

Artificial Intelligence, Microwork, and the Racial Politics of Care

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“We are where artificial intelligence [AI] meets human ingenuity,” Leila Janah told a packed audience at the 2018 meeting of The Next Web (TNW) in Amsterdam. TNW describes itself as “the heart of tech,” a space where “digital thought leaders” connect with an audience of tech entrepreneurs, investors, and policymakers looking to be inspired, explore new opportunities, and build relationships.¹ The “human ingenuity” Janah referred to could be found at the heart of her organization, then known as Samasource.² That ingenuity was the capacity to tackle the “problem” of poverty “with technology and AI to create jobs for the bottom of the pyramid.” Samasource integrated marginalized workers from depletion zones (most in the Global South) into the making of the modern world. And Janah pitched her project for an “ethical AI supply chain” to a room full of actors invested—metaphorically and literally—in tech. Yet her pitch was to have them invest in people, to “give work rather than aid.”³

Since its founding in 2008, Janah committed Samasource to a unique model of philanthropy that was not concerned with providing displaced and marginalized populations with access to goods or services. Instead, it enacted an altruistic mode of care by incorporating these populations into the global labor market. The outsourcing nonprofit was organized around the premise that “talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not.”⁴ The only way to bring people out of poverty was to give them higher paying jobs and, through these, create new opportunities. Samasource’s intervention was informed by and partially funded through what the Rockefeller Foundation calls “impact sourcing”—a purportedly inclusive employment practice to hire and provide career development opportunities to populations excluded from the digital economy. Samasource would expand a

tech company's worker network by tapping into a rich supply of labor in places like Kenya, Uganda, Haiti, and poor communities in the United States where jobs could help increase income. In doing so, it constructed and operated a micro-work supply chain—a network of production and circulation connecting datasets to data processing and validation centers, and to organizations powered by this rich supply of predominantly Black workers so that it's "purpose-built for impact."⁵

This chapter tackles the tensions inherent to Samasource's racial politics of care in relation to labor by analyzing the organization's plans (e.g., corporate materials and Janah's statements interpreting their efforts), its relations with benchmark tech companies, and its experimental practices with philanthropic policymaking groups. Reading alongside feminist thinkers in science and technology studies (STS) on the politics of care, we ask what kinds of ethics emerge when engaging with the affordances of Samasource's plans for a microwork supply chain? How is Black/non-white labor entrenched as the invisible infrastructure of AI, often times through practices of repair work, and what are the ramifications of this sociotechnical arrangement?⁶ First, we unsettle dominant understandings of the politics of care by tracing relations not as necessarily beneficial but as potentially detrimental. Attention to asymmetry leads us next to account for the making of unequal arrangements of care.

We argue that Samasource's impact sourcing enacted neoliberal logics of self-government with a feminist sensibility toward repair work. The organization sought to repair the broken relations excluding many from the global market economy by instituting an outsourcing program that trained and integrated those on its margins. To care for the excluded was to bring them into the fold of global capital. Given the data- and labor-intensive aspects of AI or machine learning, this approach consolidated the place of microwork as integral for AI development and the tech industry in general. But even while Samasource sought to construct a "sociotechnical organization of 'humans-as-a-service,'" this was not a universal project.⁷ Instead, it was a tightly defined one whereby already vulnerable populations (i.e., often Black/non-white migrant refugees and underrepresented communities) were locked into precarious labor arrangements that undermined their access to better wages and labor rights.⁸ Through Samasource's training program and user interface, microworkers were made to care for informational systems and a tech industry that conscripted them as invisible labor. Their repair work maintains information infrastructures and the profit margins of the industry even as their participation falls to the background. Analyzing Samasource's ethical AI supply chain through the framework of racial politics of care helps draw out asymmetries in care work all the while grappling with its ambivalence.

