

Curtis Marez, **Producing Precarity: The Costs of Making TV in Poor Places**, New York University Press, 2025, 235 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover), \$28.80 (paperback).

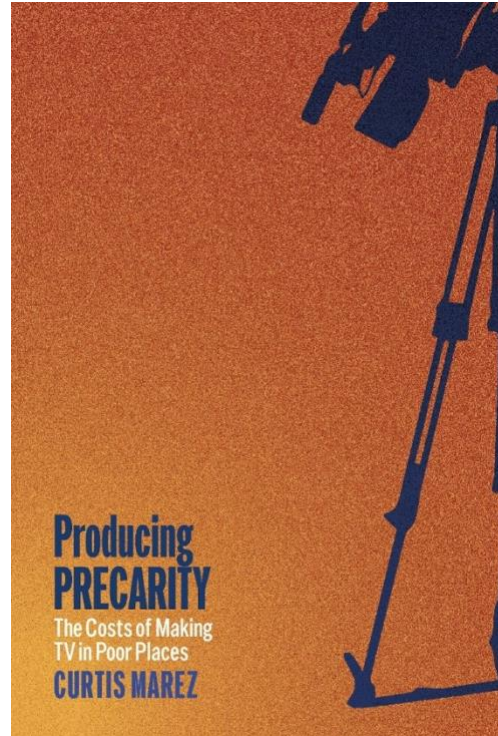
Reviewed by  
David Frank  
Drexel University

Curtis Marez's ***Producing Precarity: The Costs of Making TV in Poor Places*** applies Cedric J. Robinson's (1983) concept of racial capitalism to Hollywood television production in relatively poor areas in the United States, with particular attention to the exploitation of ancillary laborers such as set cleaners and service workers. Analyzing 70 shows filmed in New Mexico, Georgia, or the gentrifying Latinx neighborhood Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, Marez links the material and symbolic exploitation of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities. His contribution of "racial capitalism in place" (p. 2) situates a critique of racial representation across streaming and linear television within a political-economic analysis. By unifying these often-isolated approaches, Marez provides a framework for a critical geography of television.

The most pressing criticism of Hollywood is Marez's concept of the "DEI gaze that disavows local conditions of production" (p. 26). Progressive representation functions as a kind of willed blindness, allowing producers to acknowledge diversity on screen while deepening racial inequality. They do so not only by extracting wealth from poor communities through tax exemptions and subsidies but also by depicting service workers as racially coded, expendable, and often criminal.

Unlike the precarious labor described by John T. Caldwell (2016) or Brooke Erin Duffy et al. (2021), the precarious jobs in this book are not the result of aspirational creatives trying to boost themselves into the industry nor are they the result of digital labor and platform-driven gig work that turns workers into independent contractors. They are precarious due to the historical legacies of slavery, settler colonialism, and Jim Crow/Juan Crow carceral regimes. These histories preclude access to lucrative employment in the film industry for many, and the mobility of film productions creates a boom-and-bust cycle for local service workers.

Chapter 1 describes how extractive state subsidies divert funds from social services, constituting "state violence" (p. 11). Although the subsidies promise the industry will bring new jobs, these jobs are primarily low-wage, part-time, and short-term, disappearing when production relocates. Marez's review of state investment in entertainment industries, including the works of Vicki Mayer and Patrick Button, provides



excellent background on this “race to the bottom” (p. 3), in which states provide cheap services while funneling benefits upward to wealthy above-the-line talent.

Chapter 2 focuses on the symbolic and material implications of filming in dilapidated warehouses and rail stations, remnants of a Fordist past. The Albuquerque Rail Yards, co-owned by the city and Netflix, shows how “TV producers fetishize urban decay and . . . romanticize racialized poverty” (p. 33). It serves as a meeting space for climactic action scenes and drug deals as well as a traditional soundstage with green screens. For Marez, these locations represent the failed promise of progress by the manufacturing and television industry.

The next three chapters are divided by genre—crime, horror, and science fiction—each finding its own way to aestheticize or rationalize the racial capitalism underwriting its production. Crime dramas reinforce the carceral system not just symbolically but often materially. In the Albuquerque crime series *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* (pp. 53–54), police officer Simon Drobik served as technical advisor and performer, acting as spokesperson for a racial mass incarceration system while fraudulently charging the state for overtime. No such advisory roles were occupied by incarcerated people or victims of police violence, despite filming in real Albuquerque prisons. Horror television creates sensationalized others, some of which turn social services into monsters. In the Santa Fe horror series *The Unsettling*, “TV horrors of foster care seemingly rationalize Hollywood’s siphoning of funds from social welfare” (p. 75). In sci-fi superhero shows shot in Atlanta like *Watchmen* (pp. 98–106), Confederate monuments are symbols of the way white supremacy shapes television’s sense of place. *Black Lightning*, Marez argues, depicts “Black feminist iconoclasm” (p. 96) when a young superheroine destroys a Confederate monument.

