

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Global Assemblages, Technofuturos and the Worldwide Web of Care: Laboring Latinas and Care Work Platforms

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4dp6219q>

Author

Miranda Alczar, Magally A.

Publication Date

2019

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Global Assemblages, Technofuturos and the Worldwide Web of Care: Laboring Latinas and Care
Work Platforms

(Alia, Tidy, Handy and Care.com)

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Chicana and Chicano Studies

by

Magally Alejandra Miranda Alcázar

2019

© Copyright by

Magally Alejandra Miranda Alcázar

2019

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Global Assemblages, Technofuturos and the Worldwide Web of Care:

Laboring Latinas and Care Work Platforms

(Alia, Tidy, Handy and Care.com)

by

Magally Alejandra Miranda Alcázar

Master of Arts in Chicana/o Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Maylei S. Blackwell, Chair

This thesis takes up “care work platforms” as an object of study. I define ‘care work platforms’ as digital infrastructures that enable care work service providers and individuals seeking care work services to interact. This paper argues for thinking about care work platforms as technoscientific objects that fit the criteria of global assemblages and proceeds to analyze four Los Angeles-based platforms: Tidy, Handy, Care.com and Alia using new media analyses. Furthermore, I consider the implications of care work platforms on what scholars in Latina/o Studies have called technofuturos, or the study of Latinidades during a period of accelerated globalization, in particular the globalization of care work and information.

The thesis of Magally Alejandra Miranda Alcázar is approved.

Robert P Brenner

Otto Santa Ana

Maylei S Blackwell, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

DEDICATION

For Damian

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

List of Tables

- I. Introduction
- II. On Care Work Platforms as Global Assemblages and *Technofuturos*
 - A. Globalization of Care Work
 - B. Care Work as Affect and Commodity, or the Margins of Economic Thought
 - C. Of Network Culture and *Technofuturos*
- III. Methods
- IV. Findings
- V. Conclusion

List of Figures

- Figure 1.1*
- Figure 1.2*
- Figure 1.3*
- Figure 1.4*
- Figure 1.5*
- Figure 1.6*
- Figure 1.7*
- Figure 1.8*
- Figure 1.9*
- Figure 1.10*
- Figure 1.11*
- Figure 1.12*

List of Tables

- Table 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Maylei Blackwell, first and foremost for her guidance and unwavering commitment to breaking barriers for women of color in the academy at a time when such service is often invisibilized, uncompensated and as she reminds us in her first book *Chicana Power!*, too often a road to burnout. Many thanks are also owed to The Coven - Nadia Zepeda, Audrey Silvestre, Angelica Becerra, Brenda Nicolas, Rose Simons and Chantiri Duran Resendiz - who have been a consistent source of spiritual and intellectual renewal and resource for this first-generation, sister-less Chicana.

For his countless lessons on all things Marxist science, but most importantly for his comradeship and his faith in the new new left, I must also thank my advisor, Dr. Robert Brenner.

I have been privileged to count on the thoughtfulness of a number of interlocutors including Abraham Encinas, to whom I owe an unpayable debt for reminding me that it is our job in the Humanities to tell stories, Maya Andrea Gonzalez, one of the most brilliant Marxist feminist political theorists I know and my multi-talented friend Rudy Mondragon. Thanks also to Efren Lopez, Dr. Otto Santa Ana, Dr. Devon G. Peña and countless others I am ashamed I can not thank by name.

To my dear friends and coworkers Kris, Efren, Chynna, Maryann, Brenda, Raquel and Andi Xoch, you are very much appreciated.

And, lastly, but certainly not least I owe everything to my family who have taught me all I know about surviving: Andresito, Itzelita, Anahi, Alejandra, Manuel, Ubaldo, Mami, Papi and Damian (we made it).

“In this imagined future in which domestic service and caregiving work is respected, openly recognized, and legal, it would be less important whether maids are Latinas or not. As domestic service becomes a more viable way of earning a living wage with dignity and respect, there would be less of an incentive to deny the value of the contribution domestic service workers make to society. There would be no need to differentiate domestic service workers by immigration status, education, or language skills in order to rationalize their wages and working conditions. The questions of migration, gender, and race dissipate as they are disentangled from labor processes and practices. Policy reform can act as a catalyst in the process of disentangling identity issues from labor and migration practices so as to empower domestic worker services and free Latinas to give meaning to the concept of Latinidad on their own terms.”

From Teresa Carrillo’s “The Best of Care” in *Technofuturos* (2007)¹

The epigraph above is from Teresa Carrillo’s essay “The Best of Care” in *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*, an anthology whose aim is “to provide an intellectual and creative space for destabilizing and reassessing our understanding of Latinidades during a period of accelerated globalization, transnationalism, transmodernity, and reconfigurations of empire.”² Published in 2007, *Technofuturos* precedes this study by a more than a decade but in many ways it captures the spirit of this project on care work platforms and the laboring Latinas who, as Carrillo argued, continue to be overrepresented, undervalued and deeply entangled in caring for America. As a political and economic project and a historical process, globalization has been a powerful force for erosion and recomposition, as well as a powerfully productive force for articulating new constellations of global capital, labor, power relations, new discourse and new cultures. Globalization as a process

¹ Teresa Carrillo, “The Best of Care: Latinas as Transnational Mothers and Caregivers,” *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*, Minneapolis, MN: Lexington Books, 2007, p. 209.

