Seeing ourselves as inheritors of the anti-authoritarian spirit carried by those like Lucy, we work at the intersection of activism, social justice, and technology, carefully developing a counter-power to surveillance capitalism. In the late '60s when Up Against the Wall/MF sought to challenge the counterculture movements, especially the art world, it did so through a series of provocations and stunts. Against that backdrop and disillusioned by overwhelmingly technocratic critiques of tech, we created LPL as a unique space with a politic rooted in abolitionist, anarchist, and anti-colonial thought.

As such, we do not limit our critique of tech to features like economic utility or algorithmic model efficacy; our critique digs into the relationship tech and knowledge production have with persistent structures of domination. And because tech does not emerge in a vacuum, because tech is a socio-cultural and economic artifact itself, the work of "undesigning," "de-biasing", or even foreclosing deployments is insufficient.

Instead, we seek to nurture analyses, critiques, and conditions in opposition to one where ostensibly apolitical institutions hold unparalleled influence across industry, research, and governmental settings. Knowledge production is not value neutral. Even declarations like "[the] ACM is not a political organization" [2] cannot go unchallenged. In writing this piece, LPL members weighed the potential benefits in reaching the eyes of many young computational scholars against our own disavowal of the tools for carceral violence and war [3].

In higher education, we are lucky to get an implicit discussion of ethics. Perhaps students are assigned texts to read like Brighter than a Thousand Suns by Robert Jungk, which examines the development of the atom bomb from the personal view of the scientists, or are given space to discuss the so-called "Science Wars" of the '90s that contributed to a rift between the hard sciences and humanities. We, however, believe critical ethical inquiry is essential to all aspects of scientific work. As HCI scholars Keyes, Joy, and Drouhard wrote, an "explicitly articulated vision of an HCI grounded in emancipatory autonomy…aimed at dismantling all oppressive systems by mandating suspicion of and a

reckoning with imbalanced distributions of power" is needed [4]. We agree with their call and its extension beyond HCI to all STEM practices.

Anti-colonial scholar and Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick reminds us that there is no time to waste. "If we do not do this work, if we do not collaboratively call into question a system of knowledge that delights in accumulation by dispossession and profits from ecocidal and genocidal practices, if we do not produce and share stories that honor modes of humanness that cannot and will not replicate this system, we are doomed" [5]. To avoid critically assessing the work we do as empiricists is complacency—an affirmation of domination and death.

Praxis and Community Solidarity

Resistance to the development and proliferation of harmful technology is an urgent and necessary need, and one we endeavor in through a prefigurative politic, which refers to strategies and practices that reflect liberated futures—means and ends in harmony.

In one example, LPL formed a coalition against Chicago's use of ShotSpotter, a notorious acoustic surveillance product embedded across Black, brown, and poor neighborhoods in the U.S. that uses microphones and machine learning systems to "detect" gunshots and deploy police. ShotSpotter has faced years of criticism for its amplification of racist and classist policing [6], concerns about its accuracy [7], and the way it allows CPD to manufacture arrests [8]. Our local coalition to cancel the city's contract was built on abolitionist principles following the police shooting of a seventh-grader before broadening to a national movement.

The formation of Chicago's Stop ShotSpotter coalition occurred after the killing of 13-year-old Adam Toledo by police responding to a ShotSpotter alert in the predominantly Mexican neighborhood of Little Village. Adam, who dropped a handgun and raised empty hands high following a command to do so, was killed by CPD officer Eric Stillman. Immediately after, the Cook County prosecutor gave a statement erroneously saying Adam was armed when shot. A false narrative regurgitated by police and then-mayor Lori Lightfoot until released body-cam footage showed otherwise.

Animated by Adam's death, members from LPL joined fellow Chicago grassroots organizers and collectives to discuss the circumstances leading up to the shooting. Immediately, our conversations approached the nature of Chicago's immense police surveillance dragnet—a web of interconnected technologies mediating the deployment of police. As our focus landed on the role of ShotSpotter technology, we were able to hit the ground running because LPL had already spent the past few years researching Chicago's relationship to ShotSpotter and the related tech acquired by its parent company, SoundThinking. As such, we came in with a strong base of information and a deep, collective will to ensure the harm we saw would not be repeated.

