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# Post-Fordist Labor, Feminine Precariousness, and Reinvention of Civic Engagement: Within the Circuits of New Social Movements in Spain

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The politics of difference that feminists need to articulate must be rooted in a politics of experience that searches for specificity, heterogeneity, and connection *through struggle*, not through psychologistic, liberal appeals to each her own endless difference. Feminism is collective and difference is political, that is, about power, accountability, and hope. Experience, like difference, is about contradictory and necessary connection. (Donna Haraway, "Reading Buchi Emecheta" 109)

4 p.m., Madrid, barrio Lavapiés, Eskalera Karakola social center, seven women meet at the door. They are *precarias*, precarious women, as they call themselves. In this diverse group we find Spaniards along with immigrants from Ecuador. Most work in linguistic professions, translation and teaching foreign languages, but there is also an archaeologist and a cleaning person. Equipped with video and photo cameras, they begin a journey that takes them from the door of their social center through the urban labyrinth of the Spanish capital.

The women invite readers to witness their expedition in a short text included in a 260-page long book, which the author of this paper printed entirely, and legally, off the internet. *A la deriva. Por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina*, which can be translated as *Adrift. Within the Circuits of Feminine Precariousness*, is a curious book. Collectively authored by *Precarias a la Deriva* (Precarious Women Adrift)—a group of forty-four women from Madrid—it travels between fiction

and fact, essay and narrative, photography and print. It also comes complemented with a video production: a collage of short interviews, monologues, and shots of urban spaces of the Spanish capital. The video and the book narrate group expeditions, which start in Lavapiés, a half-dilapidated quarter of the Spanish capital populated by African and Latin immigrants, Chinese shopkeepers, students, and leftist youth. Traversing streets, subway stations, stores, bars, and parks, these journeys end in diverse locations of Madrid.

The word “precarious” is defined here as mobile, rushed, instantaneous, ungrounded, and sliding on the surface. The way it is employed in the text, however, this adjective also evokes an act of enabling multiple perspectives, surprising conjunctions, and innovative approaches against stalled points of view. “Precarious” means existence as a journey, which discovers differences and the way to coexist among these differences. In a variety of micro-narratives, interviews, theoretical essays, and visual texts included in their book, the authors of *A la deriva* describe and examine the experience of precariousness from multiple points of view. Out of this examination there emerges a narrative of identity: a narrative that is rough, fragmentary, and sometimes even contradictory, as it tries to stay faithful to the conditions of postmodern capitalism. *Precarias* is not made up of professional authors but rather of women who are defined by the mobility of their temporary and part-time jobs, by their illegal status as migrants, or by their semiotic mobility between codes of language.

What sense can one make of this hybrid, mobile, overtly and diversely feminine text? A first glance reveals a penchant for all things technological: the ambulant narrative is not only produced with the help

of cameras but also comes richly illustrated with collages of technological imagery. One such collage features a computer motherboard decorated with icons of a truck, a computer mouse, a tool resembling a drill, a credit card, and a house: all of them linked into a networked itinerary. If treated as a riddle, the drawing may be interpreted as an invitation to put together one’s own narrative—one’s identity—out of tools and materials at hand and send it flowing through the information networks to reach others. Technological, mobile, hybrid, female, and networked; keywords of this essay, which attempts a closer look at the female *bricoleurs* and their journeys.

The closing illustration of the narrative in question, a map, depicts a muddled web of a city traversed by public transportation routes. To narrate the city is to draw an itinerary that reveals human—gendered—bodies moving in conjunction with the urban space and the networks of technology that compose it. The journey through the city follows an ad-hoc itinerary decided by the tracks of the subway network. It is an itinerary that joins movement of the body with the flow of language, where stories can be best shared in motion. Once the crew settles inside the subway train, one of the English professors begins to narrate her trajectory: from Quito, Ecuador, via Brazil and Massachusetts, and finally to the temporary final stop, Madrid—and this, most likely, only temporarily. Along the way she traverses spaces and trades professions to locate her identity in the precarious and the mobile, the only constants of life’s trajectory. The narrator concludes that this is an identity that breaks with expectations, betrays assigned roles, and defies patterns of behavior, thus re-evaluating stereotypes of women. Abruptly, this conversation on multilevel mobility is interrupted by the

stopping of the train. The crew drifts into San Fernando de Henares station on the outskirts of Madrid, the first destination of their urban journey.

Crossing the desolate landscape of abandoned train tracks, our storytellers visit the part-time workplace of one of the English teachers: an industrial building of NCR, the National Cash Registers company. It becomes clear that the journey has quite a specific purpose: it is an investigation. *Precarias* searches to elucidate the landscape of the postindustrial economy that is intimately entwined with their own conditions of mobility. Equipped with notebooks and recorders, the female researchers put to good use their communicative skills to interview the NCR employees and this way “make sense of the connections between the structural changes of the economy and our own precarious work” (81).

What is the role of an English teacher in a multinational corporation that installs and services ATMs in chain restaurants and malls? As we learn, English becomes “necessary” for the technicians servicing cash machines and their managers to keep their jobs. Structural changes of the early 1990s related to transnational mergers reduced the number of workers up to 400%, enforced temporary and part-time employment, and centralized operations in other European countries. Much of the work done in NCR takes place over the phone and on the internet. It also takes place in English, which infiltrates even the Madrid NCR where offices are labeled in this “international” language.