² Nancy Raquel Mirabal, “Historical Futures, Globality, and Writing Self: An Introduction to Technofuturos,” *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*, Minneapolis, MN: Lexington Books, 2007, p. 209.

invites us to be attuned to new social, political and economic formations and processes and to build new methodological approaches. This paper reflects the spirit of research of *technofuturos*.

This thesis takes as its object of study “care work platforms,” digital platforms that mediate care work. For the purpose of this essay, I use Nick Srnicek’s definition of platforms which he defines as “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact.”³ From Rachel Brown, I take the definition of care work to refer to the tasks and occupations involved in the care of children, elderly and the infirm, housekeeping, nursing and sex work; beyond occupations, however, I also define care work in terms of the work of “caring for” things like physical chores, cooking, cleaning, washing or “caring about” such as childcare, elderly care.⁴ So, I define ‘care work platforms’ as digital infrastructures that enable care work service providers and individuals seeking care work services to interact.

I first became aware of care work platforms in 2016 when I was the target of advertisements by the company, Tidy, one of the platforms profiled later in this study. Though I had studied domestic work - house cleaning, childcare and elderly care - by Latina women as an undergraduate, I was honestly puzzled by this particular company, Tidy, and what it meant for the work of care in the contemporary moment. My first instinct was to reach for a comparison to ride-hailing platforms like the ubiquitous Uber and I even found myself explaining this project to people by saying “I’m studying care work platforms. They’re kind of like Uber, but for domestic/care work.” The reality was that, even as I said that, I could feel that the comparison required some stretching. Certainly care work

³ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017.

⁴ Brown, Rachel. “Re-examining the Transnational Nanny,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18:2, 210-229, 2015.

platforms share many aspects in common with Uber, especially in terms of the kinds of digital infrastructures i.e. rating systems, worker and client profiles, algorithmic technologies, etc. But, in reality, the work of care is unlike driving a car or transporting a passenger in some ways that are critical to unpack. Care work is a historically specific and unique formation. It has been shaped in the West by particular ideological formations. Care work in the United States has been shaped by the twin pillars of slavery and patriarchy in ways that are incommensurate with the work of chauffeuring or taxi driving. Domestic labor in the West has been historically “othered” economically in particular ways including through the institutionalized separation of the public and private sphere. Under the coercive system of slavery, Black women carried the double burden of wage labor and housework in the plantation economy, a trend that continued into the post-antebellum 20th century where many Black women worked as paid housekeepers.⁵ Today, crafted by particular domestic laws and foreign policy, domestic work has been shaped along patterns of globalization such that have entangled it discursively if not ontologically with particular bodies, namely Latinas and other immigrant women from the Global South. Care work platforms, as I will explain in detail in this thesis, are made possible through the confluence of a number of global processes including the globalization of care work, capital, migration, the feminization of labor and the globalization of information. As nodes in a worldwide web of care, care work platforms are the byproduct of emerging globalized network cultures that require new modes of analysis.

⁵ Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, New York, NY: Random House (Vintage Books), 1983, p. 238.

My suspicions that care work platforms are unlike Uber in critical ways was corroborated in part by Julia Ticona, Alexandra Mateescu and Alex Rosenblat in their recent study *Beyond Disruption: How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work and Ridehailing* who wrote that:

The dominance of Uber in public understandings of on-demand labor platforms has obscured the different ways technology is being used to reshape other types of services – such as care and cleaning work – in the ‘gig’ economy. In particular, the Uber model doesn’t illuminate differences in regulation, workforce demographics, and legacies of inequality and exploitation that shape other industries.⁶

“Uber but for housework” does not and can not capture the nuances of marketplace platforms that provide services like housekeeping, childcare, pet sitting, and even cuddling and marriage brokering. They can not entirely explain the ways in which platforms like Tidy, Handy, Care.com and Alia (the four platforms I profile here) utilize technologies to manufacture culturally desirable qualities of care such as tidiness, handiness, care, compossibility, trustworthiness, professionalism, etc. And it can not explain the persistence of identity markers of differences like gender, race, immigration status, education, language skills etc. that Carrillo described in 2007 and that are present on care work platforms today. How, then, do we understand the emergence of care work platforms in the last decade? What are their conditions of possibility and how do they invite us as social scientists to reimagine social and cultural analysis?

I argue that care work platforms are technoscientific objects that fit the criteria of what globalization scholars have termed “global assemblages,” which Stephen J. Collier and Aihwa Ong describe as “global forms [that] are articulated in specific situations - or territorialized in assemblages

⁶ Julia Ticona, Alexandra Mateescu and Alex Rosenblat, *Beyond Disruption: How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work and Ridehailing*, New York, NY: Data and Society, 2018, p. 3, 5.

