Data and Labor (with Shaka McGlotten and Chris Ramsaroop)

Annie Galvin (AG): Hello, and welcome back to *Public Books 101*, a podcast that turns a scholarly eye to a world worth studying. I'm Annie Galvin, an editor and producer at *Public Books*, which is a magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship that is free and online. You can read the magazine at www.publicbooks.org.

Natalie Kerby (NK): And I'm Natalie Kerby, digital content associate at Data & Society. Data & Society is a research institute that studies the social implications of data-centric technologies and automation. You can learn about our work at https://datasociety.net/.

AG: This is the third season of our podcast, so if you're listening for the first time, I invite you to subscribe to Public Books 101 in your podcast feed and listen back to season 1, which was about the internet, and season 2, about the novel in the 21st century. This season, we are excited to partner with Data & Society to explore the past, present, and future of human life being quantified as data. Natalie is your host this season, so I'll let her take it from here. Thanks for listening.

NK: In this season, "Becoming Data," my guests and I are considering a few main guiding questions. How long has human life been quantified as data, and in what contexts? What are some major implications of humans being quantified or measured as data? How are people pushing back against the datafication of human life, work, health, and citizenship, among other things?

Today, my guests are Shaka McGlotten and Chris Ramsaroop. We'll be discussing data in the context of labor. We address the historical ways that data has been used to organize labor, the labor of making ourselves visible to data-centric systems, and the different ways that people, and more specifically workers, are resisting datafication.

Alright, let's dive into my conversation with Shaka and Chris.

NK: Thank you, Chris and Shaka, for being here with us today and chatting with us about data and labor. I'd like to ask if you could both say your name and tell our listeners a little bit about the work that you do. So, Chris, let's start with you.

Chris Ramsaroop (CR): So good morning, everybody. My name is Chris Ramsaroop, I'm an organizer with Justice for Migrant Workers. I am also enrolled at the PhD program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the University of Toronto in the Department of Social Justice Education. And I teach at the University of Windsor in their faulty of law in at the migrant

worker clinic, as a clinic instructor. And at New College in the Department of Caribbean Studies at University of Toronto as well, too. And when I'm not busy I like roti.

NK: Great. Shaka?

Shaka McGlotten (SM): Hi. My name is Shaka McGlotten. I'm a professor of anthropology and media studies at Purchase College SUNY. And I do research on a variety of things but all the research I do tends to have something to do with art, media, technology, race, and sexuality. And I sometimes like to think of what I do as sort of staging encounters between scenes of media, art, and technology and blackness and queerness.

NK: Great. Thank you. So since this is a podcast series about data, I'd like to start with the question what is data? And this may sound like a simple question but I think a lot of people's answers will vary based on the type work that they do. And so I'd like to ground us in the understanding of data that both of you have. So, Shaka, I know that you've been working on a project called Black Data. What does Black Data mean in the way that you're using it and what are you exploring in this project?

SM: Sure. So I'll start with the definition of data which I think will be helpful leading into describing what Black Data is. So I really think of data as performative, right? So the strict definitions have to do with information. But for me I can think of it even as a genre, right? Or a set of principles for ordering the world. So again as in language I see data as something that brings worlds into being rather than just being a set of objective units of information.

In terms of Black Data it's an expansive project I've been working on since about 2013. Initially I really thought about things like predictive policing and algorithmic violence. But as in so much of my research and creative practice I want to deal with art and with artists who are responding to this kind of work. So increasingly especially as there's been an explosion of work related to, you know, Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression*, or Meredith Broussard's *Artificial Unintelligence,* Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology*. I really have focused more on the creative aspects and thinking about artists, Salome Asega, Mimi Onuoha, Stephanie Dinkins a lot of Black and a lot of queer Black artists who are finding different ways to reconceptualize living in a datafied society, Right? Whether that has to do with algorithmic violence, or artificial intelligence, or how we imagine collective futures that in which people can use technologies without being over determined by them.

NK: All right. So, Chris, how about you? What is data to you?

CR: So first I want to apologize to the listeners in advance. Yeah, I don't know. To be honest I was stumped by both questions. So, this morning I did a lifeline to one of my former students and a member of Justice for Migrant Workers. A little bit of context about us: I've been organizing with farm workers in Ontario, Canada for approximately 20 years now, and the data question I was like well, really what does that mean? To quote the friend I called, she said, I

don't necessarily interact with data on an individual level, but it gives me a perspective on the extent of an issue. It shows the trend, pattern, long term, and short-term gain. It gives you the big picture.

That lifeline was so critical at that moment for me in many ways, because it started to make me think about the big picture, about what I do on a daily basis, and about how, in our current context as we try to survive in this bloody pandemic, data is critical both as an act of oppression but also as an act of resistance. The oppression exist with respect to workplace COVID outbreaks, and how racialized people are managed during the pandemic. How with respect to technology, data is being used to suppress racialized bodies and particularly agricultural workers, the guest workers in rural Ontario I work with, which nobody really gives a second thought about.