The visit on the NCR premises is brief. After they have gathered their notes and recordings, *Precarias* leaves the company’s building to reach other destinations enumerated on their itinerary, which follows the logic of the new economy based on

electronic finances and transnational communications. Thus the next destination of the journey is an internet café on Montera street, a workplace of many self-employed translators in need of wired computers and printers. We are back in the subway train. On this journey in search of identity, it is the displacement of the body that again sets dialogue and reflection into motion. The enormous, industrial-looking building of NCR that hosts a meager forty employees confirms the familiar discourse of postindustrial capitalism. And yet, despite the experience of precariousness and instability that the travelers share with the NCR workers, the common narrative that *Precarias* ventures to encounter in their excursion proves to be elusive. NCR remains an alien territory. It is only during the journey back in the subway train, joined together by a common enterprise, that our investigators experience a sense of commonality:

Nos hemos encontrado en esa alianza temporal que ha emprendido un viaje desde la Karakola, en esa inesperada alegría de estar juntas perdiéndonos por las arterias de la ciudad. Nos hemos encontrado, en el tren, hablando del desarraigo, después de la lectura del relato sobre esa vida vivida como un viaje del cual una desconoce la próxima parada. [...]. También nos hemos encontrado en algunos gestos: [...] rascándonos los bolsillos para hacer un bote para el billete del cercanías, colándonos en el metro camino de Sol, saliendo del metro y quedándonos pasmadas ante un inmenso cartel de Niké, con una pregunta ‘quién eres tú? Descúbrete a ti misma’ y ‘6 modelos de mujer’ como perversa respuesta siempre reducible a una única mucho más sencilla: *nike-women.com* [...]. (82-83)

We found ourselves in this temporal alliance embarking on a journey from Karakola House, in this sudden joy of being together, of getting lost in the arteries of the city. We found ourselves in the metro, talking about being deracinated, narrating our lives as journeys of which no one knows the next stop. [...] We also found ourselves echoing each other's gestures: [...] delving into our pockets to chip in for the train ticket, sneaking into the metro station towards the center, coming out to experience a wave of fury in front of an immense Nike poster exclaiming, 'Who are you? Find yourself!' and reading 'Six models of a woman,' as a perverse response always reducible to an even simpler one: *nikewomen.com* [...].<sup>1</sup>

Searching to answer the very question of identity reiterated by the Nike ad, *Adrift. Within the Circuits of Feminine Precariousness* relies on mobile, fragmentary, inconclusive narratives; narratives in motion and about mobility. We traverse the landscape of postindustrial Madrid: made up of streets and subway stations with their tapestry of commercial posters, supermarkets and internet centers, and, in the end, private homes where the transient labor of cleaning or translation takes place and merges with everyday, mundane activities. In this journey we witness an emergence of commonality, which shapes itself out of the flow of conversations and gestures, in the midst of a shared enterprise.

This practice of tracing affiliations and similarities, of constructing a common space in the shifting and fragmentary landscape of a contemporary metropolis has been called a *deriva*—a drift. Mimicking the unstable conditions in which *Precarias* is compelled

to search for identity, the performance of a drift—groundlessness in drag—affirms and, at the same time, challenges the fragmentation and fluidity of postindustrial identifications. *Drifting* becomes an artistic practice, if we define art as a creative re-appropriation and de-familiarization of what is customary. A drift is a metaphorical performance of the mobility that saturates everyday experience, and, at the same time, it transforms this mobility, as *Precarias'* women move differently, move *together* within the circuits of the postindustrial environment:

El desviarnos de nuestros recorridos designados permite una discontinuidad de la situación de nuestras propias vidas. Tenemos la oportunidad de abandonar nuestros roles interiorizados, nuestros lugares habituales para adentrarnos en otras realidades.[...]. El derivar permite atravesar con nuestros cuerpos, nuestras mentes, tales realidades y hacernos así parte de ellas. Durante nuestra travesía agudizamos nuestros sentidos y empiezan a bullir las ideas hasta que salen espontáneas y las repensamos en colectivo, las reorganizamos, desordenamos, apuntamos en una libreta mientras la otra sopla al oído. Aquí no hay nada por descubrir, todo está tendido frente a nosotras esperando a ser interpretado, a ser hilado con conexiones. (88)

Deviating from our customary routes allows us to redefine our situation. We gain an opportunity to abandon interiorized stereotypes and habitual roles, to enter other realities [...]. *Drifting* allows us to traverse with our bodies, with our minds these realities and to make ourselves a part of them. As we travel, our senses sharpen and ideas begin to sprout; they emerge

spontaneously, and we rethink them collectively, reorganize, disorganize and record them in the notebook, as one whispers into the ear of another. There is nothing to discover; all is here in front of us, waiting to be interpreted, linked together.

Drifts are an active response to the environment of postindustrial economy, which defines the dominant modes of labor and socialization in contemporary capitalism.

This creative work that *Precarias* takes on is intrinsically and explicitly grounded in the theoretical approach that defines our contemporary period as post-Fordism. Dispersed in many places in the book are reflections on the shifts that European societies have undergone in the last few decades as a consequence of the dissipation of the Fordist-Keynesian mode of economy. The Fordist model privileges the nuclear family as the core element of sociopolitical organization. Stable gender roles parallel the stability of professions. The model Fordist society is supported by a gender-specific division of labor. With post-Fordist restructuring, which shifts material production from the North to the South, this model breaks down. In the North dominant forms of labor center on the sphere of “abstract production” rooted in communication technologies and a service economy. Flexibility, fast adaptation, communicative skills, and the ability to socialize become features of highly valued workers. From Fordist production we pass to post-Fordist reproduction as the essence of economic activity. It is a reproduction of linguistic and communicative structures, but also a reproduction, or maintenance of life in its various dimensions.

An array of presumably marginal, and yet crucial, occupations emerges at the center stage of the new economy. In the na-

rratives gathered in the book we have so far encountered language workers: teachers and translators. However, the text also includes among its protagonists a diverse group of communication workers, media producers, as well as caretakers, maids and other domestic employees, and sex workers. Communication and care, in the broad meaning of these words—from securing basic subsistence to providing pleasure—are keywords of the new economy. It is not by chance that *Precarias* is made up of women. In the post-Fordist economy, the feminization of labor becomes an ambivalent practice, signifying the breakdown of the gender division of labor, but also symbolizing desired qualities of the postindustrial employee. Clichés of adaptation, communicativeness, or caretaking are stereotypical designations of femininity, which now move out of the domestic sphere to saturate the public sphere. Feminine precariousness from the book’s title points us to a complex set of phenomena that embrace the inclusion of women in the workforce and also symbolic transformations related to the dominant forms of labor.