[which] define new material, collective, and discursive relationships[6].”⁷ Global assemblages are defined by their quality of *global*-ness; they are objects which are “abstractable, mobile, and dynamic, moving across and reconstituting ‘society,’ ‘culture’ and ‘economy.’” Global assemblages represent a challenge to classic social scientific abstractions and modern disciplines.⁸ In this, I draw from social and cultural analysis methods in Latina/o, a field that is “born of and defined by the United States as its nation-state [but] influenced by globalism and transnationalism, including international migrations, economic globalization, global labor circuits, and neo-imperialist political policies.”⁹ I build upon this interdisciplinary impulse in the field.

Ong and Collier argue that “technoscience - whether material technology or specialized social expertise - may be exemplary of global forms.”¹⁰ In my project I discuss the ways in which care work platforms as a global assemblage and technoscientific object that fit the criteria as laid out by Ong and Collier. First, they are “limited or delimited by specific technical infrastructures, administrative apparatuses, or value regimes.”¹¹ In the first part of this paper, I discuss how value regimes like the social reproduction, domestic and foreign policies (statecraft) and the availability of certain technical infrastructures. Furthermore, I show how care work platforms are adept at “[assimilating] themselves to new environments, to code heterogeneous contexts and objects in terms that are amenable to

⁷ Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier, “Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems” *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 4.

⁸ Ong and Collier, p. 4.

⁹ Mirabal, p. 2.

¹⁰ Ong and Collier, p. 11.

¹¹ Ong and Collier, p. 11.

control and valuation.” Yey, in addition to the ways that care work platforms lend themselves to control and valuation by the powers that be of globalization, I also want to allow space for considering the ways that global assemblages like the care work platform are appropriated, negotiated and challenged by those subjects made vulnerable by macroeconomic global processes.¹²

Here I interpret care work platforms using three discourses on globalization that speak to one another. First, in a traditional literature review fashion, I interpret care work platforms as a byproduct of the confluence of neoliberal processes of economic and reproductive crisis, globalization and the commodification of care work. Second, I analyze care work platforms as technoscientific global assemblages. Lastly, I treat four care work platforms as texts which I analyze through a method of close reading and as culturally situated objects wherever possible drawing from the previous two approaches as interpretive aids.

¹² Nancy Naples, Changing the Terms: Community Activism, Globalization, and the Dilemmas of Transnational Feminist Praxis,” *Women’s Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.

Care Work Platforms in the Shadow of the Social Reproduction Crisis

The presence and proliferation of platforms to mediate care labor are the product of a coalescing of social, political and economic factors, but they are also indicative of the introduction of new digital infrastructures and new corporate and nonprofit actors seeking to profit from and manage them. The first decades of the 21st century has been characterized by an unprecedented demand for care workers in the Global North and supply of care laborers primarily from the Global South. Nancy Fraser coined the term “social reproduction crisis” to refer to the neoliberal process resulting from the disinvestment in welfare in countries like the United States that has effectively “ externalized care work onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it.”¹³ In true neoliberal fashion, not everyone is affected by the social reproduction crisis equally. Fraser writes that this disinvestment has resulted in “a new, dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, we can anticipate that at the current rate where approximately 10,000 Baby Boomers reach the age of 65 daily in the United States, the need for quality care workers is trending upwards. The trend is confirmed at least in part by official reports from the national Bureau of Labor Statistics which projects that the number three and number four occupations expected to grow between now and 2030 are home health aids and personal care aids.¹⁵

Care work platforms are significant because their proliferation may mark a shift in the economic organization of care work. They are deepening free market logics into areas of affective life

¹³ Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review* No. 100, July-August 2016.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.nr0.htm>

where markets did not previously exist. Care work platforms are private firms and non-profit organizations, or platforms, which function as “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact.”¹⁶ Care work platforms here refer to platforms that provide the infrastructure for clients and cleaners to interact. They provide the digital infrastructures that enable care work service providers to sell their labor-power as a commodity and for clients to hire said workers to perform a number of tasks pertaining to the “caring for” things like physical chores, cooking, cleaning, washing or “caring about” such as childcare, elderly care.¹⁷

In the face of a social reproduction crisis and the supply and demand for care work, corporate and nonprofit entities like Handy, Tidy, Care.com and Alia (the platforms analyzed in this study) play a role crisis managers often for the purpose of yielding a profit, but sometimes not. They do this, I argue, through an effortful process of *thickening* digital infrastructure and management systems and subsuming affects under the logics of the market economy. The notion of market and management thickening is derived from a 2016 article in the *Harvard Business Review* called “The Internet of Stuff Your Mom Won’t Do for You Anymore” by Ray Sullivan and Tim Fisman. Sullivan and Fisman write that “this service becomes more valuable with market ‘thickness,’ so the bigger you get, the more indispensable you become and the less feasible it is for competitors to muscle in on your business.” In the article, the authors discuss the utility of platforms for “[making] the buyer-seller relationship work notably better – or even creating markets where none could have existed without the platform’s

¹⁶ Snicek, p. 2.