On the one hand, data for me is about that domination project. But the other side I think, where Shaka's looking at the artistic forms of representation and if I may say resistance as well to data and the control of data, I think for myself about what we can learn from the workers and how they are resisting how data is controlling their lives. What steps do we take to try to disrupt data and its I guess all-encompassing control on who we are as a society?

NK: Yeah. I really love that answer for a few different reasons. I think data is a word that's thrown around all the time right now. But if someone asked me to say what data was I think I would definitely struggle for a minute to be like okay, it is like information but it's so many more things right now in our world, right? And I think that's going to come out throughout this episode.

So our next question is kind of maybe a fun one. About how you see data show up in your own life. Just to kind of get some concrete examples on the table we're interacting with it every day in our lives without often even realizing it. So, Chris, what is kind of one major way that you see yourself interacting with data on a day-to-day basis?

CR: I guess my constant use of the phone. I'm always on WhatsApp particularly and I know we should be turning over to signal or more but I use WhatsApp almost every minute of the day. Thank goodness for this podcast because I'm not on it right now checking that, looking at other social media to see what's going on around any issues or relevant current events that's going on. That's pretty much I guess the main thing for me is my phone.

NK: Yeah. I mean I definitely was like oh I'm glad we're putting our phones on airplane mode right now. And I was like I have to close all my tabs that might notify me because I know I will look at them. So I hear you. How about you, Shaka?

SM: I mean in terms of interacting with data on a day-to-day basis – I almost said data-to-data.

NK: Tongue twister.

SM: I can't really think of one way that it isn't, right? I can make oatmeal without looking up how to do it but not a lot of other things. I listen to NPR via a smart speaker which is really listening all the time. You know, I support NPR and they know it and they are probably sharing parts of that information with others.

The scholar John Cheney-Lippold says, he has a book called *We Are Data* and I tend to agree, right? The lines between this sort of abstract set of operations, computation or not and who we are has completely blurred. I very rarely use social media anymore. You know, I cannot say for work Twitter and every once in a while, I'll go on and off, but it doesn't really matter that I don't use that. You have shadow profiles and I can still be advertised things based on what my partner looks at, you know, I'm like why am I getting Hermes scarves like in my recommendation.

I think I'm really interested in this idea of thinking about data as a genre for ordering the world. We think about computational data and the collection of it, you know, in this very contemporary context. But data goes way back before computation in the sort of in the digital era. So in thinking about the accountings of capital or debt, data has always been tied to state power.

I was doing a little research for this conversation, and I was talking with a colleague and a friend who reminded me that even terms like "statistics" are quite old. These come from Roman antiquity, right? And the term really comes from council of state, it's tied to words like "politician" and the original purpose of the statistic was to produce data that was going to be used by governmental administrative bodies, right? We have that now in the census. And the census likely derives from Roman antiquity. You had someone called the censor, which is interesting in and of itself, who took the censuses and oversaw things like public manners and morals and so that idea of censor actually is to appraise value and to judge. But these histories that write up data as always tied to state power, I think these are very important histories.

NK: I like that you brought up value, because I think that is a way that data particularly gets connected with labor. How we value ourselves, the value of our labor, the exchange of capital. And then also the census is such a great example especially since we just went through the 2020 census. So hopefully that's a way that a lot of people can kind of imagine this quantification system.

My next question is about labor. Since I feel like we really got a good grounding now of what data is and how you're both thinking about data. I think labor can refer to so many different things, so I'm really curious to hear how you both understand that term.

Chris, could you go first since your work kind of fits more into traditional concepts of what labor is. When you talk about labor in your work, what are you describing? Who are the laborers and what work are they performing?

CR: So to give both I guess a personal background but also kind of an historical work that has been happening here in Ontario. My family came to the Caribbean as indentured workers after

the end of slavery in the 1850s or 1860s, I believe. In the post-abolition period throughout the British Empire the plantation class had to find ways to ensure their profits would continue and to basically ensure that sugar and other cash crops could continue its international domination. So they looked for what some people would call "cheap labor," but we'll say "unfree labor." And that's how many Indian, Chinese, people from the African continent, Portuguese communities ended up in the Caribbean and other places as indentured laborers.

Indentured labor is where people were fixed to a contract anywhere from two to five years. After that period of time, they could so-called buy their freedom or return home. In many cases, people were indebted afterwards. These contracts were very carceral. What I mean by that is if you tried to escape the plantation you would be whipped. You would be put into jail. The full effect and the full enforcement of the colonial state would be used to imprison and to punish you, your so-called the act of freedom.