Writing on microwork requires a feminist critical race analytics. Human-machine configurations are made through complex situations that cannot be neatly bounded as strict technical procedures. Elements of a situation become embedded in such configurations just as much as configurations shape elements

of the situation. To that end, we draw on what Patricia Hill Collins calls “matrix of domination” to understand how microwork is constituted by and constituting intersecting oppressions. The labor force providing Silicon Valley with its extensive microwork supply chain is made through situated oppressive relations, relations organized by/through race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability.⁹ As the case of Samasource shows, their racial politics of care operated through the integration of predominantly Black/non-white workers as AI’s invisible labor. But such labor had to first be made available and able to work in AI development. As new laws and policies seek to regulate the growing gig economy, we must contend with the material infrastructure of the tech industry, differential impacts on labor, and what possibilities exist in this conjuncture for a feminist politics of care.

“ETHICAL AI”: LABOR AND UNSETTLING CARE

With proliferating cases of (infra)structural injustice and wider mobilizations challenging structural oppression, researchers and actors in industry identified bias, fairness, transparency, accountability, privacy, and responsibility as the key issues in ethical AI.¹⁰ Many of these actors prioritize correcting biased systems, smoothing over their hard edges. However, corrections rarely tackle the underlying rationale of AI or of its deployment in a range of contexts where they either institute or maintain asymmetrical social, economic, and political relations. This chapter builds on work questioning the effects of AI operations on marginalized communities and the data technopolitics embedded in these systems.¹¹ We open the black box of AI by focusing on the human labor that makes and maintains it.

Attention to labor opens room to question the relations made possible by and through AI. Of import is the hidden labor embedded in AI operations. Jenna Burrell and Marion Fourcade, for example, suggest that a society of algorithms emerges through the organization of specialized data labor. A wide swath of institutions pairs massive datasets with computer methods to sort, organize, extract, and mine them. This pairing relies on the articulation of what they call a “code elite” and a “cybertariat”—the first holds and controls data and software while the latter is tasked with producing, refining, and working the data fed through algorithms. The cybertariat is essential to the very operation of the society of algorithms as technicians are often confronted with the computational limits of automation.¹² The human labor of the cybertariat is inseparable from AI.

Caring for low-wage labor, as Janah’s presentation at TNW 2018 stressed, is a matter of concern. In addressing the politics of care, feminist STS scholars ask who cares, why do they or we care, and how to care. They invite their interlocutors to trace and interrogate material relations formed by and through ethico-political obligations.¹³ To care is to tend to something or someone, to notice and work in relation to them. Concern, feminist STS thinkers contend, “is an affectively charged sensibility,” a practice or way of doing things “characterized by

worry, attentiveness, and thoughtfulness.”¹⁴ Care is commonly enacted in ordinary fashion, in everyday practices that are life-sustaining and life-repairing. People’s quotidian concern and attunement to relational well-being, or care, has often been construed in gendered terms as feminized, overlooked, and devalued labor. As a result, the politics of caring are, as María Puig de la Bellacasa argues, “at the heart of concerns with exclusions and critiques of power dynamics in stratified worlds.”¹⁵ To examine the articulations of care beckons an ethical disposition to question invisible arrangements that enforce, reify, and maintain unequal relations.

Tending to the politics of care means not falling into the trap of conflating it with a moral good. This is what Martin et al. call “care’s darker side: its lack of innocence and the violence committed in its name.” Care does not automatically nor inherently lead to a virtuous result. It is often implicated in reinforcing the practices and logics of capital and imperial formations, as they grow concerned with their own maintenance, reproduction, and perpetuation. Hence, these scholars and others like Michelle Murphy propose “situated critiques of care and its politics.” The politics of care invite a critical accounting of raced, sexed, and classed violence, of dispossession, displacement, and exploitation.¹⁶ Murphy’s retelling of feminist self-help efforts in the 1970s shows how these scholars and activists grappled with differential arrangements enrolling some populations into asymmetrical relations. Care was not an intrinsic good but a practice that perpetuated precarity. Asymmetrical relations maintained and ensconced the privileged positions of few all the while undermining the capacities of exploited women workers to care for their own.¹⁷ Precarity was embedded within these differential arrangements, rendered through invisible modes of repair work.