¹⁷ Rachel Brown, “Re-examining the Transnational Nanny,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 18 No. 2, 2015, p.

nurturing hand.¹⁸ We quickly see that function of “the nurturing hand” which appears to be a shorthand for digital infrastructure and management systems:

Because a valuable platform is a ‘place’ where groups meet to trade or otherwise transact in ways that would be difficult without the mediating hand of the platform. This includes ensuring that the right types of participants show up: Care.com, for example, allows sitters to provide third-party verification of their bona fides and – like so many other online platforms – enlists users themselves to maintain quality control. Parents rate sitters, and vice-versa, with the hope that a five-star rating provides at least some peace of mind to anxious parents.¹⁹

In this way, I argue that what Sullivan and Fisman call the platforms’ nurturing hand is in fact a revamp of Adam Smiths’ hand of the market for the 21st century. The authors describe that what makes platforms valuable are introducing new technologies to mediate between the needs of diverse participants be it buyers and sellers, service providers and clients, and so on. This model is inspired by the thickening of infrastructures to mediate used car industry. The authors describe the ways that the car industry identified a problem in supply and demand and introduced fixes that yielded them a profit. In the used car industry, they write, buyers and sellers were interested in a transaction but there was a problem of ‘asymmetric information’ or a difference in what the buyers and sellers know. Car dealerships, and later platforms like eBay Motors, began to charge clients a fee in exchange for conducting eight-point inspections that gave customers peace of mind, employed rating systems for sellers and buyers and outsourced evaluations to third parties like Carfax. Platforms like Care.com, they write, work in a similar way by employing common platform features like third-party verification

¹⁸ Sullivan, Ray and Fisman, Tim. "The Internet of "Stuff Your Mom Won't Do for You Anymore"." Harvard Business Review. April 24, 2017. Accessed June 2018.
<https://hbr.org/2016/07/the-internet-of-stuff-your-mom-wont-do-for-you-anymore>

¹⁹ Ibid.

and rating systems. In these various ways, care work platforms seek to position themselves as the best managers of the crisis of care in the context of globalized and commercialized care work.

Care work platforms exist within a bigger ecology of platform capitalism. In his book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek methodically classifies four types of platforms²⁰:

- Advertising platforms like Google and Facebook that extract information on users, undertake the labour of analyzing this information, and then use the products of that process to sell ad space
- Cloud platforms such as AWS and Salesforce that own the hardware and software of digital-dependent businesses and renting them out as needed
- Industrial platforms like GE and Siemens that build the hardware and software necessary to transform goods into services
- Product platforms like Uber, Airbnb that attempt to reduce their ownership of assets to a minimum and to profit from reducing costs as much as possible

Under this scheme, care work platforms might be classified somewhere between industrial platforms and product platforms, for reasons I have already discussed. One thing that is clear is that they belong to what has been called the “on-demand economy”²¹ which refers to exactly what it sounds like. Such on-demand platforms “range from specialized firms for a variety of services (cleaning, house calls from physicians, grocery shopping, plumbing, and so on) to more general market-places like TaskRabbit and Mechanical Turk, which provide a variety of services.”

Ai-Jen Poo, executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, in a public keynote, spoke about the on-demand economy thus: “Technology is being used to create so much efficiency and convenience for middle-class people and really wealthy people like bringing everything to your doorstep.” What Poo’s comment suggests is that this commercialized, on-demand economy is not simply a way to access goods and services with greater efficiency and convenience at your doorstep,

²⁰ Srnicek, p. 49.

²¹ Srnicek, p. 72.

but in its commodified form is accessible only to a middle-class audience or as a luxury for the very elite. This analysis of care work platforms as reserved for people with the financial means to purchase them harkens back to Nancy Fraser's analysis of the neoliberal crisis of social reproduction as a variagated system "commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot."

This fact has cultural implications. What it means culturally is that care work platforms tend to address the bourgeois subject and reflect bourgeois cultural values. For instance, in Sullivan and Fisman's article "The Internet of Stuff Your Mom Won't Do Anymore," it quickly becomes apparent that the "you" is a importantly distinguish their version of platforms from any old startups on the web that connect brick-and-mortar businesses to consumers, particularly tasks like "laundry and cooking." They also clarify the *you* to whom they are directing their address, writing that tasks like laundry and cooking "may be tasks that software engineers would rather not do themselves, but platforms haven't made these chores any easier to deal with." Then, almost as though directly addressing the *you*, Sullivan and Tillman's essay takes a reprimanding tone. Speaking now to this imagined software engineer-as-Peter Pan, an individual who refuses to trouble themselves with things like dropping off their laundry or picking up lunch at a restaurant, they write: "It's really not much trouble to drop off your laundry or dry-cleaning at the place down the street, and then pick it up yourself. If you don't like the hassle, it's not much work to find one that delivers. That is, information costs, search costs, and transaction costs are all pretty modest."

Modest as these costs might be (this is arguable), Sullivan and Fisman downplay, on the one hand, the cost of completing these tasks in terms of time and, on the other, the value in terms of a price that such labor might be worth on the market. Their argument that the labor of doing chores is "not

much trouble” indeed seems tonedeaf in the face of a trend within the very on-demand platform economy about which their essay is focused: a trend of catering precisely to this sort of individual who according to representatives of the platform Handy are “customers who have no interest in assembling their own furniture or figuring out how to do their own tasks,” also called by experts the “do-it-for me customer.”²² In fact, one example of such a customer even appears in the comments section of the *Harvard Review Business* article from a user named Gorjan Ivanovski who writes:

Personally I'd love to have the Internet of "Stuff my Mom won't do for me anymore" and there is massive value in it. How much of our adult lives are spent on chores? What is the \$ value of that every month? What is the opportunity cost of those hours every year? Press a button and all my shopping, house chores, clothes washing, cooking and ironing are done? Where do I sign up? Meanwhile, students, unemployed, people needing extra income on the side can sign up to provide a variety of these services, find customers quickly and not worry about payments systems or marketing? That's already a proven model (Uber, Fiverr, Upwork). How are these not valuable problems to solve? Even though traditional markets are working 'just fine'.