Simultaneously when we think about migration we usually think about it as a one-way avenue, right? We think about south to north particularly. One of the things that we always have to remember about the indentured period, is that the British empire was always an empire that was contested. And it was a place of genocide and perilousness where crisis, famine, the failure of British agricultural policies led to the death of millions of people and these are the reasons why people migrated to other parts of the world.

I wanted to set that foundation up, because I look at a direct connection from British imperial policies from several centuries ago to both the legacy of slavery and the colonial system to how migrant workers arrive in Canada. The contract I mentioned a little while ago where migrant farm workers have been coming up to Canada since 1966 is very similar. People come for a fixed contract. If you do try to "run away" then you'd be imprisoned and you basically would be disbarred. You're tied to an employer and you've got no form of labor and social mobility in Canada.

This through the peculiar institution that I started to organize with migrant farm workers 20 years ago thinking about family roots. Trying to understand the geography of rural Ontario. And just thinking about the history of race and labor. The challenge about race and labor is that when we look at a class analysis there is always a shortness and a challenge where class conscious comrades to basically belittle or devalue race. And simultaneously when we're talking about race we're trying to ensure that the perspective of racialized and working-class communities are undertaken and understood.

I also wanted to talk about the plantation economy because that technology has been fundamental for the advancement of the industry for the last several hundred years. It's in no way a coincidence that we're seeing the prevailing changes in automation, artificial intelligence, and technology with the expansion of an agricultural industry both in Canada and the United States. We're in tandem. Not just simply about the production of food but also about empire. So

both Canada and United States are trying to expand our agricultural dominance of the global South and the guest worker programs, unfree labor, whether it's undocumented or guest workers, and the role of data and technology is used to maximize profits for the purpose of domination.

NK: Yeah. I think that's really important to highlight. And as you said often gets lost in labor debates because they become so much about class and socioeconomic status.

Shaka, how about you? Chris really brought up this legacy of colonization and going back to plantations and how this technology has been carried throughout this history. I'd like for you to both talk about how you think about labor, but then I know, Shaka, in your Black Data work you often reference the fact that a lot of the technologies that are around today are rooted in the transatlantic slave trade, so I'd love for you to talk a little bit about that history as well.

SM: Sure. I was recently re-reading one of the kind of foundational texts of Black Studies and Black Feminist Studies by Hortense Spillers. It's *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*. And it's an extraordinarily rich piece and I was reading it with my Black Data project in mind and one of the things that she talks about is just being very clear about the processes of dehumanization that occurred by turning people into commodities where you become a value and in that way are no longer a person.

And there's of course the prior moment I think of colonization – I mean I think of colonization and the slave trade are of course completely intertwined – but of reading about the ways that the notions of discovery, discovering the New World really I think of it as now through Spillers as this really interesting process by which colonizers were seduced by the availability of these people who then have to not become people in order so you can civilize them which is a process that requires of course that you take them, and you take their stuff.

There's a really twisted and sick logic, right, kind of at root where you could almost say you're asking for it. You were asking for it by being barbarians. Right? And now we're civilizing you by increasing our own wealth through you and not just your labor or your resources but in order to set a system into work that takes us up to this present moment. In other words, you think about something like a private prison. It's a plantation, right? It generates revenue. So in terms of the relationship to slavery you have ways in which people are just turned into numbers on a ledger in these really famous archival documents. You have the plans for the slave holds on the ships. And they would calculate, okay, well, a man needs one and half foot by six feet. That's a coffin, right? And a woman needs less, and a child needs less, right?

Katherine McKittrick also has this very interesting phrase in an essay of the same title called "Mathematics of Unliving." These are the breathless lists, the ship registries, the ways in which slavers would sometimes throw slaves overboard in order to collect insurance money because it might have been more valuable to do that than to actually sell slaves. I think these are some of the ways that this moves through. And you think about a census, you think about the ways that data have been used to mark Blackness as deviant or to mark Blackness as separate from –

redlining was a data driven process. It's not as if we don't have data, right, it's who has it and how is it being operationalized.

CR: If I could just follow up. You said a few really beautiful things there that there is this myth of people coming from the global South. With my organizing with temporary farm workers or guest workers or migrant workers, the same notion comes up, the same idea of a civilizing mission, that they are coming up to the global North we are quote/unquote "saving" them from poverty, from abjection, from a society that has failed.

SM: Right.

CR: And there's this idea that the only way that their salvation can be met is by coming to work on dehumanized, dirty and deadly jobs in the global North. That idea is still prevalent and it's a continuation, that extension of how bodies are commodified, which is a beautiful way for how you put it. You come to work crappy jobs. You don't have the right to labor protections of democratic participations, or other forms of exclusion which kind of further entrenched this subordination or exploitation in the global North.