At the time we wrote: "As abolitionists, we are not fooled by calls to merely modify police policies and procedures, as the mayor has called for finally implementing recommended foot-chase reforms following the killing of Adam Toledo" [9]. Our position is that reigning in and ultimately abolishing these technologies is

critical for preventing more deaths and in bringing justice to all harmed by the consequences of mass surveillance like Adam. And as we mentioned earlier, it was not just enough to "foreclose" the design of new technology [10] but for our visions to be prefigurative in building a new world in the shell of the old. We concluded by saying, "Justice for our youth requires that we dismantle the technology of militarized policing and build a society based on care, equity, and mutual aid" [9]. In this way, questions of technological development cannot be separated from the nature of our social relationships.

We must expand where we challenge power and build solidarity across our workplaces and communities to change how technology shapes our world.

Of course, campaigns like the push to cancel the ShotSpotter contract do not emerge overnight. Our local coalition was built on years of research, trust built among organizers, knowledge generated collectively, and a persistent belief that we will win regardless of how powerful the opposition seems. First, for our part, we stake our claim that rigorous and strong research was critical to this campaign and for all organizers, particularly in the face of State and corporate power. Our campaign did not have the luxury of announcing implausible and inflated statistics ("zero false positives in over 20,000 alerts" [11]) that are accepted at face value by virtue of proximity to State and corporate power. This is an important point: When organizing for justice, nobody will view your credentials as authentic when we are talking about power. Second, we are rooted in an abolitionist tradition that is only compatible with a clear-eyed rejection of technological fatalism. As Chris Gilliard reminds us when describing bans on the use of facial recognition technology, "No one would look at asbestos and say, 'Well, you can't outlaw chemistry'" [12] This draws us to another reminder for technology practitioners: "[T]he ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently" [13].

At the time of this writing, we've entered a phase in Chicago where the existing ShotSpotter contract will be decommissioned after September. This does not resolve the larger issues of mass surveillance, data extraction, or digitally-driven state violence, but the decision represents a major organizing victory following coalition-building and rigorous research efforts.

As Alfredo Bonnano, John Carpenter, and Guy Debord all remind us, we experience the world and culture through symbols and this relationship with symbols can be broken. Bonnano writes, "Every now and then we reemerge due to a surviving trace of culture and become aware of what is happening to our ears. But this step cannot be taken without mediation and support" [14]. Building solidarity is a pre-condition to building kinder worlds. We must expand where we challenge power and build solidarity across our workplaces and communities to change how technology shapes our world.

Against Techno-Optimism

While we've highlighted the work we labored on in collaboration with community members, it would be a mistake to think companies like

ShotSpotter and research into surveillance tech are rogue exceptions. Among STEM practitioners, we see a tendency toward techno-optimist beliefs, which must be challenged. Recent critiques of tech billionaires have pointed to a rise of accelerationist rhetoric, a set of philosophies positing that accelerating economic, social, and technological development toward a point of collapse can lead to a viable post-collapse society. And even before these newer tendencies, political scientist James C. Scott spoke disparagingly of what he called "high-modernist ideologies" guiding Western statecraft: "a strong, ... muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the master of nature (including human nature), and above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws. ... It was, accordingly, uncritical, unskeptical, and thus unscientifically optimistic about the possibilities for the comprehensive planning of human settlement and production" [15].

A commitment to uprooting that which causes inequity, oppression, and domination requires the courage to destroy.

Ultimately, regardless of what these ideologies are called, it's apparent to us that the futurist utopias they express are an uncritical aesthetic. The function of these techno-optimist ideologies is to justify authoritarian, elitist, and dominating practices enhancing State and corporate power at the expense of communities denied autonomy.

We find these techno-optimist frameworks to be dangerous and self-justifying. Following a logic akin to imperialism, techno-optimist ideologies share a vague notion of a greater good that can be achieved via domination—be it through extraction from exploitable communities, territory capture through extensive hardware deployments, or population control via automated systems. Prominent biologist and historian of science Stephen Jay Gould frequently warned of the way eugenics and genetic determinism have and continue to haunt scientific work. He wrote, "[s]cience must be understood as a social phenomenon, a gutsy, human enterprise, subject to external incentives and nasty prejudices" [16]. For Gould, and for us, science is "not the work of robots programmed to collect pure information" as techno-optimists may suggest.