The privilege maintained by care work is at the heart of the “digital depletion economy.” Such an economy emerges, the Precarity Lab suggests, through the space-making dialectics of “enrichment zones” and “depletion zones.” The former comprises those spaces containing resources, labor, and raw materials extracted from the latter.¹⁸ Enriching zones are ever-unfolding entanglements constituted through their capacities to finance, extract, and coordinate relations of dispossession and exploitation. Depletion zones are simultaneously life-sustaining and life-debilitating for the people whose labor constitute them as much as for the inhabitants of enriching zones. This does not mean that everyone is on the same life-preserving/life-weakening boat. Situated analysis shows that these zones are not homogeneous, but they do work toward homogenization. They consolidate the distribution of resources, discriminate between bodies and the value their labor generates, and conserve intersecting axes of domination to safeguard relations of dispossession and exploitation.

Enrichment and depletion zones are different yet repeating arrangements in the *longue durée* of racial capital.¹⁹ The dialectics of differentiation worked through race as “the rationalization for the domination, exploitation, and/or extermination” of non-Europeans and non-whites.²⁰ The digital depletion economy hinges

on persistent practices of distinction and discrimination that posit some bodies, some communities, and some places as extractable matter.²¹ These practices follow logics of exception making possible “the combination of managerial and labor regimes in transnational networks that carve striated spaces—or ‘latitudes’—shaped by the coordination of systems of governmentality and regimes of labor incarceration.”²² The racial politics of care work weave together enrichment and depletion zones through the veil of matters of concern—a concern that follows logics of differentiation or exception governing unequal arrangements.

Approaching care work through a racial politics of care also means to examine the articulation of an interlocking matrix of domination. Differentiation does not unfold through singular pathways but is the product of co-constituting, multipronged, and multi-sited forces. Care for the Other, especially when animated by notions of (economic) development, does not immediately undo systems of oppression. They can quite as easily exacerbate them because, as the following pages show, political recognition of the Other is premised on the idea that bodies and their labor ought to be productive. The Other, which in most instances here is a Black working person, is politically legible as worthy of concern insofar as they add value to artificial intelligence-as-commodity and intelligence-as-information infrastructure. Looking after racial politics of care fleshes out how matters of concern might undo some relations while reifying others.

UNEQUAL ARRANGEMENTS OF CARE

Samasource’s plans to build an “ethical AI supply chain” enact a racial politics of care in two senses. Its care work for the poor means providing them with higher paying data-processing jobs, or attending to the life conditions of dispossession generated by modern capital. Such care work builds on techno-optimistic visions, or the long-standing belief that technological production and use, innovation, and human improvement are tightly bound together.²³ Samasource’s plans seek to integrate the poor in predominantly Black/non-white countries and their vitality as an infrastructural appendage of Silicon Valley. As a result, the Black/non-white poor and their vitality are inscribed as racialized labor, or extractable and productive matter for capital. The other sense is the care work these workers perform for AI. Their work, which Samasource calls “microwork,” supports AI by allowing it to operate in a seemingly unobstructed manner. The labor of these workers is necessary to maintain the systems that are imagined as making up modern life; logically, modern life is dependent on the invisible AI care work of Samasource workers. They are the “ghost work” that operationalizes AI and sanitizes a vast range of websites by removing graphic, violent, and hateful content.²⁴

When she founded the nonprofit organization Samasource in 2008, Janah set out to disrupt the philanthropic and outsourcing models. As she reflected years later in an essay on social entrepreneurialism, “the actual problem [of poverty]

is access to opportunity—and the often deeply entrenched, systemic barriers that deny hard-working people the chance to build a future.”²⁵ Charity did not transform root causes of poverty, and international aid packages, she concluded, were insufficient. A techno-optimistic solution was in the offing. Tapping into the wealthy outsourcing market, Samasource redirected some of its capital to address this lack of opportunity by hiring low-wage and unemployed workers to perform data service labor. Their jobs would, Janah often told captive audiences in the startup and tech worlds, improve their lives and the lives of those who relied on their source of income. A white paper by MIT economists concluded 40 percent of workers who received training and a job referral from Samasource went on to higher paying jobs and reported lower unemployment rates than their control group.²⁶ Relying on the company’s internal worker surveys, Janah claimed that, prior to employment with Samasource, workers reported an average daily income of \$2.20 with many living in improvised housing and maintaining unhealthy diets (e.g., eating sugar cane as a main source of caloric intake). After employment with Samasource, workers earned on average \$8.15 a day which led to improvements in diets, education, and housing. “This is the power of work over charity.”²⁷ Or this is Janah and Samasource’s articulation of the first sense of racial politics of care, a care toward people in the Global South meant to protect them by enrolling their labor in the making of the modern technological world. A second sense requires further elaboration.