The example that I like to use, in Southwest Ontario and for the listeners if you don't know much about Ontario, the area that I organize with is just outside of Detroit and the mythology is that these farmers put food on the tables of Canadians and Americans. In Canada, that mythology is extremely powerful. And why I want to focus on that for a second is that one of the things that we can't forget is that these are profit commodities, right? They exchange, they shift. On one day there are millions of acres that are being used for tomatoes. But they now know that cannabis is a more profitable industry so they've just switched over to cannabis production. So, what happens to all those bodies, those migrant workers who used to work on tomatoes? They are no longer needed. They bring in a new crop of people and therefore we've just basically displaced and dis-planted entire communities.

NK: As if you almost become so connected to the crop in and of itself.

CR: We saw workers from the Caribbean who are predominantly Black working in corps such as tobacco and apples. Latinx workers would be working in the greenhouse industries. So as industries changed, as tobacco went under, those workers who had spent so many years tied to the land, tied to the crop, they no longer had a career. They had no opportunities for workers, so those bodies became discarded.

NK: I think that's really interesting in that it almost again shows the dehumanization, right, because they are no longer people who need livelihoods but they're directly related to whatever labor they can produce, whatever crop they can work on.

I want to bring us into the next section to think about how technology and data is reconfiguring labor.

Shaka, in your work you focus on sexuality and pornography. So, I want you to talk a little bit about OnlyFans which is a content subscription service and how in the pandemic we've seen, through OnlyFans and through other means, more sex work move online, because of safety. And I'm curious has this changed sex work or has it kind of stayed the same? And what are the consequences of this work that's been traditionally marginalized and in the shadows existing online where it can be more easily tracked and more datafied.

SM: So OnlyFans is a subscription-based service where creators can post their own content and users can subscribe to the content sometimes that makes all the contents available. Sometimes you may be required to spend extra money in order to unlock different kinds of content. And although different kinds of people use OnlyFans, you know, musicians, and comedians and other people it is primarily known for its sexual content. But in terms of OnlyFans and sex work more broadly we all know that sex work is never going to go anywhere. Ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, every it will always exist and frankly I think that it should exist.

In terms of OnlyFans, this is a gig economy, right? And like all gig economies the labor, the rules around labor, the fairness of labor practices these things don't really exist, right? Take the case of Bella Thorne, an actress who came in and promised certain kinds of images and she's relatively well known and she made a million dollars in a day. This led to changes in OnlyFans: how they allowed producers, creators to monetize their material whether it was the amount in terms of getting tips, the cost for subscriptions. OnlyFans is just part of a larger sort of sex work ecosystem. So, prior to COVID you might have performers who would perform in videos for mainstream pornographic production companies who are also escorts. That's been happening forever. And then you might have people who created their own sites. And then of course you have something like OnlyFans and comparable sites where people were able to find a platform that then they could supplement.

The truth is, and I think the *New York Times* reported on this not that long ago, is that it's very hit and miss. You could get on there and make like $4-5,000 a month and I could get on there and make $200. There is an unevenness that has always been there I think in digital sex work, right, who takes off and who doesn't.

NK: Do you think that that wasn't present kind of in the nondigital world of sex work?

SM: You know, prior moments of sex work were tied to – and I'm going to leave a side like street work which is its own kind of thing. But if you thought about with massage parlors or escort services, you know, in gay male culture there were specific bars that were known as like hustler bars. And there were networks, right? And I think that one thing maybe that is interesting is that given the digital context creators in OnlyFans are on this platform and others like them they can network with each other, right? So there can be I think like even though there's a sort of very decentralized quality I think even something like with farm workers once you start talking to each other then you have the means to mobilize and to at least draw attention to what may be

happening. But I would say to listeners, you know, don't actually count on making money doing it, right? It's an extraordinary effort, right? And if you see the people who are actually quite adept at it it looks like the kind of pornography they're producing in other context, right? They have a boom mic, they have lighting, they have – even if it's filmed in a very kind of natural way these are professional productions. And if for anyone who has tried to, you know, for all of you who have tried to take a good selfie or who've tried to make a TikTok it's a lot harder than it looks.

NK: That reminds me. I was going to ask you about your article on streaking, where you talk about working with and being trained by your partner in how to do the right angles and get the right lighting. And I thought that was like such an interesting way to think about how we labor at these technologies just to make ourselves visible to them and legible and read well to others.

SM: Yeah, very well put. There are best practices you could look them up to understand how do I take a good picture of my butt. I think about the people who are younger than me, and probably younger than you, and probably younger than most of the listeners on this show, who you know, you call them digital natives and they can take an amazing selfie. They know how to do that. But they don't always understand the underlying processes that are going on, and I don't just mean sort of social processes which they're very sophisticated about and very politically woke. But I mean the kind of underlying like data processes. Whether it's Facebook with facial recognition or it's the ability for people for TikTok and other platforms to detect nudity though a lot of humans still actually have to do that work, a surprising number.

NK: Definitely. So, Chris, I want to talk to you now about the farm workers that you're working with. I know that you had told us previously about how these greenhouses are being outfitted with new tech tools and new automated tools, so I'd love for you to tell us about that and what the workers' experiences are interacting with these automated systems. We're talking about these historical agricultural tools as well, so do you have any historical and present-day examples?