The final two chapters address reflexive depictions of privilege by privileged above-the-line creatives. Chapter 6 describes how Black creators like Tyler Perry praise and uplift local police while depicting wealthy Black characters who embody the idea of respectability politics: the idea that “the answer to inequality lies not in activism or state actions but in respectable conduct,” by individuals and families (p. 142). Chapter 7 critiques “displaced” depictions of gentrification in poor neighborhoods, such as *The Curse*, from creators Nathan Fielder and Benny Safdie, that nonetheless contribute to gentrification (p. 145). Developing the argument further, he compares Hollywood gentrification to settler colonialism, stating that because Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, is being built up due to TV production and both are on Tongva-claimed land, this gentrifying process is a continuation of settler colonialism.

In the afterword, Marez addresses streaming and algorithms that reproduce histories of racism, arguing “With their racialized algorithms, moreover, streaming platforms reproduce a perceptual segregation for viewers that can reinforce segregation in the material world” (p. 175). He also uses the afterword to name his method “streaming in reverse” (p. 176), as it traces television to its material sources. He concludes by speculating about AI video replacing on-location shooting entirely but ironically creating a “new race to the bottom” (p. 179), in the construction of AI data centers.

This work contributes to discussions among television and Hollywood scholars trying to bridge the widening gap between those focused on intersectional representation and those focused on the material conditions of racialized industry labor. As the political economy of Hollywood’s outsourced

production continues to shift and state subsidies for filmmaking are expanded and rescinded, Marez provides a crucial framework to discuss how promises of diverse above-the-line productions can obscure below-the-line exploitation and the extraction of money from social programs by the wealthy filmmakers pushing progress narratives.

Those studying copaganda and televised justifications of racially discriminatory policing will find Marez's analysis of *The Deputy* (pp. 63–66) especially useful, showing that subsidizing TV production in poor states often entails subsidizing and lionizing local police departments. Marez explores how TV production improves public perception of local police and prisons by association and provides material benefit by employing off-duty officers as security, script advisors, and actors. Any praise earned by a show like *The Cleaning Lady* (pp. 70–71) for depicting the precarity of undocumented workers is undermined by the fact that television production supports the very law enforcement agents that threaten them.

Global TV scholars should attend to Marez's observations about exploitation in neighborhoods within Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Albuquerque that mirror TV productions in the Global South. Challenging the assumption that cultural imperialism only operates overseas, Marez frames the American settler-colonial project as always seeking to exploit poverty and occupy indigenous land abroad and at home.

One recurring theme is the privilege or ignorance of above-the-line creators, including creators of color. Marez describes the *Breaking Bad* creator commentary track as "condescending" and "patronizing" to laundry workers who performed in an episode (p. 46). Likewise, he describes Donald Glover, creator of *Atlanta* and *Swarm*, as condescending for his depictions of working-class Black characters (pp. 80–82). While these critiques are valid, they seem disconnected from the racial capitalism of the industry at large, which is described in material rather than interpersonal terms. Greater empathy from the creators would not change their role in extracting labor at the lowest possible cost. At times, the book's focus on symbolic injustices, such as hypocrisy, overshadows the material harms. Neoliberalism, deregulation, risk regimes, and post-Fordism are rarely connected to racialized inequality or violence, despite the title implying a focus on precarious labor.

Marez has already written a follow-up author essay for NYU Press titled "Pluribus and the Political Economy of TV Production" (Marez, 2026) about a science fiction program filmed in Albuquerque by *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan. While one could potentially apply this lens of racial capitalism in place to Albuquerque television forever, future "streaming in reverse" research could benefit from incorporating interviews or participant observation of ancillary workers in areas with subsidized television production.

### References

- Caldwell, J. T. (2016). Spec world, craft world, brand world. In M. Curtin & K. Sanson (Eds.), *Precarious creativity: Global media, local labor* (pp. 33–48). Berkeley: University of California Press.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ffjn40.7>

Duffy, B. E., Pinch, A., Sannon, S., & Sawey, M. (2021). The nested precarities of creative labor on social media. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021368>

Marez, C. (2026, January 28). *Pluribus and the political economy of TV production*. NYU Press.  
<https://nyupress.org/blog/2026/01/28/pluribus-and-the-political-economy-of-tv-production-by-curtis-marez-author-of-producing-precarity-the-costs-of-making-tv-in-poor-places/>

Robinson, C. J. (1983). *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*. London, UK: Zed Press.