What is significant in this users' comment the users' acknowledgement of an abundant reserve army of labor in the form of the gig worker, portrayed as “students, unemployed, people needing extra income on the side.” In short, to use Sullivan and Tillman's own terms - two parties interested in a transaction. As I show later in this paper in my close reading of various platforms, they tend to be consumer or client-facing.

²² This was collected through ethnographic fieldwork at Shoptalk Las Vegas 2019, a retail industry convention.

Globalization of Care Work

In the last three decades, this crisis of social reproduction in a great part of the Global North whose welfare state has been gutted has been subsidized immensely by the constant global flow of labor from the Global South. In an interesting twist of history, feminist political theorists like Angela Davis and the Wages for Housework movement in some ways predicted this crisis when they argued that the state would fail to take responsibility for supplying or subsidizing reproductive care, and that there would be no large government subsidies or bailouts for working families unless a feminist social movement intervened. It is likely they could not have foreseen the incredible capacity of globalization to partially resolve the crisis, at least for those who can afford to outsource care labor to poorer women from the Global South. Care work related migration today is one of the leading factors in global migration patterns. A 2013 report by the International Labor Organization called *Domestic Workers Around the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protections* described the trends. Though it is difficult to define the parameters of care labor because of informality, it is estimated that there are anywhere between 52-100 million care workers globally. That number has risen by 19 million since the mid 1990s.²³ An impressive 17%, nearly 1 in every 5 care workers, are international migrants.²⁴ Another way to look at this is in terms of total global migration, where migration is becoming increasingly feminized. This is significant because women migrants are more likely to end up in care work jobs because care work is gendered; whereas previously migrants were primarily men, the gender of migrants has leveled out with 50% of migrants who are now women.²⁵

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

This all has come at a cost to migrant care workers. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, in their book *Border as a Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* have gone so far as to argue that globalized women care workers “embody both the feminization of labor and the feminization of migration,”²⁶ two critical terms to describe increased exploitation and immiseration in a neoliberal race-to-the-bottom. As products of the feminization of labor and feminization of migration, such care workers are more likely to find themselves in jobs that have unclear boundaries about employment and unemployment or labor time and free time as well as in precarious working conditions, not to mention performing the lions’ share of unremunerated or undervalued affective and emotional labor.²⁷ Migrant care workers, in this way, occupy a peculiar location in the international division of labor in a nebulous space between super-exploited and unfree labor, though further discussion of this subject is beyond the scope of this paper.

In any case, one thing that is indisputable is the way in which care labor has become a precious—and extractable—resource. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hoschild, in their 2002 anthology *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, argue that care today exists in a global care chain that mirrors the global supply chain. “It is as if the wealthy parts of the world are running short on precious emotional and sexual resources” they write, “and have had to turn to poorer regions for fresh supplies.”²⁸ The global care chain (GCC) interpretation of the global gendered division of labor, the sexual division of labor is represents the globalization of a once local gendered

²⁶ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as a Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hoschild, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks, 2002, p. 4-5

division of labor, in the Fordist nuclear family model such that “the First World takes on a role like that of the old-fashioned male in the family— pampered, entitled, unable to cook, clean, or find his socks. Poor countries take on a role like that of the traditional woman in the family—patient, nurturing and self-denying.”²⁹ Another aspect of a GCC analysis emphasizes that while the surplus of care flows from the Global South to the Global North, workers are incentivized to migrate to be able to send part of their wages back in the form of remittances.

While the crisis of social reproduction certainly relies on the disinvestment of the state on welfare, it would be a mistake to think that this means a withdrawal of the state as an political actor. A lean state is produced as a matter of policy, and the crisis of social reproduction is the conscious production of neoliberal statecraft. In *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*, Grace Chang describes the effortful production of “disposable domestics” through U.S. foreign and domestic policy. She writes that “immigration from the Third World (sic) to the United States is carefully orchestrated—that is, desired, planned, compelled, managed, accelerated, slowed, and periodically stopped—by the direct actions of US interests.”³⁰ Chang’s study explores specific domestic and foreign policies and national ideological formations including the image of immigrants as invaders and parasites,³¹ public charge laws,³² anti-welfare policies directed at Latina immigrant women that paint them as welfare abusers, breeders and dependents,³³ anti-labor policies

²⁹ Ehrenreich and Hoschild, p. 12.

³⁰ Grace Chang, *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*, Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016.

³¹ Chang, p. 12.

³² Chang, p. 13.