CR: When Shaka and I talked, I was straight up honest. I am the most, shall we say, non-tech person out there, all right? I still have problems turning on my MacBook and I sometimes require the help of a four or five year old to figure out my technological skills. My foray into technology and thinking about that with respect to workers and racialized workers came out of an incident that happened in 2013.

We're an all-volunteer collective, and both my academic work which is based on the organizing, it's premised on building trust, building long term relationships, being straight up honest with peeps, dealing with a lot of heartache, a lot of pain, a lot of sadness, a lot of happiness, and a lot of joy. And on a Friday night I usually would go out to these communities in the middle of nowhere Ontario, set up shop, start talking to peeps, and it's through this kind of outreach that we strengthen our analysis and understand other vectors or the intersections where racialized labor comes into being and criminalization, racial profiling.

A bunch of the brothers in a place called Tillsonburg, Ontario, and these are mostly Trinidadian workers at that time that I was talking to, had told me that the cops had come to their farm and they had basically said that they wanted our DNA, right? And one of the brothers pulled me aside on a Friday night and we talked for a little bit. And then I started talking to other people who started pulling me aside, too, and I'm like whoa, so what's going on? We realized that there was a DNA sweep, where basically they took every Black and Brown worker, every worker from Trinidad, Jamacia, and Dominica had forced them into giving them their DNA. It was in relationship to a sexual assault that happened in the community. They had a description of who they were looking for. But who they decided to take the DNA and coerce this DNA from – they didn't fit the description. They took every Indo and Afro Caribbean worker, brothers that were 5'1" to 6'5" literally 102 pounds to 360 pounds and they basically corralled everybody in the back of a car, then they took them to a van. Their employers were complicit in this. They kept harassing the workers over and over again day and night to try to show that they somehow were criminalized or were somehow involved in this act that they were looking for. The employer put pressure on these workers. The employers put pressure on these workers that they had to comply with this. One worker who refused to take part could not come back to work in the program even though this gentleman was innocent.

I know it's no surprise to any of us that the police lied to the workers that they said that yeah, their DNA swab would be destroyed, but as you know we started to organize, put pressure on the government, engage in different forms of government body investigations. We realized that in these types of DNA sweeps, even if you're innocent and you have nothing to do with it, because of the nature of these crimes, thousands and thousands and thousands of people's DNA is kept forever in a registry. Besides organizing, we've also been engaging in a class action human rights case about this form of racial control, racial profiling. And that was really kind of the foray into start thinking about other forms and levels of contained control.

I wrote about one of these talks on a Friday night in my Data and Society piece, where I introduced readers to three people: Lion, Sandra, and Miguel, all long-time organizers in another community. And very much the same thing happened: all three of them started telling these stories about robotics and agricultural industrial operations and the way that the narrative is that all of these advances in technologies are supposed to make the employer's life good. It's supposed to help profit, maximize profit. It's supposed to make the seaming-less production of crop production for cash crops. But what's always missed in this is what are the implication on racialized workers?

Now getting back to what Lion, Sandra, and Miguel told me. Lion was like look, we would work faster than the robots and in many cases when the robots broke down on the farms we'd lose work. Or that we were put in competition with the robots, right? That was one thing. Lion also talked about stop watches and how stop watches were used to basically surveille the workers and to identify how much crop production each worker was involved with.

Sandra was talking about the use of biometrics, whether it's fingerprints or something else. Where is this data going? Who is collecting this data? What companies are involved in the cannabis industries? Who is this being sold to? And how are bodies constructed, right? So how are Latinx bodies or Black bodies constructed in relationship to data collection? How do we construct the ideal worker in relationship to how many crops they can pick?

And Miguel talks about wage theft, and the systems that are used for so-called "time theft" to check what time people start work, and about the piece rate, the piece rate system which is a way that people are how much crops they pick. So Miguel and his workers, comrades were like we notice they talk about time theft but what we're seeing is wage theft. And we're seeing that our wages are being stolen by a computer system that doesn't necessarily understand or take into consideration the work that we are putting into picking and harvesting crops.

For me, that was an extremely eye-opening moment. There has always been this idea of technology as a salvation. Lots of government money is invested in technology and innovation. But the majority of times it fails. So for me, it's about not just thinking about innovations and technology and automation, but it gets back to age-old questions. Why are agricultural workers exempt from minimum wage laws? Why can agricultural workers not form unions? Why do we insist on a system where instead of insuring when people are hurt and sick rather than getting proper and decent healthcare they're deported back to their home countries while we're downloading our responsibilities of the global North to them?