In her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway introduces the notion of feminization of labor, which helps elucidate the ambivalent function of gender categories in post-Fordism. For the scholar, “feminization,” along the lines of the arguments *Precarias* makes in their book, refers both to real conditions of work in the new economy and stereotypical images of femininity, which at present extend into the entire workforce, regardless of the gender of the workers. On the one hand, work is becoming feminized as it increasingly implies being:

made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force [...] subjected to time arrangements

on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day” (166).

On the other hand, we face issues pertaining to the dismantling of the welfare state, the loss of jobs by men and the transfer of employment to women. The public space of labor entwines closely with what used to be known as the privacy of the home. The unpaid labor of sustaining life and the income-producing “public” labor can no longer be separated if the same women are responsible for both. The women who shape their hybrid identities out of this public/private collapse are key protagonists of post-Fordism.

In many narratives and essays included in *Adrift*, we find reflections on the symbolic and material approximation between the labor of production and the labor of reproduction. Work time invades leisure time, emotional and material subsistence of families increasingly relies on paid labor exercised by migrant women. Sex workers are featured in many narratives and conversations in the book, and occasionally even play a central role as emotional and physical caretakers.

The charged notion of “feminization” points us as well to a radical interpenetration between the public and the private. These sexualized and gendered terms become inseparable, as many narratives included in *Adrift* demonstrate. As Donna Haraway claims:

If it was ever possible ideologically to characterize women’s lives by the distinction of public and private domains—suggested by images of the division of working-class life into factory and home, of bourgeois life into market and home, and of gender

existence into personal and political realms—it is now totally misleading ideology, even to show how both terms of these dichotomies construct each other in practice and in theory. (“A Cyborg Manifesto.” 170)

A web of crossings, public *and* private, inner *and* outer, identities *and* locations, emerges as the field onto which subjects in the new economy etch their lives. Haraway imagines a network of permeable boundaries that radically merges the outside and the inside, to use an obsolete spatial metaphor. *Precarias*, I argue, responds to such an image, as they move freely among various modes of spatiality: streets, metro stations and trains, private homes, multinational corporate offices, the body, and the cyberspace. To complement and reinforce this physical mobility, they produce a text that switches discursive forms, skipping between personal tales, interviews, reports, and essayistic reflection.

One strategy of communication that speaks to this fluid space of the hyper-connected postindustrial economy, which simultaneously threatens the life of the collective with new divisions, is personal narrative. If we follow Haraway’s arguments, it is not paradoxical to claim that the public “non-space” of a subway car can be an ideal location for retelling life-stories and revealing intimate experience. As we have seen, the journey across depersonalized and annexed by multinational territories of Madrid has served precisely as an experience of intimate bonding. As we find out through their narratives, *Precarias* goes even further in revealing the permeable status of the boundaries that structure postindustrial spatiality. The “external” travels crisscrossed by links of intimacy, emotion, and caring come complemented with “internal” journeys into the privacy of homes, families, and bodily experience.

Many narratives collected in *Adrift* include detailed descriptions of the daily life of an immigrant domestic: her struggles with exclusion and both mental and physical abuse, as well as her irreplaceable role as caregiver. We also encounter intensely personal, private texts that explore the entanglement of space-times of labor and domesticity. In her short narrative, one of *Precarias'* women nicknamed Mona Mür, traces a narrative that seamlessly navigates between the interiority of her bodily experience and what used to be the exteriority of her paid labor. Mona's minuscule apartment in the center of Madrid is saturated with instances of labor, which cannot be separated from her experience of "domestic space." "Absurd Velocity. Going Ultrasound in Editorial Space-Time" opens with an account of fatigue and a sense of being overwhelmed by many tasks of a freelance editor "collaborating" with prestigious Spanish publishing houses. The narrator employs a detailed, detached style of description appropriate to her profession. Labor is a continuum of focused intensity punctuated by episodes of rest. It invades the space of psycho-physiological body and shapes the material and mental environment of the subject with overpowering exclusivity:

Esos paréntesis de intensidad consisten en encerrarse un número indeterminado de días con el libro en cuestión, armada de pilot rojo, marcador fluorescente, lápiz, goma, ordenador, diccionarios de diverso tipo y manuales varios de gramática y estilo, y no salir de allí hasta que has dejado el libro sin una errata. (187)

These bracketed periods of intensity consist of isolating oneself at home for an undetermined period of time with the book in question—armed with a red pen, fluorescent marker,

pencil, eraser, computer, dictionaries of various sorts and diverse manuals of grammar and style—and of not going out until one leaves no trace of error.

Mona depicts her freelance existence as an incessant race with "time" to fit the necessary tasks of subsistence—shopping, washing, cleaning the house—into the irregular periods of rest is a juggler's exercise. Yet, this narrative opens into another dimension, ceasing simply to be a diary of an overworked precarious employee when it goes "public" as a part of the political project that *Precarias* enacts. Winding her way through the labyrinth of her daily tasks, Mona continually repositions herself as a member of *Precarias*, actively involved in the work of Karakola House. Thus she converts her daily routines into material for establishing communication and sharing.

This new "public" dimension that *Precarias* creates in their discourse and action is a hybrid category that crosses boundaries of the inside and the outside, of the natural and the constructed. The body becomes a cyborg-like site of this hybridization and hence its central site in the project. In the last stop of their drift, the precarious language experts record a conversation that centers on the polyvalent canvas of the body. Paused in front of the Nike poster, a "condensation of identity/ies" with its multiple possible modes of femininity, they find this quintessence of postmodern capitalism to pose the very same question they wanted to ask. The narrator of the last fragment of this *deriva* takes the lead from there and begins to trace her bodily experience, narrating an imagined drift that takes the participants to her kitchen, to her yoga class, and to her bed. The journey inside the body completes the outer travels, mirroring the confusion of intimacy and public experience of post-Fordism that *Precarias* explores and appropriates:

El cuerpo es uno de los ejes que hemos definido para nuestros recorridos. Se trata de una fuente de apercebimiento y mucho más. A mí me gusta verlo así: el poder se prende del cuerpo condicionándolo, aclimatizándolo, domesticándolo, poniéndolo a punto para el desarrollo de una determinada vida. El cuerpo es un efecto material, una materialización de la subjetividad. (91)

The body is an axis that we have chosen to traverse. The body is the source of perception—and much more than that. I like to see it this way: the body supplies strength once we condition it, acclimatize it, domesticate it, and make it ready to develop a desired kind of life. The body is a material effect, a materialization of subjectivity.

