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Review of *Inequity in the Technopolis: Race, Class,
Gender, and the Digital Divide in Austin* edited by
Joseph Straubhaar, Jeremiah Spence, Zeynep
Thfekci, and Roberta G. Lentz

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Inequity in the Technopolis: Race, Class, Gender, and the Digital Divide in Austin. Edited by Joseph Straubhaar, Jeremiah Spence, Zeynep Tufekci, and Roberta G. Lentz. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. xii + 284 pp. Illustrations, tables, maps, notes, references, appendices, index. \$55.00 cloth.

Austin, Texas, by most accounts, is one of the most attractive cities in America. It is said by many people and magazines to be one of the best cities in which to live. Outside of Silicon Valley, it possesses some of the best high-tech companies and the most generous investors in high technology. Young people from across the country attend the University of Texas at Austin—and few of them ever seem to leave. It has become the Urbantopia of our age, the model for the new “creative economy.”

But is it? How much of what we know about Austin is simply its branding, not its substance? This book by Joseph Straubhaar and his colleagues from the University of Texas suggests that all is not perfect in Urbantopia.

For many decades, Austin was simply another college town. But in the 1970s and 1980s several strategic decisions and some luck helped the city become a “technopolis”—a center of high technology in which all its residents, presumably, would have the technical skills and know-how to work and live in a high-tech world. The city council, the state government, and the University of Texas all conspired to attract the new high technology companies in the 1980s. IBM was the first to arrive, and the Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation furnished an additional boost in 1983. George Kozmetsky of the Business School at the University of Texas helped invent the term as well as a vision for the technopolis, in addition to providing a good deal of its energy and initial financial resources. Once Michael Dell decided to take early leave from the University of Texas in 1983 to begin his own computer firm, the new and revolutionary directions of the city were in place.

The specific question posed by the collaborators on this book is this: Has Austin as a high-tech, high-wire utopia man-

aged to address the question of inequality, particularly in the ways in which people negotiate and profit in it, or is it a utopia in which only the privileged can live and thrive? The research team addressed this question in two ways: by looking directly at the “digital divide,” the division in resources and access to the new technology among people of different races and social classes; and by considering the way in which the cultural, or spatial, geography of Austin plays into the access people have to this new world. A large number of students and a number of University of Texas faculty got involved in the research effort that unfolded over 10 years—among the students, the number was in the dozens. And the research itself was carried out in a very careful and meticulous way, including the novel (and adopted) methodological strategy of actually mapping the location of racial groups in Austin from the early 20th century to its late decades. Ethnographic studies were done of how young people used the libraries as well as the public facilities for access to the Internet; studies were made of the occupational distribution of the local labor market. Indeed, in terms of the research effort and the materials uncovered to examine the digital divide, this study is exemplary.

So what did the team discover? They learned that many local groups and people were well aware that not everyone might have equal access to the new technology. Local entrepreneurs like Dell and new local organizations consequently made a decided effort to try to bridge the digital divide and give disadvantaged groups equal access to high technology. Public venues were established where everyone could have access. Classes were held where students from disadvantaged backgrounds were taught the skills necessary to navigate this world. Classes were even held for adults to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with this new world.

Despite all these efforts and the good intentions of many public officials and private figures, the digital divide remains firmly in place today. Poverty itself has actually grown in Austin since the dot-com bust of 2000. And while lower-income adults may have been trained in the skills and know-how of this new high-tech world, they often can find no jobs in it. The various authors argue that the inequalities exist because the cultural geography of access continues to shape Austin—the rhythms and spaces of its public life are today pretty much the same as they were in the early part of the 20th century. In particular, Austin is still divided between East Austin, where the majority of African Americans and Latinos have lived since the 1930s and 1940s, and the rest of the city. Geography is indeed a matter of power.

The overall conclusions are compelling and important, though I have just a few academic quibbles. The book tends to be repetitive, the same arguments made in one chapter after another. The work also tries to use and implement the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, a well-regarded contemporary sociological theorist, but I, for one, did not find the theory nearly as helpful as the actual empirical discoveries made by the research team.

In the end, Austin may be the Urbantopia of today, but one with fundamental flaws and problems.

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