³³ Chang, p. 13.

and the recruitment of “temporary” guest workers dating back to the Bracero program,³⁴ structural adjustment policies that force women to migrate,³⁵ immigration control government agencies like INS (now ICE) and right-wing rhetoric.³⁶ So, Chang’s work is a methodical analysis of the production of disposable migrant care workers as a function of statecraft. In short, care workers increasingly find themselves within a complex, global division of labor that is exploitative by design. Brett Neilson and Sandro Mezzadra stress the intricacy of this process when they refer to “the heterogenous constitution of global space and the complex ways it crisscrosses the production and reproduction of labor power as a commodity” and contend “that the proliferation of borders in the contemporary world means the political organization of labor must be carried out in an irreducibly multiple sense.”³⁷ One explanation for deep entanglement that Teresa Carrillo describes between care work and *Latinidad*, then, can be explained partially through the domestic and foreign policies and accompanying ideological formations that have tethered the United States to some of its closest geopolitical neighbors namely Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, but also the Philippines and the Caribbean. This geopolitical intimacy is reflected, for instance in an old Mexican *dicho* (saying): *Pobre de Mexico. Tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de los Estados Unidos* (Poor Mexico. So far from God, so close to the United States).

Care work, if we recall Teresa Carrillo’s opening epigraph is thus systematically though informally “differentiate[d] by immigration status, education, [and] language skills in order to

³⁴ Chang, p. 13-14.

³⁵ Chang, p. 14.

³⁶ Chang, p. 15.

³⁷ Mezzadra and Nielson, p. 95.

rationalize their wages and working conditions” such that “questions of migration, gender, and race” refuse to “dissipate” or be “disentangled from labor processes and practices.” Care work is globally gendered (according to the same 2013 ILO report, 80% of global care workers are women) with similar numbers in the United States for childcare, elderly care and housekeeping. Race is also a statistically significant factor, with Latinas particularly overrepresented in certain segments of the care work industry. As of 2017, 88% of house cleaners, housekeepers and maids were women and 49% were Hispanic or Latina/o” according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Put another way, 1 out of every 2 housekeepers in the United States is *Latina*.

Decision makers are at a crossroads with regards to the policy of care work today. The United States Department of Labor’s Fair Labor Standards Act has long established minimum wage and overtime pay standards for employees, but also outlined certain exemptions for domestic workers.³⁸ A campaign by members of the National Domestic Workers Alliance has been trying to California state has become a hotbed of political activity by domestic workers, self-organized into organizer centers and NGOs which are part mutual aid societies and hubs of labor advocacy. The demands of these, mostly immigrant women-led centers, are dignity and respect which in practice means labor protections that would require the overturning of long-held exemption clauses in labor law. Domestic worker advocates a social recognition of their labor as “the work that makes all other work possible.” Beginning in the 2000’s, domestic workers and their allies nationally began crafting a list of demands. The list of thirteen points that include things like the right to overtime pay at 1.5 hours, rest and meal breaks, time to sleep, etc. was eventually named the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. A version of the

³⁸ See: <https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/hrg.htm#8> and <https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs25.pdf>

bill passed the California Assembly in 2013, and was renewed as a Senate Bill in 2017. For the first time in history, care workers who work in private homes are eligible for certain labor protections afforded to workers in the United States who were left out of the original New Deal-era Wagner Act that established labor relations processes. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division:

“An employee who performs companionship services in or about the private home of the person by whom he/she is employed is exempt from the FLSA's minimum wage and overtime requirements if all criteria of the exemption are met. "Companionship services" means services for the care, fellowship, and protection of persons who because of advanced age or physical or mental infirmity cannot care for themselves.”

California AB 241, passed in 2013:

“A domestic work employee who is a personal attendant shall not be employed more than nine hours in any workday or more than 45 hours in any workweek unless the employee receives one and one-half times the employee's regular rate of pay for all hours worked over nine hours in any workday and for all hours worked more than 45 hours in the workweek.”

To do this, it is necessary first to discuss the literature on the companion exemption in labor law in which to situate the politics of domestic work. Using Julia Tomassetti's paper about the companion exemption in labor law and the problems it poses to incorporating care work, I will briefly engage the study of labor law and the long-standing companion exemption which is a key barrier to labor protections for domestic workers today. As much as possible, I try to weave in literature about the separation of the public and private spheres, out of which the notion of housework emerges, and

the literature on the production of differences like class, race and gender, especially as they pertain to the importing of domestic workers from the Global South to the Global North.

In her essay “Who is a Worker? Partisanship, the National Labor Relations Board, and the Social Content of Employment,” Julia Tomassetti writes that the The National Labor Relations Act 1935 (or, the Wagner Act) established the rights of workers by granting them certain labor protections such as the right to self-organize and collectively bargain. She argues that law, and I would add policy, mediates the social relations of work and that decision makers play a role in shaping the contours of inclusion and exclusion of certain workers. In other words, the question of “who is a worker?” is determined largely in the legal terrain. Economic relations, such as the myriad forms of exchange of services for a wage or other remuneration, are only part of determining who is a worker; the rest is social. These insights are especially useful for thinking sociologically about the inclusion and exclusion of certain domestic workers and certain kinds of domestic work even when it is a straightforward exchange of services for remuneration. Only by contemplating the dynamics of the naturalization of care and housework, for instance, or the politics of racial hierarchies, can we get a full picture of why certain domestic workers are not compensated or not fully compensated for their work and why they are not considered worthy of labor protections.