The body becomes an object/subject of manipulation, of incessant shaping in search of identity, as much as it remains a source of fear and disorder. Its shape and appearance register particular trajectories molded by social and spatial locations. The body produced by a mother's daily schedules and the body emerging from a housewife's trajectories are contrasted with the body of the narrator, a translator, "made of communication links, interpretations and mobility in the web and in the city, [a body] traversing the *continuum* work/militancy/socialization" (92).

The narrator of this verbal *deriva* guides us through her corporeal itinerary where work routine meshes with the chores of everyday subsistence, with social interaction and political activism as a member of *Precarias*, with leisure, and with sex. The discontinuous public/private trajectory is marked by points of "rupture:" cooking and yoga, two strategies of "disconnection," which allow

her paradoxically to find continuity of bodily experience and connection with the environment. Traversing the trajectories of the body, working both from within a daily routine and from the distance of reflexive practices repositions the post-Fordist female body. From the site of incessant change and distinction, of incessant molding, which constructs the body as a channel for the flow of capital as in the Nike poster, the strategy of drift shifts us to a different perspective. Re-appropriation of bodily experience in postindustrial reality is a question of awareness and articulation of one's moldable material and discursive position within the environment of late capitalism. This re-appropriation, which takes the form of narratives filled with the minutiae of daily existence, does not change the conditions in which the body is being constructed as a subject/object of capital flow, but it does produce a sense of connection and commonality among those who share these narratives and thus overcome the alienation and seclusion of their own bodily trajectories, be they the trajectories of illegal immigrants or Spanish nationals, independent professionals or domestic workers.

*Adrift* is thus an effort to create a site for the critical articulation of the transformations that affect capitalist societies from within a space that collapses the public and the private, exteriority and interiority. Here the "privacy" of the body in its physical and mental dimensions entwines seamlessly with what used to be known as the public experience of labor, which now imperceptibly overflows into domestic space. As we have seen, as it reports and analyzes these conditions of general human experience in post-Fordism, *Adrift* is an exercise in search of a collective identity in the mobility of labor, of location, and of identity. In the very center of Spain we are faced with a post-national landscape of shifting and

fluid identifications. The grand narratives of nation and labor as foundations of identity become radically destabilized. The groundlessness experienced by our narrators is an effect of the changing makeup of the European nation-state. It is a consequence of material and discursive mobility, of human migrations and transnational economy. Yet, what is original about *Precarias* is not the recognition of groundlessness, but an effort to refigure commonality from within the fragmented experience. By tracing connections, investigating similarities of condition and experience, creating new platforms for public coexistence in a reality that all too often propels us to withdraw into seclusion, *Adrift* creatively re-appropriates post-Fordist conditions. Let us look more closely at this re-appropriation.

Italian philosopher and political activist, Paolo Virno analyzes intellectual and emotional structures that follow from flexible and immaterial forms of labor. Virno's argument about the nature of contemporary politics will help us approach the way *Precarias* configures the meaning of political activism in terms of the radical groundlessness of identity. Virno takes on Hannah Arendt's assertion of the close relationship between politics and labor. For Arendt, politics points to the:

human experience of beginning something again, an intimate relationship with contingency and the unforeseen, being in the presence of others. (*A Grammar of the Multitude* 51)

Politics thus become akin to labor. Virno inverts this argument to maintain that in post-Fordism, labor takes on the features of politics. Contemporary labor, the labor of a flexible accumulation period, to add a

term Virno does not use, is an experience of contingency, of the unforeseen, and of the possible. Postmodern labor, centered on communication and service, "brings into play the talents and the qualifications which, according to a secular tradition, had more to do with political action" (51).

*Adrift*, as it enacts and explores this "being in the presence of others" in the conditions of contingency and uncertainty, searches to revive and bring out into the open the political potential of post-Fordist flexible labor. *Precarias's* creative work comes from a conviction that enactment of truly political action can emerge only from an investigation and understanding of one's conditions, which are shared by others despite, or rather within, the mobility and fragmentation of experience. And the conditions in which identities are shaped today are largely described by labor, which in the new economy invades the most intimate spheres of body and psyche.

As Virno argues in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, the "training" that post-Fordist labor requires can serve to teach us political skills. As they "drift" among the contingency of the post-national landscape of Madrid, *Precarias* enacts situations in which creative and communicative skills begin to serve to revive the diminishing public space and public interaction. As Arendt holds, politics understood as a general human experience, not party politics, involves being in the presence of others and being creative. *Precarias* re-imagines politics as a space of public creativity where politics needs to be rediscovered by employing imagination and experimentation and by enabling circulation. Politics is, at the same time, an experience intimately connected to the prevailing forms of contemporary labor, as it appropriates its flexibility, mobility, and emphasis on communication. In other words, *Precarias* takes seriously Paolo Virno's asser-

tion that the antidote for “bad sentiments” that saturate the post-Ford era—opportunism, cynicism, resignation—“can be tracked down only in what for the moment appears to be poison” (84).