I had seen a program on Canadian television where Canada is always seen as this beautiful welfare state, and they were trying to say, with the changes in automation and technology Canada's going to be okay because just like Sweden and Denmark and Iceland where they have a very wonderful welfare state, when people lose their jobs as a result of technological changes the welfare state, our social safety net are going to shield and protect them. But from experiences in both Canada and the United States, we know that is not true. The people who pick our crops, the people who are in service industries do not get access to social safety nets. We've put this wall of whiteness to say about advancements but also to exclude the people who produce the most foundation labor in our society.

NK: Absolutely. Thank you. You both just spoke about different types of workers and the way that we can labor with these technologies and I'm curious if in listening to each other you found any similarities or differences in the way that these two types of workers experience technology?

SM: Well, we had a really nice conversation Chris and I, last night. And I think that there are a lot of points of overlap. I think the question of automation and also just sort of understanding the ways that these processes of dehumanization take place. I read a really interesting term, I think it comes from like Frantz Fanon, *the condemned*: the people who – whether they were talking about actual prisons or not who are prisoned, you know, by certain structural functions whether it's the exclusion from a welfare state, the inability to unionize which is one obvious I think point

say between sex workers and migrant farm laborers. And the reduction of people to thingness, right?

Earlier, Natalie, you were talking about the ways that I think the farm workers and the robots and the land form an integrated circuit, right? And there are failures at every level however the only ones who are punished for the failures as Chris pointed out are the laborers, right? And so I think that the sort of thingification, the plantation logics of indentured servitude, or slavery, or migrant farm workers and we can't make the obviously equivalent but there is similar kind of formal attributes where people aren't people anymore, they're part of a system that depends on them but they are the only ones who are going to be punished in human ways.

To go back to this question of time theft versus wage theft. I think I said this to you last night, Chris, that the employers are worried about time theft. The employees are worried about wage theft. But the employees are also having their time stolen because they're indentured. They exist in a state of indebtedness from which they can never escape. And for all of us who are living on credit right, it's a different form of that. But in these cases it's the theft of a livable present and a flourishing future.

CR: That's beautiful. And it really captures the conversation we had. There are multiple forms of debt, right? This idea of precarious communities which always feel in debt, this gratefulness for a shitty job. Or this continuous indebtedness in the global South because of unfair trade agreements. And a continual collective debt to the North as a result of these unequal economic colonial relationships. It's a continued indebtedness that creates this bonded relationship which really does force people to return year after year. It's not that people have a free choice. One of the things that happened during COVID was that a lot of the workers from the Caribbean had to sign these waivers that if anything happened to them in the global North such as COVID, if they got it, their governments would be not responsible. And people kept chastising the workers. It was your bloody free choice to come up to Canada. And, no, it's this unequal relationship, this debt relationship that I think that we're both getting to here, right, that forces people to migrate.

The other component that historically links sex workers and migrant workers, and yes, in some ways it's interchangeable, because many migrant workers engage in sex work and sex workers engage in agricultural work. But the way that the states and say bourgeoisie bodies think that the only way to provide support is through this idea of "saving." Saving the oppressed becomes the fixation rather than building consciousness for liberation. And not just empowerment, but basically transformation to accept that people are going to engage in sex work or they're going to engage in agricultural work on their own terms, not to be formed or to be put into conditions that they don't want to face. So I see that as another commonality. And the way that the state responds to liberation through multiple forms of suppression through both legal instruments and police instruments is very, very similar. And Shaka, correct me if I'm wrong, because I could be but I guess with your digital work, with digital sex workers there is a connection about how both

bodies are commodified, but I think both of us are trying to also think about libertarian modes, right? Or ways that people are trying to defy. And tell me if I'm off the mark.

SM: No, I think that's right. I mean I think that people find ways to navigate, to be resilient, to go back to this part of this too of the, you know, you're asking for it, you know, there is this sort of if you weren't so poor you wouldn't be so poor. If you weren't so in debt you wouldn't be so in debt. And so we're saving you but we're not saving you by offering you a chance to get out of a debt you'll never get out of.

Someone told me the other day, I was feeling very down from the caucasity which is what I call White Supremacy these days, and he just sort of reminded me, he's like don't get gas lit. One of the tricks of the caucasity is to tell you that you're losing. To convince you that you're losing when we're winning. And if the state didn't have to work so hard to mobilize against Black Lives Matter, migrant farm workers, sex workers and so on, if the state wasn't doing that then it means that they would be winning. But the fact that they have to do it means that they're losing.

I think about all the work within my sphere of research and all of these Black and Brown folk who are writing books, holding symposia, someone like Timnit Gebru who was fired from Google after they hired her to be on their AI ethics Board this kind of work is changing, the work that's on Data and Society and now this is putting pressure to bear. I think that the sad thing is like in these forms of marginalized labor that have been so historically marginalized it's the people who are the most vulnerable. The question is how do we pay attention to and elevate the forms of resistance that they're engaging in and provide whatever kinds of support some of us can provide? I provide very different kinds of support around these issues I think, Chris, than you. But I think that these are some of the questions that we have to think about going forward.