Tomassetti argues, any my findings are consistent with this, that Republican decision makers have sought a strong divide between “primarily economic” relations and those which are outside of contract law; by contrast, Democratic decision makers have argued that commodity production requires some non commercial activity and therefore should be regulated by common law.

The theories of 1) global care chains and 2) care workers as enmeshed in complex foreign and domestic policies and ideological formations are helpful for contextualizing the overrepresentation of certain bodies (Third World women workers, subjects of various laws), but neither one alone helps to explain the proliferation of care work platforms. An easy explanation for this gap is historical: care work platforms rely on new technologies that were not available until recently. While this may be part of the reason, I believe the gap is also indicative of deeper theoretical problems. Care work platforms are difficult to understand because they are socially located at the margins and the intersection of mainstream and feminist economic thought.

Care Work Platforms at the Margins of Economic Thought

There is an easy counterargument to the claim that the gap in knowledge or concern about care work platforms is merely due their newness and that is the mounds of recent scholarship related to the study of platform capitalism, the cyber-proletariat, labor in the digital economy. These studies tend to emphasize new technologies and management strategies that are transforming traditional industries. For instance, in Nick Srnicek's discussion of "product platforms," he focuses on Uber, Airbnb, which he describes as companies that "attempt to reduce their ownership of assets to a minimum and to profit from reducing costs as much as possible."³⁹ In this sense, even the term "lean platforms" seems to imply the existence of a previous not-lean, manufacturing-intensive labor process. Kim Moody is correct in his assessment of automation in the recent essay "High Tech, Low Growth: Robots and the Future of Work" when he argued that "artificial intelligence, robotics, self driving cars and trucks, and 3-D printers" techno-futurisms play second fiddle to technologies for a "changing work environment and flexible working arrangements."⁴⁰ Moody, like Srnicek, situate the digital economy in the context of the so-called "long downturn," a condition emerging in the 1970s that "created a major shift within these general conditions, away from secure employment and unwieldy industrial behemoths and toward flexible labour and lean business models."⁴¹ The technological revolution that began in the 1990s and the new internet industry, America's definitive turn from its manufacturing base and toward asset-price Keynesianism and the resulting immiseration of workers

³⁹ Srnicek, p. 49.

⁴⁰ Kim Moody, "High Tech, Low Growth: Robots and the Future of Work," *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 26 No. 4, 2018.

⁴¹ Srnicek, p. 34-35.

more susceptible than ever to exploitative working conditions, according to Srnicek, “set the scene for today’s economy.”⁴² My intention here is not to suggest that these approaches to digital platforms are wrong *per se* nor do I mean to make a blanket statement about their lack of engagement with questions of gender, but rather that there is an androcentrism in mainstream and even Marxist economic thought about the digital economy that obscures the significance of care work platforms.

By this I mean that a different picture of the emergence of the digital economy becomes apparent when we center the margins of care work, or work that is historically “othered” according to feminist economists Drucilla K. Barker and Susan F. Feiner.⁴³ Associated with women, care work as a household or family economy has historically existed in a social location that is incommensurate with the market economy. Describing these two economies the public market and its other household or family market (which I will use here synonymously with the sphere of social reproduction), Barker and Feiner describe this difference. “The economy of the market is the familiar public economy of supply and demand, production for exchange, profit, and class conflict. The economy of the household constitutes the “other” economy of domestic relationships in which people are reproduced through expenditures of time, affection, and money.”⁴⁴ Although not technically productive in the sense of lacking the exchange value necessary to produce a surplus value or profit, feminist economists (building upon liberal and Marxist feminist social movements and thought) like Barker and Feiner appropriate economic grammar in the practice of “reading economic texts to discover, name, and

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Drucilla K. Barker and Susan F. Feiner, *Liberating Economics: Feminist Perspectives on Families, Work and Globalization*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Barker and Feiner, p. 20.

valorize the many productive activities performed by women and other subordinated peoples.”⁴⁵ At the risk of confusing the reader, I argue that care *is and is not* simply an “othered” economy that is only valorized or productive in such feminist appropriations. The question is not *if* but *to what degree* care work is in fact incommensurate with “the” market economy. An understanding of care work platforms pivots on this critical point. The point is an empirical one.

Care work is overwhelmingly mediated by personal networks outside of the market economy. Third party organizations, private firms and nonprofit organizations have, until now, been considered as merely fringe phenomenon. The 2016 study *Profile, Practices and Needs of California’s Domestic Work Employers* by UCLA’s Institute for Research on Labor and Employment confirms, even if at a somewhat local level. The study found that 71% of employers in California used their personal networks such as neighbors, colleagues and friends to hire domestic workers.⁴⁶ This same study also found that only 15% of employers used agencies or organizations, and 7% used websites and the same amount used classified ads.⁴⁷

This is reflected in much of the literature on care work where third party agencies whether for-profit or not-for-profit organizations, in-real-life (IRL) or digital, figure only as penumbric; far more likely is care work discussed in terms of what I call affective and embodied (dis)entanglements, a catch-all term for the myriad ways that care is discussed in non-economistic associations to valuation and devaluation in conjunction with historical and political processes. Some examples may be instructive here. One of the leading thinkers of care work, Arlie Hochschild, has described care in

⁴⁵ Barker and Feiner, p. 8.