The response to the post-Fordist situation that emerges from *Precarias's* work is an attempt to create a public space, a space of being in the presence of others. Yet, as Michael Warner points out, “a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time” (62). *Adrift* is, indeed, part of a larger project of enabling what Warner calls “stranger sociability.” Individual drifts coexist and co-signify with other texts and projects. In fact, starting with this text, we can trace a dense network of creative political and artistic work emerging in Spain, where political aspirations of institutionalized literature and art surrender all-too-often to the politics of marketing. *Precarious Women Adrift*, collectively authored by 44 women as well as anonymous male and female contributors, is a project that arose as a direct response to the general strike in Spain on January 23rd, 2002. It searches for new forms of political engagement more responsive to the conditions of post-Fordist flexible labor. The authors introduce the book as a part of a process of opening a “space of encounter for discourse” and action, as:

[...] la primera criatura, polifónica y en proceso, de una trayectoria de investigación-acción sobre la precarización de la existencia (dicha en femenino) [...]. Un *frankenstein* coral hecho de remiendos y encuentros en una búsqueda de nombres comunes, singularidades a potenciar, formas de cooperación, resistencia,

fuga y espacios de organización desde la multiplicidad. (11)

[...] the first polyphonic and in-process outcome of an action-investigation of increasing precariousness of life (in feminine) [...]. A Frankenstein collectively assembled from scraps and pieces in search of common names, individualities ready to multiply, in search of forms of cooperation, resistance, avoidance, in search of spaces to be organized from within multiplicity.

*Adrift*, with its *derivas* as collaborative *re-discoveries* of the logic of precariousness and social disconnect in post-Fordist environments, is only a part of many other projects that *Precarias* puts in motion: workshops, reunions, support centers, happenings. When I find myself in Madrid attending one of their meetings on March 19th, 2006, *Precarias* is overflowing with ideas. A new project they are designing includes diverse activities linked by the goal of enabling and building networks of communication and support. Down-to-earth projects coexist with plans for new happenings and artistic ventures as creative collective responses to the unstable and unpredictable world of post-Fordism.

The way *Precarias* works is by vivid brainstorming and exchange of skills, where everyone contributes with their specific abilities and creative ideas. New plans include constructing a computer center with internet and inexpensive telephone service for immigrants, legal workshops on immigration laws, women's self-defense, bulletin boards where various services are exchanged. At the same time, utilizing the skills of media specialists who belong to the group, *Precarias* is creating a soap-opera and an internet radio show with a nighttime

phone-in advice line. The protagonist of the soap-opera, a parody of a cartoon Super-woman, has a day job as an erotic phone operator, but after dark sets out on her real mission. Magically endowed with an internet bio-port for an easy Google access and equipped with an iron, which leaves marks in the manner of Zorro on Madrid's buildings, as her weapon she navigates the urban labyrinth of postindustrial Madrid to solve problems for fellow precarious women.

The parodic Super-heroine is one of the crucial figures that metaphorically embodies the message of *Precarias'* work and as such deserves a closer examination. She is what Donna Haraway would call a political cyborg figure: a figure of shredded, broken identity, a figure that incorporates nonhuman parts and pieces. This hybridity, precisely, is the source of her strength and ability to make a difference, even if only symbolically, within the framework of a comic popular narrative. This fictional figure embodies "a network ideological image, suggesting the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body-politic" (Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" 170). The recognition of the cyborg nature of human identity, its ultimate hybridity, permits a creation of new circuits of integration based not on similarity but on radical difference that is as much a private as it is a public experience. In this figure and in their entire piece, *Precarias* elaborates images of a radically incomplete, composite, fragmentary subjectivity—an impossible identity. It is this recognition of the most intimate incompleteness and hybridity that opens onto the possibility of a community that is based on multiple crossing links that connect differences and not on an imposition of homogeneity. Super-heroine with her dramatically mutated cyborg body traverses the

landscapes of precariousness tracing links of connection and mutual support. Similarly, drifts are trajectories of exploration, which enact intimacy among women of different ethnicities, economic status, education, and profession gathered in a cyborg body politic made possible by the recognition of one's own cyborg nature.

*Precarias'* projects are marked by heterogeneity on various levels. The form of their work complements the narratives and symbolic figures of hybridity embedded in them. Their endeavors flow between fiction and reality, virtuality and concrete, grounded space. What remains constant is the notion of creating a space-time for exchange, for encounter and cooperation. The very process of how this work comes into being is, in itself, such a space-time, where Spanish and immigrant women of diverse professions and life trajectories meet to construct an on-going, open-ended, and multifaceted project. Moreover, the process expands onto an even richer collaboration: email reports give account of creative meetings with other groups, such as Maiz, an association of migrant women from Austria, who already have experience with happenings, radio, and other media work. Creating a common space is also a question of networking and exchange of know-how and experience.

Let us look at how *Precarias* designs the radio *culebrón* to examine a sample of their multidimensional activity. One of the email reports goes as follows in its colloquial, rapid style that records a brainstorming session:

Respecto a la producción comunicativa, la idea más aclamada fue la de un culebrón radiofónico, que pudiera jugar con el lenguaje de los sentimientos y a partir de ahí hablar

de otro modo de la cotidianeidad, con un tono de parodia. El culebrón podría tener una estructura modulable, que permitiera mezclar la realidad precaria con la ficción de la historia que va por capítulos: a modo de radionoticiario que se inserta en el culebrón, o de un personaje del culebrón que es periodista y se involucra en luchas precarias de la ciudad o... El culebrón estaría inserto y bebería de las historias que llegaran a la agencia precaria y también se conectaría con historias de fuera. Podría recibir sugerencias de fuera, como hacen algunos culebrones reales. (Fatimatta, unpaginated)

With respect to the communicative production, the best idea was the a radio soap-opera, which would play with the language of emotions and this way express a distinct mode of everydayness, in a parodic tone. The soap-opera would have a malleable structure to allow for a mixing between the reality of precariousness and the fiction of the story, organized in chapters. Into the soap-opera we would insert radio news clips, which would be presented by one of the protagonists who is involved in the precarious battles of the city, or... The soap-opera would be mixed with and based on stories that come to the Precarious Agency from the real world. It could receive suggestions from outside, as some real series do.