NK: Yeah. I love that this conversation has naturally moved into resistance and refusal because that was definitely wanted to talk about next.

So, Chris, can you tell us like what you've seen so far as to how farm workers are kind of refusing or resisting these technologies?

CR: I just want to follow up on what Shaka was mentioning about winning, and why the state is always trying to shut down resistance movements. The resistance to whiteness, to white supremacy, to capitalism: it's always contested. It's never just one-way suppression. People are always trying to fight back. My rule is to echo and provide support and a solidarity network to those people who are fighting. And what we're seeing is different methods and different ways that people are trying to talk back to technology, trying to talk back to oppressive work conditions.

Going back to the article I did for *Data and Society*, Lion came to Canada a couple years ago on the farm program. He suffered a near death experience where he almost died as a worker. And they were trying to ship him back home, repatriate him while he was still sick and he's been here

and he's been resilient in trying to fight back in Canada, to not only demand healthcare but justice for his comrades. And when you meet this dude, you know, he's always kind of smiley and hides his sickness. But he's extremely astute and he goes into a greenhouse and he observes what's going on. When he and his workers were told to wear these stopwatches he said no, we're not going to do it, right? They kept trying to force him and threaten him, he's like we're not going to do this, we're not going to let you control us. And then even with robots and automation, they have found ways to manipulate and suppress the way that automation and technologies are used to control their labor.

Now the other thing we've seen during COVID is workers engaging in wildcat strikes. Once again, it is the most precarious, the people who have the most to lose who find ways to fight back. And a lot of times, they put everything on the table. So whether it's engaging in work refusals, whether it's using WhatsApp or Signal or Messenger to document the work conditions. And then sharing they share them, which becomes part of this collective memory, where people are saying, look my housing is bad, but I can relate because another worker in another town somewhere else has the same conditions, and we've been able to share our experiences through technology that wasn't meant to be used that way.

A lot of farms across Canada are on lockdown. The workers are not allowed to leave their farms ever, right? They're basically told that they have to stay on their property under perpetual curfews, so we have to find different ways to organize with the workers. Now, we're trying to bring different people from different places together. We're workers who've engaged in different forms of acts of resistance and trying to get them to see their commonalities. Sometimes people from the Caribbean don't necessarily agree with each other. Trying to see Trinidadians, or Jamaicans, workers from Barbados, Montserrat trying to get them to understand that there are commonalities in resistance and then thinking about Mexican and Guatemalan workers, and Thai workers, and Filipino workers and try to show how they use the same tools to fight back.

It's an extremely promising period. It is depressing. It is tough. There's a lot of pain and a lot of sorrow once again. But I think as somebody who tries to do organizing, it's about the hope and the sacrifices. The fact that people are trying to fight back – I don't think we have a choice but to support them.

NK: Definitely. Shaka, in your work you talk about refusal and you specifically use the metaphor of the black box. Traditionally the black box, as you say in the paper, is a system in which one can only see the inputs and the outputs but not the contents. Not how an output is created. You use this metaphor, you employ it as a tool for people to become dark and refuse technological systems. I'd be really curious if you could talk to us about that.

SM: It's not so much refusing all technological systems, you know, I'm really inspired by the work of Édouard Glissant which is partly about the ways that within Western Humanism there is a demand to be transparent. But I think that what Glissant puts under pressure is that people have

a right to be opaque. Right? And so, the black box metaphor is actually kind of working two ways.

One is that it's a critique of the ways technical systems are made opaque, where we don't know what's actually going on inside which is the case with a lot of, basically any company that's using an algorithm is being contracted by a state agency to use algorithms to whatever, produce data and make decisions. We don't know what's going on in them. So you have a lot of algorithmic accountability efforts that are going on now that I think are really, really important. But the flip side of it too is yeah, like what would it mean to go dark? And I don't mean you're just gonna go live in the woods and I don't know, do whatever. Like, scroll the tree bark. But it is a question about what is this demand to be transparent?

I think that the European data privacy law is a very interesting one as is the right to be forgotten, right? That this idea that some of what makes us "us" including all the data that we produce that rather than that being extracted and value being produced from it that we should have some kind of say. There is this way in which it becomes impossible for a lot of people to step outside of these systems and in countries where Facebook says you know, we'll offer the internet free except you can only access the internet through Facebook. You don't really – then what's your choice, you know, setting up a mesh network or just being wealthy enough to afford a different way of connecting.