In examining the way algorithmic technology is "implicated in global racial power relations" that underpin anti-Blackness, Safiya Noble writes that "[w]e have more data and technology than ever in our daily lives and more social, political, and economic inequality and injustice to go with it" [17]. Beyond a mode of techno-pessimism, where does this leave us?

Producing Knowledge and Reproducing Injustice

Lucy Parsons reminds us that "a long period of education must precede any great fundamental change in society" and it must be one geared toward "the development of self-thinking individuals" [1]. As researchers, scientists, and empiricists, a love of learning and a belief that it can help us achieve social progress is

certainly core. However, we must go beyond idealizing the accumulation of knowledge. We must emphasize a critical pedagogy that interrogates how knowledge is produced, what kinds of knowledge are incentivized, and how the accumulation of knowledge actually interacts with the world we live in. Simply, knowledge production cannot be divorced from questions of value, ethics, and power.

An uncomfortable truth we must face is that the utility of knowledge does not grant it absolute moral importance. Reflecting on racism and the climate crisis, social ecologist and Black anarchist Modibo Kadalie points out "human knowledge has taken a dangerous direction" where its expansion has fed ecological catastrophe. The reasons he gives are because "[s]cientific development is entangled with the production of both war materials and goods for markets [and] [c]apital needs to supply these markets, so it needs to destroy more of the environment or transform it" [18].

Neither we nor Kadalie want to wholly reject knowledge production or technological development. Following Kadalie's words, we believe the "task of science should be to integrate technology into society in such a way that provides for an ecologically sound world, a world in which we won't be shooting at one another all the time [and a] world without these giant prisons" [18]. Now, how do we get there?

A critical part of our work is public education, sharing both our political analysis and technical knowledge. To that end, we put on workshops, create infographics, and guide original research into surveillance technologies. One such project is a primer on all of the known surveillance technologies in Chicago. For years, we have kept detailed documentation via ChicagoPoliceSurveillance.com on the known tools of police, efficacy, and legal concerns as well as the many funding streams for these tools (some of which rely on off-the-books funding sources [19]).

If the current modalities of learning and producing knowledge reproduce existing social prejudices, scholars like Saidiya Hartman highlight that tacked on educational reforms are insufficient for liberatory change [20]. Speaking of white supremacy, she states that it "can't be rectified by learning 'how to be more antiracist.'" For Hartman and ourselves, liberatory practice requires "a radical divestment in the project of whiteness" via a "redistribution of wealth and resources." It requires "the abolition of the carceral world, ... of capitalism, ... a remaking of the social order, and nothing short of that is going to make a difference" [20]. While we may see similar lines of thinking across critical fields like the history and philosophy of science, it's not often that we see these arguments take place within STEM writ large.

Techno-Revolt and Revolution

While evil flourishes in banality, liberatory praxis has no such luxury. A commitment to uprooting that which causes inequity, oppression, and domination requires the courage to destroy. Recognizing that we can collectively set the conditions for more just worlds to emerge only via the devastation of harmful socio-political relations, we are reminded of the dictum by anarchist Mikhail Bakunin who wrote that "[t]he urge to destroy is also a creative urge." And in realizing that the will toward liberation exists as a profound love for others juxtaposed against an immense revulsion at all which uphold tyranny, revolutionary George Jackson wrote of the

"[p]erfect love, perfect hate" [21], he felt inside of himself and we hope to cultivate in ourselves.

The formation of LPL as a place for challenging surveillance was born out of several like-minded individuals working to form the organization. None of us had formal education in public policy but were still able to scratch out our expertise through our research experience and shared commitment to each other. LPL can exist because of a shared possibility of solidarity and above all, we sought a project that brought us political enjoyment. We are reminded from Bonanno that, "It's easy. You can do it yourself. Alone or with a few trusted comrades. Complicated means are not necessary. Not even great technical knowledge. Capital is vulnerable. All you need is to be decided" [22].

Acknowledgment

This piece was collectively written by members of Lucy Parsons Labs (LPL). LPL explores technology's role in creating harm and counters it through education, investigation, and litigation. Initially a collaborative of technologists and transparency activists named after the 19th-century Chicago labor organizer, agitator, and anarchist, LPL is currently structured as a 501(c)3. We believe liberation comes from sustained community relationship-building and are continuously working alongside our co-travelers to deepen each other's work.

For more information, please visit our website at lucyparsonslabs.com and follow us on social media.

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