It is about connecting, about reaching beyond oneself to connect with others and also to gain distance from oneself; hence its parody. It is about creating fiction, but a fiction that is not a stalled, imposed imaginary, but rather one that draws on reality: on concrete, rooted, localized struggles of

everydayness. Imagination and mundane reality merge in the labor of making connections and building solidarity out of precariousness.

An official inauguration of these new projects was planned for May 15th, 2006, in one of Madrid's shopping centers, with a happening featuring the Super-heroine and an exhibition of the diverse activities the group sponsors. *Precarias* is, in the end, about creating "ongoing space" in which discourses and practices are reiterated. To comprehend the cultural form they are producing, we need to look at different levels that compose it. The individual events of their drifts were fixed in print and recorded to be placed in circulation, thus multiplying the acts of sharing and communication. The form of writing and recording parodies post-Fordism by repeating its conditions to question and challenge them, to search for their critical interpretation. The existence of the copy enhances the effect of *derivas*: the experience is now set "adrift," circulated, distributed, in a word, networked but also fixed and preserved in a material form. Out of this networking new projects arise, opening new spaces for inclusion and exchange.

Textual embodiments of *Precarias's* work function on another level as well. They are not limited to their own circuit of distribution, but rather integrated into a larger network of cultural production. On March 19th, as I sit down in a circle with *Precarias*, I have the curious experience of being in a place I have already imagined many times. As Karakola House is being renovated, the meetings are now held across the street, in *Traficantes de Sueños*, or Dream Traders, bookstore. A curious experience for me, since it was precisely through *Traficantes* web site that I came across *Precarias's* projects. The bookstore is filled with publications

of all sorts: theoretical treatises, fiction, or alternative magazines. Announcements of a rich program of workshops, meetings, and presentations creates a sense of a dynamic hub for intellectual exchange. *Traficantes* is a project which joins real- and cyber-space to produce an alternative environment for discourse circulation. On their web site *Traficantes* refuse to be called a publishing house, preferring to remain a forum or simply a bookstore, even if one of the crucial elements of their activity is, precisely, making texts public. Under the Creative Commons license, *Traficantes* put in circulation a variety of texts, from fiction, cultural criticism, and sociology to philosophy, civic activism, and books as unclassifiable as *Adrift* and texts by self-organized activist groups. It is on this website where work by *Precarias* gains a new dimension, as we see it side by side with other collective projects—such as *Colectivo Situaciones* from Argentina—and learn about the ongoing dialogue and exchange of experience between them.

Creating public spaces may, as it happens with *Precarias*, appeal to dreams of inclusion, dialogue, exchange. These dreams emerge on the borders between practicality and utopia, the concrete and the virtual. The projects described here look into the future, as they embody ideals of cooperation and re-appropriation of post-Fordist conditions of precariousness and mobility in a material form of artistic undertakings. Yet, these projects also come into completion in the here and now, in the very midst of the post-Fordist crisis: their value is located in the *process* of imagining, creating, exchanging ideas. In this sense they are as much artistic as they are political.

Let us consider how political philosophy can help us understand the role of endeavors such as *Precarias* or *Traficantes de Sueños* in creating new spaces for public

engagement. Michaele L. Ferguson's democratic theory illuminates how to consider the role of these projects in the ongoing process of creating democracy, which requires sustained attention in order to maintain its social relevance. Ferguson argues that much of democratic theory so far has shared a belief that "sameness is important because [...] it helps to imagine ourselves as a community" (1). Consequently, a sense of commonality is crucial to generating civic identity and hence maintaining democracy. Yet, in fact, the very concept of identity, of sharing *something* in common, becomes problematic once we try to define it. Every attempt to determine what is that *thing* that we all have in common and that thus makes us share identity will unjustly exclude some or, perhaps, erroneously include others. We need only consider attempts to identify what genders women.

In order to overcome the paradox of democratic theory, Ferguson takes issue with the assumption that commonality is essential to creating democracy. She draws on Linda Zerilli's feminist theory, which posits gender identity not as truth but as a political claim, i.e. a claim that is partial, seeks assent, and is contestable. Ferguson thus argues for an understanding of identity as an ongoing set of practices whose continuation, precisely, gives identity meaning. Gender—and, by extension, other types of identity—is "meaningful not because it is grounded in sameness, but because it comes out in complex, interrelated practices that reveal that it is a part of our worldview" (12).

From the perspective of post-Fordist criticism, the tenuous structure of contemporary labor corrodes from within the fiction of commonality, and, hence, the very possibility of civic identity and democratic rule. Yet, if we adapt the theoretical lens provided by Ferguson, we can invert this argument to see that, in fact, current climate

opens a space of immense potential for reviving civic exchange and cooperation. The very features of post-Fordism such as, as Virno describes them, mobility, precariousness, and communicativeness can propel democratic process. Ferguson concludes her discussion by claiming that:

Democratic theorists and actors alike should aim [...] not at trying to identify what is or should be the core of our shared identity, but rather at perpetuating the debate over what it means. This is sharing identity with others: recognizing that our claims to identity cannot be sovereign, because they are contestable. (24)

Thus only “the proliferation of a diversity of practices” can “ensure the coherence of a civic identity over time” (20). Civic identity as a political claim (and not truth claim) gains strength not because we have something definitive in common, but precisely because we *cannot* identify this something, and thus we argue and debate about it: and we do this because we care. We organize our social discourse around the paradox of identity and this process of organizing discourse brings us together and propels us to re-imagine and engage in the civic sphere. Care for and involvement with one another are questions of practice, not of a preexisting essence.