So to go back to the black box, right, there are these two meanings. There is, on the one hand, the sense that we need algorithmic accountability. We need to see inside the box when it impacts people; we need to be able to see it. When it's about distributing state resources we need to see what's going on there because it has been demonstrated over and over and over and over again that data are not neutral, that algorithms are not neutral, and certainly their outputs are not neutral. California has enacted better data privacy laws but what's the problem here? Why can't we do that? Why can't we have greater control that we are producing value. Are we getting paid? No, I'm just rabbit holing all the time. I'm just waiting for that breaking up big tech. I'm waiting for that demand that any other processes that impact people, citizens and non-citizens should be auditable so that we know what's really going on. So, transparency for the state, opacity for everyone else, right? At least as a potential right.

NK: Yeah. And I think that's a really good segue into the last question here, which is where do we go next?

I think as this conversation has shown how when we talk about data and technological systems, things can feel very pessimistic or dystopian, but then here we have people resisting and fighting back and finding new ways of repurposing technology for activism.

Chris, let's start with you. I know that in previous conversations you've really highlighted how important you think a worker-led movement is, and I'd be really curious to hear from you like how do we ensure that happens? How do we support a worker led movement in fighting back?

CR: I do want to shout out both Data & Society and Food Chain Workers Alliance. Part of the work that I've got to do is to continue this project to look at the way and the impact that technology has changed. So I'm working with workers once again to start connecting some workshops and the ideas there. Those are my immediate next steps.Second of all is to document the forms of resistance and sharing those with other communities. I think it's also a question of how do we ensure that people's privacy is respected. But working towards the fact that people could collectively organize together.

For us in Canada, our other demand is around permanent status. So anybody who is undocumented or anybody who comes up as a guest worker, anybody with a precarious immigration status should be given permanent status on arrival. It's about reforming immigration laws and labor laws, and to think about how data and technology are being imposed onto workers with negative consequences. How do we actually turn that around? How do we ensure that any data that's being taken or any technological changes are done in the interest of workers? How do we get to the situation where the worker is the primary decision maker not the bosses. It's about trying to see how to shift that balance of power, learning from the different wildcat strikes, seeing the different ways that people are mobilizing, and the different ways that people are coming together, and trying to amplify what's happening now to keep building.

I've been at this a very long time and we have only scratched a very, very, very, very small surface. But I look at the work that we're doing as part of a longer legacy. So if you're thinking about indentureship or thinking about early agricultural organizers who are fighting back, we're only a blip on this larger timeline. For me, it's about learning about the past and different ways that other people fought back. As I get older, I think about how we start ensuring that other people continue the work, because we know the other side is doing that. They've had a long-term vision about where they want to see the plantation economy, where they want to see capitalism, and what they want to value and commodify food. For us, it's about having that long-term vision of what we want as a society: one where food is not a commodity, where food is a right, where people's dignity is a right, and where we exploit ourselves every day, and we don't put ourselves in the positions where we die to make a basic living.

NK: Yeah, thank you. Shaka, over to you.

SM: I echo everything Chris said across a variety of contexts. These are basic human needs and dignities that should be afforded everyone. And that in the end costs less even within a capitalist system. But I think it's important to emphasize, as Chris did, all of the ways in which people are fighting.

Within the context of my own research, especially around say like Black Data, this is echoed in the work of other scholars as well which is like number one, does X need to be built? Do you need it? If you could give farm workers living wages and permanent status, do you need a

computational system to monitor them, right? Or do you find ways if you are, and I think this is the other part, does it need to be built and then who is at the table from the very beginning, right?

I think about issues of ability, issues of race that's been the problem. It's not a pipeline problem, is it these white techno libertarian, often neofascist which is a very, very fine line between these techno libertarians and neofascist which strangely always seem to reproduce and reproduce and reproduce misology, sexism, and so on. Right? I mean someone like Peter Thiel is a neofascist, like let's just be really, really clear. So if you're really serious about building something that you believe has some benefit to some group of people or humanity then you need everyone at the table to begin with, right? You don't need an after the fact five years down the road adjustment to an operating system that actually makes it accessible to people with vision or hearing impairment or whatever, right? You need to have those people there from the very beginning you're going to create a system that is going to shape the labor practices of farm workers or that is going to affect the distribution of various forms of public service aid or welfare state aid then why aren't those people there from the very beginning, right? And then part of it too, and you see this in tech giants you have these movements to unionize, you have these movements that are like we're not going to work on this software for this surveillance program. And so I think that those are sites as well for potential collaboration across academic fields, activist fields, labor, people who are inside institutions. And that work is already happening.

NK: Right. But we can always use more.

SM: Yeah, we can always use more.

NK: Well, thank you so much, Shaka and Chris.

And that's our show! A huge thank you to Shaka McGlotten and Chris Ramsaroop for sharing their thoughts about data and labor.

Next time on Becoming Data, I talk to Deb Raji, a researcher who studies Artificial intelligence and accountability, and Arthur Gwagwa, a researcher who works on human rights, AI, and global security. We investigate how AI and automation can lead to harms across different geopolitical contexts, and discuss how we might mitigate those harms. So I hope you'll join us for episode 3 about data, AI, and automation.

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