Samasource’s “ethical AI supply chain” combines microwork with impact sourcing. Animating Janah’s approach to microwork was her interest of “tapping into the brainpower of the poor.”²⁸ Microwork breaks down big data projects such as the AI and machine learning models powering self-driving cars into smaller actions. Samasource workers, who must be literate and know how to use a computer, are enrolled in cognitive labor by annotating images and video to build training datasets subsequently fed into AI algorithms.²⁹ Annotators identify objects such as cars parked and moving, or lane location and change, and people and their pose (e.g., standing, sitting, walking, running) by drawing polygons around them as well as by labeling them. Samasource’s in-house interface Samahub, meanwhile, allows real-time quality assurance to assess the accuracy and reliability of worker data inputs. The services offered by the company are not so dissimilar to those Lilly Irani studied in Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Microwork at Samasource assembles “cognitive pieceworkers in service of employers and their computer systems. The pieceworkers work on tasks in batches; the employers can put these batches out automatically through computer work code they write.”³⁰ Microwork, as Irani deftly shows, helped produce the distinction between innovative and menial labor—a crucial distinction in the articulation of value and of those bodies/minds imagined to represent such value. Scholars in new media studies expressed concerns and questions about the ethics of microwork and crowdsourcing soon after they became experimental sociotechnical arrangements.³¹ A key difference lies in the

company's commitment to "impact sourcing," which means the establishment of a sustained labor supply chain with Samasource playing a permanent intermediary, coordinating, and repairing role.

Toward the end of the 2000s, concerned with growing global economic inequality, the Rockefeller Foundation sought to transform the outsourcing industry through a new supply chain model called "impact sourcing."³² The foundation and some of its partners saw impact sourcing as an "inclusive employment practice" whereby "companies in global supply chains intentionally hire and provide career development opportunities to people who otherwise would have limited prospects for formal employment."³³ Impact sourcing requires the articulation of an ecosystem comprising outsourced workers, the worker's immediate community, outsourcing organizations, and outsourcing clients. As proposed in a range of Rockefeller-funded reports, impact sourcing is meant to benefit all elements of this ecosystem via a developmentalist vision. First, it provides higher-income employment and access to new opportunities for these workers. Workers can then dispose of this income in their wider community and, thereby, create a ripple effect of economic and social activities. After all, these workers, from the purview of policy makers, often live in "rural areas of developing countries or in slums," lack access to secondary or tertiary education, or, despite having some education, find themselves in areas with high unemployment. Outsourcing organizations fulfilled the demands of its clients while managing and investing in jobs and skills development that benefit workers and their communities. Lastly, outsourcing clients meet cost savings and growth objectives all the while developing corporate social responsibility goals.³⁴

Impact sourcing is a neoliberal political strategy imbued with a racial politics of care. It is an ethical commitment toward the excluded other through a moral calculus of worth. Human value as well as practices, lifestyles, and visions of the good are tightly understood in relation to the market. And the market is positioned as the privileged allocator of public resources; it is a technology of subjection through which to "differently regulate populations for optimal productivity," especially via the spatial practices of market forces.³⁵ Companies subscribing to impact sourcing enact modes of governing populations that follow differentiating logics of efficiency and optimization. These logics position some populations as prime targets for subjection, for their capacity to maximize values produced through exploitation, dispossession, and extraction. Impact sourcing also institutes knowledge and expert systems, as Samasource attests, that induce in workers self-animation and self-government through the attainment of skills, the pursuit of entrepreneurial endeavors, and more. And it was in the digital economy that the Rockefeller Foundation identified an immediate potential for the development of impact sourcing.