Ferguson’s arguments about civic identity, I argue, help us to elucidate how in post-Fordist era art can gain political meaning without losing its specificity as art. Leaving the complex theoretical discussion on the paradox of identity, I focus on the material-economic conditions in which the sense of identification is shaken if it does not dissipate altogether. How can we create and maintain identity if its core fac-

tor in capitalism: labor, becomes radically unstable? How can we include within our civic collective those who are migrants or those who are relegated to the fringes, even if central to postindustrial economy: sex workers, domestic employees, caretakers? In the context of this essay, Virno’s description of post-Fordism reveals that we are in a period of fragmentation and radical mobility that nevertheless offers us the tools to create and perpetuate new forms of civic identity. The training in flexibility, communication, and sociability assimilates labor and politics and thus potentially empowers subjects as more creative, inventive, and flexible. *Precarias* puts these qualities to good use in their artistic endeavors at various levels, opening a forum for perpetuating debate about what we have in common, even if we differ, even if our own sense of identity vanishes. *Adrift* and other projects by *Precarias* and similar groups utilize artistic strategies such as metaphoric language and image that mimics post-Fordist fragmentation and fluidity. In their drifts *Precarias* speaks through a consciously employed form that connects the intellectual to the experiential to articulate and communicate their experience amidst the uncertainty of contemporary reality. Much of the text of *Adrift* recounts intimate, personal stories and narrates micro-practices of solidarity and exchange, as the subway escapade illustrates. These practices mimic the post-Fordist collapse between the public and the private, as they travel between inner and outer spaces and spin tales of intimacy into political discourse. Yet, no matter how meaningful its form, the narrative does not exist on its own rights. It is, rather, the *act* of sharing this narrative that becomes central. *Precarias* is, all in all, a social activism project, and they locate their work within a larger context. Through the circulation

of discourse, which takes place both in cyberspace and physical environments, a process of creating collectivity emerges, as the very fragmentation and heterogeneity of contemporary experience is re-appropriated to corroborate a new, process-based, civic identity.

Through innovative projects that combine artistic practices and political activism, such as *Precarias*, the activity of deliberation, debate, and exchange can emerge from within post-Fordism. To borrow an expression from Donna Haraway, *Precarias* explores and consciously integrates the image of women in the circuit.<sup>2</sup> Their multifaceted artistic and political activity offers a chance to arrive at commonality, even if this commonality reflects the reality of precariousness and thus resists being fixed or stabilized.<sup>3</sup>

I have argued that real/virtual environments such as *Traficantes de Sueños* and diverse artistic and political projects they support and make public by providing a rich material infrastructure and discursive background for them, form a new, emergent and in-the-making, Habermasian “communicational space.” This space is necessary to open a field for democratic cooperation. As Joan Ramon Resina observes, such space does not emerge *ex-nihilo*: “it cannot be abstract space, but the space that arises from the interrelations among concretely situated subjects” (53).<sup>4</sup> For a crucial enactment of deliberation to persist on Ferguson’s terms, deliberation must take place in concrete life-circumstances not in abstract ideals of civic collaboration. The concreteness and uniqueness of human situations, which the project discussed in this essay makes visible, is necessary for the creation and recreation, enacting and continuous reenacting of democracy.

In their personal narratives, interviews, and reports, *Precarias* enacts the situated-ness of the subject so often reduced to abstractness in political theories. In times when increased hybridization of societies and destabilization of identities invade public consciousness, *Precarias* demonstrates that new forms of social and artistic work can become ways of reinventing “communicational spaces” for the new society. Recognizing the disruption of individual and, consequently, collective identities, *Precarias* takes instability as the very basis of their work. They embrace a cyborg-like fragmentation and heterogeneity of social imaginaries instead of creating myths of uniformity. It is from within hybridization that new, more inclusive of and more responsive to a multinational social makeup, imaginaries can arise. *Precarias* is conscious of the fact that on this hybrid social landscape that Spain is becoming in post-Fordism, links and connections can only be created by establishing a rich space for deliberation and exchange. They explore in their artistic and political work the possibilities that acting and creating in common can provide to establish a common context, which always remains a context-in-the-making. In their proclivity for all things technological and attention to physical space that enables communication and working together, they also recognize the crucial dimension of materiality in creating commonality, and thus they escape abstractions.<sup>5</sup> *Precarias* and similar projects emerge as multifaceted forms of cultural agency that respond to the complex material-semiotic circumstances of post-Fordism.

I would like to suggest that the projects discussed here form part of a larger, emerging movement in Spain and other nation-states. These projects supplement

the waning political role of official literature, whose publication is largely controlled by multinational, for-profit corporations. In Spain, and other countries, it seems that politically engaged art is shifting from the sphere of the literary to this new, emergent, technologically-mediated cultural environment. Methods of study, appropriate terminology and critical interdisciplinary tools that would connect literary, political, and sociological approaches await elaboration.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All translations of the Spanish original of *Adrift* and other texts by *Precarias* have been prepared by the author of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> As Donna Haraway explains, she uses this image after Rachel Grossman in order to:

[...] name the situation of women in a world so intimately restructured through the social relations of science and technology. I used the odd circumlocution, 'the social relations of science and technology,' to indicate that we are not dealing with a technological determinism, but with a historical system depending upon structured relations among people. But the phrase should also indicate that science and technology provide fresh sources of power, that we need fresh sources of analysis and political action [...]. Some of the rearrangements of race, sex, and class rooted in high-tech-facilitated social relations can make socialist-feminism more relevant to effective progressive politics. ("A Cyborg Manifesto" 165)

The exploration of the possibilities of commonality in the post-Fordist society informed by fragmentation, mobility, and the omnipresence of technology, in a broad sense of this word, can be summarized in the notion of the "integrated circuit." Technology here is both an actor in the post-Fordist restructuring of social life and a

tool to-be-appropriated and turned into a useful device in political struggles. The precarious women who are implied in one way or another in the project discussed here and whose lives are marked by specific, diverse, and heterogeneous experience and social position become integrated in a circuit of political action and artistic creation, which is enhanced by high-tech communication. The recognition of the specificity and uniqueness of their life trajectories, which are shared with others through intimate narratives and other discursive forms, enables them to begin forming links that do not "homogenize" but respect and appreciate differences.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to argue that *Precarias* addresses in their own way one of the crucial contentions of political philosophy of today, namely the need to reconcile a post-national, heterogeneous make up of contemporary societies and the need for common values and worldviews to enable coexistence. How to escape exclusions and conflicts that a return to nationalisms can produce and still provide for a strong social fabric? In the reality of multi-nationalism and dispersion of rigid identifications, there appears to emerge a need to theorize a new matrix for a non-exclusionary and tolerant coexistence. Scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, for example, establish a dual logic of civic identity and cultural diversity. To use Joan Ramon Resina's apt summary, for Habermas:

post-traditional identity relies on a juridical patriotism that 'relates not to the concrete totality of a nation but rather to abstract procedures and principles.' Interestingly, though, Habermas recognizes that an abstract patriotism deprived of cultural traditions will not hold. And while he admits that national forms of life continue to shape collective identities, he believes that those forms can coexist and interact without any need to gather them into a unified symbolic core. (51)