From work training and discipline to work assessments, Samasource is responsible for the smooth operation of its sourcing ecosystem. Janah developed her

labor sociotechnical arrangement by testing it in 2009 in a few computer centers in the refugee camp of Dadaab in Kenya. She taught a small group of refugees in the camp how to do microwork for Microsoft and an outsourcing company in Silicon Valley. The high quality of the work convinced her that this microwork model could be expanded. Samasource began to work with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to “aggregate workers and recruits.” These NGOs sent them to one of the company’s partner organizations on the ground in Kenya and Uganda, to name two countries where it runs operations. Partner organizations are responsible for running data “delivery centers”; oftentimes these had been Internet cafés but were now reorganized to deliver Samasource with training data for its clients.³⁶ Microworkers at Samasource do not pick the small “batches” they want to work on, but instead are trained to perform repetitive tasks during six- to eight-hour sessions every day with most workers staying with the company for eight months.

The kind of labor performed by Samasource’s workers in Kenya, Uganda, and Haiti is a somewhat permanent kind of “patch work.” It is patch work in the computing sense that they are preempting errors in a system by providing it with accurate and reliable data to address existing or future problems. It is patch work in a repairing sense. Microworkers in depletion zones are enrolled to enact relations of repair and maintenance of information infrastructures designed to extract value. Artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms are dependent on the training data produced by the cognitive labor of microworkers. This is how the “brainpower of the poor” fuels the machines of late capitalism in enrichment zones. Their care for these systems means the drawing out of a stable labor supply chain of contradictory ethical commitments and precarious labor arrangements in the digital depletion economy, especially through gig work.

Not content with organizing a microwork supply chain in the Global South, Samasource sought to bring its outsourcing philosophy into the United States by disrupting the gig economy. The gig economy has given rise to a new category of worker and raised important questions for researchers as well as for law and policymakers who have sought to protect and care for gig workers.³⁷ Gig work is similar to microwork in its short duration, its contingency, and the common treatment of workers as independent from the tech company responsible for allocating the work. Intent on intervening in this area as well, Samasource created a training program in 2013 known as Samaschool to “help low-income individuals become successful freelancers in today’s changing job landscape.”³⁸ With an online curation of modules, quizzes, and in-depth community discussion boards, the online training program was Samasource’s commitment to teach poor and marginalized workers in the United States to “thinking gig.” Schools were established in San Francisco, rural Arkansas, and New York City, with curriculum covering everything from how to manage professional communication on gig economy apps like TaskRabbit and Uber, to negotiating contracts, and upleveling on career skills like resume and LinkedIn writing.³⁹ The program hoped to provide training that met market needs

while advocating for social change. Samaschool called on policy and lawmakers to intervene in the creation of new laws and policies to protect gig workers.⁴⁰ In this sense, Samasource's efforts in creating an "ethical AI supply chain" was entangled with promoting the gig economy. Samaschools instilled in its students a sense of self as entrepreneurial subjects, updating themselves to fit the demands of a shifting market.⁴¹ One chain connects with the other, ever extending the company's racial politics of care—supporting the Other even while ensuring their integration in a chain of exploitation and dispossession.

Microwork, as represented by Samasource, can be said to be "articulation work," or "work that gets things back 'on track' in the face of the unexpected," work that "modifies action to accommodate unanticipated contingencies."⁴² Microwork is the kind of care work that subtends the humming of the imagined futurity made through artificial intelligence and machine learning. The vast supply chain designed and operated by Samasource seeks to keep AI and ML "on track" by validating its data through human labor. This labor is performed by the poor and the working classes of depletion zones—from Kenya and Uganda to San Francisco. Their care work maintains the sociotechnical relations of exploitation at the heart of Big Tech (e.g., Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Uber, Lyft) and some of the richest US logistics companies (e.g., WalMart) who are clients of Samasource. While "sama" means "equal" in Sanskrit, the microwork supply chain that Samasource constructed maintains, reproduces, and expands the differential treatment of workers in depletion zones. These are workers enrolled in curricula for their self-optimization as modern neoliberal subjects that in caring for themselves are made to care for the systems that dispossess and exploit them.

CONCLUSION

Since its founding in 2008, workers at Samasource were enrolled not only to do work for TaskRabbit, Uber, Care, and Lyft, they also maintain and care for the infrastructure upon which all gig workers rely for their work. Microwork keeps digital infrastructures such as image processing, community Q&A queries, and driverless cars running. This kind of work is what Precarity Lab called the *undergig*—invisible work that falls to the background of the digital depletion economy. The emphasis placed on gig workers such as those driving people on Uber or Lyft, as much research, legislation, and policymaking does, while of great importance, can reproduce the invisibility of a wider labor supply chain sustaining global information infrastructures.