Now, this dualism seems to be a work of abstract reasoning that implies a possibility of cooperation without shared commonality. Civic

cooperation, of course, can happen in the conditions of cultural disunity only if we assume rational and selfless agents. *Precarias*, on the contrary, instead of claiming a need to marginalize the importance of concrete human bonds that national identities, as it is often believed, used to provide, is looking to create ways those bonds can be re-established in the conditions of cultural instability and heterogeneity. It is not about bracketing identity in the name of tolerance and multiplicity but, rather, about finding new original ways of constructing this identity through common practices that take place within heterogeneous and unstable experience. In other words, *Precarias* is closing the gap between culture and politics. Shared narratives and shared experiences that the multifarious projects by *Precarias* enact are, precisely, tools for *creating* cultural commonality so that a shared political or civic experience can emerge.

<sup>4</sup> It needs to be clarified that I am taking liberty here to misappropriate Joan Ramon Resina's arguments. In "The Scale of the Nation in the Shrinking World," the essay I quote, Resina reevaluates the importance of nationalisms in the globalizing world of today, which is often qualified as post-nationalist. Resina argues that nationalism should not be disposed of as it provides "the oil that lubricates the state" (71). Nationalism is, precisely, the set of practices and beliefs that can ensure a concrete enactment of the communicational space, the space wherein conflicts can be resolved jointly by politicians and their constituencies and democratic rule can be thus secured. Resina would surely disagree that projects such as *Traficantes* or *Precarias* could ever compete with the force of nationalisms. Instead of looking for alternatives to this historical lubricant of the life in common, Resina elaborates arguments supporting the value of nationalisms. In his view, pre-established commonality is still necessary for a democratic rule and this commonality can be secured most effectively by shared national traditions and values. As he argues, the Habermasian communicational space "presupposes a 'concrete' intersubjectivity: a shared language, a common set of references (provided by a culture), and an array of com-

mon values and conventions" (53). Artistic and political projects such as *Precarias* or *Traficantes*, because of their newness, ad-hoc nature, and proclivity for coincidence and paradox, within Resina's logic could not, as I assume, fulfill the role of a lubricant for democracy. Resina sees the crucial characteristic of national identity in the "slow sedimentation of experience in the land," which acquires in turn "omnipresence in the people's cultural memories" (66).

Yet, stability of location, gradual development of relationship and commonality within a shared territory is, precisely, the forbidden, illusionary quality in post-Fordism. The projects described in this essay are alternatives to the impossible nationalism: they intend to enact commonality in a rapid, dislocated, even erratic manner. They are paradoxical and parodic. They attempt the "impossible" enabling of communication and exchange without a preset common language, without shared points of reference. This way they are faithful to the conditions of contemporary experience instead of turning to myths.

<sup>5</sup> Materiality is a thread that runs through *Precarias'* imaginaries. Narratives, essays, and images put together by them are populated by motifs of the body, recording devices, transportation technologies, or urban infrastructure wound into the stories of post-Fordist mobility. Concrete material locations such as Karakola House or *barrio* Lavapiés become protagonists of the project, as they entwine seamlessly with human lives. At the same time, specific technologies—the web and email in particular—are agents of dissemination of *Precarias'* and other groups' work. Technology thus participates in the formation of political space of debate and exchange, becoming a necessary platform for encounter. It is not coincidental that the way in which technology is used becomes a political issue itself. The Creative Commons license employed by *Traficantes*, which legitimizes a free, not-for-profit distribution of intellectual property, is both a way of promoting circulation of alternative works and a political statement on the use of internet technology in creating public spaces that grant access to those interested in collaboration.

Materiality is a sine-qua-non of democracy as deliberation and exchange. The notion of technology is a blanket term for a diverse array of material and ideological actors that collaborate in human projects. Bruno Latour, in his introduction to a collection of essays that explore diverse aspects of political “materiality,” stresses that if democracy is an act of assembling, coming together of citizens, this assembling is never a purely human enterprise: it is not a gathering of talking “naked people” (17). In order to study the communicational space that enables and enacts democracy, we need to turn to the rich material infrastructure that makes it possible. Latour illustrates his point with the description of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* frontispiece, demonstrating the center-stage role of materiality in the making of the body politic:

A simple look at [the engravings] clearly proves that the ‘Body Politic’ is not only made of people! They are thick with things: clothes, a huge sword, immense castles, large cultivated fields, crowns, ships, cities and an immensely complex technology of gathering, meeting, cohabiting, enlarging, reducing and focusing. In addition to the throng of little people summed up in the crowned head of the Leviathan, there are objects everywhere. (16)

Latour postulates a need to elaborate ways to study this diversely material presence in human politics. In the case of *Precarias* and *Traficantes*, materiality, as has been noted, appears at different levels and is consciously entwined into their political and artistic endeavors as actor and as object of reflection. As the group “drifts” through urban spaces of Madrid, *Precarias* narrates the ways in which their mobile bodies become entwined with nonhuman materiality. They locate their political enterprise within the constraints of materiality and draw it out of these constraints, rather than creating an abstract version of political participation. This complex

technological presence is worthy of studying as one of the crucial elements of these new artistic/political forms.

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