Law and policymakers often grapple with how to classify platform work within the umbrella of labor law to regulate, restrict, or provide protection and justice to gig workers.⁴³ The most notable of these, California Assembly Bill 5 (2019), popularly known as a gig worker bill, sought to define the boundaries of what classified a worker as an independent contractor instead of an app-based employee:

the person was “free from the control and direction” of the hiring company; the person works outside of usual course of company’s business; and the person normally works “in an independently established trade, occupation, or business” similar to the work performed. In 2020, the California ballot initiative Proposition 22, backed by gig work platforms like Uber and DoorDash, was passed to reinstate the independent contractor classification to all app-based workers, undoing their status as employees. Though the issue continues to be fought in court,⁴⁴ Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi argued soon after its approval that Proposition 22 was a model for other states and invited the US federal government to pursue similar legislation.⁴⁵ He framed support of the ballot initiative through a racial politics care, given that, in being classified as independent contractors, gig workers would acquire “new benefits and protections with the same flexibility.”⁴⁶ Preserving the fungibility and expendability of gig work all the while building a façade of care, Proposition 22 constructed app-based “contractors” as a separate class of worker and, in so doing, removed them from existing federal and state labor law protections such as the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 or the National Labor Relations Act. The ramifications of Proposition 22 were quickly felt as grocery chains fired their delivery staff to sign contracts with DoorDash, in pursuit of its cheaper labor pool of gig workers. Health care stipends were also reported to cover a small percentage of the overall cost and the labor time required to pay for it was significantly higher than the supposed minimum.⁴⁷ The racial politics of care undergirding the classification work of legally defining gig workers solidified the precarity of their everyday.

Efforts at the federal level, such as the Employee Rights Act of 2022 and the Worker Flexibility and Choice Act of 2022, have also revolved around classification work. The former has sought to define the contours of the “future of work” primarily to protect the “successful franchise model and gig economy,” as Senator Richard Burr stated in the joint press release with Senator Tim Scott.⁴⁸ The bill defines gig workers as independent contractors stating that, “notwithstanding any other provision of law, the fact that an individual accessing work through a digital marketplace company receives retirement or fringe benefits from such digital marketplace company shall not establish, or support the establishment of, an employee and employer relationship between the individual accessing work through a digital marketplace company and the digital marketplace company, respectively.”⁴⁹ Emphasis on worker access to a market of flexible work arrangements disavows corporate responsibility in drawing up the boundaries for “independent contractors” and in upholding the false choice between flexibility and benefits, between no rights and full rights as an “employee.” What Anna Fisher calls the “coercive hospitality” of platforms, enabling access and sharing while hiding their costs to users, is embedded into the classificatory exclusion of gig workers;⁵⁰ it absolves companies of the need to pay workers full employee benefits like health care and time off. Furthermore, legal boundaries so often become entangled with the geopolitical boundaries of the state, which precludes understanding transnational

labor arrangements that support and make viable industries. Reclassification of gig workers as employees does not undo the differential relations of racial capital, but preserves the distinctions made about whose bodies are deemed extractable and whose labor is exploitable under conditions beneficial for global capital.

We propose the racial politics of care as an analytical lens to grapple with situated and differentiated ambivalences in gig work, in microwork, and in the configuration of neoliberal technologies across enriching and depletion zones. Debates about ethical AI must not be limited to questions of data accuracy and representation, and AI use. Tending to labor through intersectional lenses sheds light on the making and maintenance of interlocking matrices of domination, and its diverse experiences. We examined the plans of Samasource to open the black box of AI development. Yet this chapter only offers insight into the world-view and human-machine configurations constructed by Janah, the Rockefeller Foundation, Samasource, and the state. Future studies of the racial politics of care in microwork supply chains need to also examine them in action, through attentive ethnographic observation of how microworkers understand their participation within these labor supply chains. Doing so further decenters the world-making practices of Silicon Valley and moves us beyond simplified conceptions of exploiter/exploited. More importantly, given our feminist critical race standpoint, it also allows for tending to the desires and aspirations of those whose labor is made invisible by complex sociotechnical relations.

NOTES

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