⁴⁶ <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/publication/domestic-employers-report/>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

terms of its likeness to surplus value, again appropriating the grammars of “the” market economy but to refer to the transfer of non-economic processes:

“If it is true that attention, solicitude, and love itself can be ‘displaced’ from one child (let’s say Vicky Diaz’s son Alfredo, back in the Philippines) onto another child (let’s say Tommy, the son of her employers in Beverly Hills), then the important observation to make here is that this displacement is often upward in wealth and power. This, in turn, raises the question of the equitable distribution of care. It makes us wonder, is there in the realm of love an analogue to what Marx calls ‘surplus value,’ something skimmed off from the poor for the benefit of the rich?”⁴⁸

In this way, Hoschilds’ work seeks to discover, name, and valorize Vicky Diaz’s care work not as productive labor but as possessing qualities associated with a kind of local and transnational value such that their absence is marked by Vicky’s son Alfredo in the Philippines and their presence as social reproduction contributes to the wealth and power of Tommy and his family in Beverly Hills. By contrast, we can see the devaluation of care in Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez’s example of Verónica, a domestic worker in Hamburg, Germany who said that “to feel within it totally invisible and also completely worthless because there . . . is no thank you, no, ah, there you are again, you feel like a ghost.”⁴⁹ These applications of feminist economics of the “other” economy are fascinating from the point of view of creating mimetic languages and grammars of supply and demand and value (valuation and devaluation). Yet, these mimetic feminist grammars run the same risk as the androcentric viewpoints in the opposite direction. Neither analyses of the market economy or the “other” economy alone are sufficient for explaining the emergence of care work platforms, which lie at the intersection of both.

⁴⁸ See Arlie Hochschild’s book from 2001.

⁴⁹ Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, *Migration, Domestic Work and Affect: A Decolonial Approach on Value and the Feminization of Labor*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2010, p. 1.

The following section gives an overview of care work platforms in the context of network culture.

Care Work Platforms and Network Culture

With this in mind, I want to turn the focus here to some specific ways care work platforms might be understood as coding heterogeneous contexts and objects, how they might enable control and valuation, and importantly how they are appropriated, negotiated and challenged by subjects made vulnerable by macroeconomic global processes. My intention with this is to provide a new vocabulary with which to discuss the care work platform as an object of social scientific study. This will be useful in the next section where I do a close reading of four platforms and discuss them in their cultural contexts.

A natural place to begin this discussion is to consider the introduction of the personal computer. In her book, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*, Sadie Plant describes the history of the computer. The first computer was created by Charles Babbage and it was called an analytical engine. It consisted of two parts - the store (where the memory was programmed) and the mill, where it was processed. By the early 1800s, these analytic machines were being used to automate textile manufacturing as with the Jacquard loom. It was attacked by anti-technology Luddite rioters shortly after. Towards the end of the 20th century, computer programming became more complex and it went from calculators to word processors to networks, and to 'network culture'. By the 1990s, the Internet system and the World Wide Web were born, enabling what Manuel Castells calls computer-mediated communication⁵⁰ via electronic addresses which we now refer to as emails, but also chat rooms, forums. Today, we have moved far past the personal computer to the cellphone and have even more complex computer-mediated communications like the platform. The Internet and the

⁵⁰ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of Network Societies*, 1996.

World Wide Web enabled the flow of information at unprecedented speed and an unprecedented breadth. Over time, it has only become ever more ubiquitous, accessible and affordable.

Made up of many channels or “segments and microsegments,” in the words of critical theorist and new media scholar Tiziana Terranova,⁵¹ the internet has also become a site of global culture, forms of expression and compossibility. At an individual level, the internet becomes a space where people are permitted the possibility to “express themselves outside of local norms and customs, as their audience extends across national, cultural and racial boundaries,” “project... fantasies, both erotic and intellectual” and “express their hopes, dreams, and intimate desires and, in the process, access other cultural frameworks and norms.”⁵² This is to a degree, of course. But the internet also creates the possibility for new spaces of encounter between subjects, new communities. For instance, in her study of the School for International Organizers, a project of the Mexico-based group *Mujer a Mujer*, Teresa Carrillo describes the way in which this group established networks of communication between US Latinas and the Mexican women through email in 1992.⁵³ Schaeffer describes another realization of compossibility on the internet as it relates to the cybermarriage industry, writing that

“women can turn to the Internet to commune with U.S. and other foreign men [sharpening] their sense of becoming someone new at the moment of intimate contact with another. These virtual intimacies rely not on proximity or even bodily contact, such as the exchange of breath and the friction of bodies, but by the depth of one’s commitment, communicated via translated e-mails (sic). Women do not wait for their destined moment and person to come along; instead they craft themselves as modern subjects conjuring life worlds from elsewhere into their everyday lives.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, London, UK: Pluto Press, 2004.

⁵² Felicity Amaya Schaeffer, *Love and Empire: Cybermarriage and Citizenship Across the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2013.

⁵³ Teresa Carrillo, “Cross-border Talk: Transnational Perspectives on Labor, Race and Sexuality,” *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

⁵⁴ Schaeffer, p. 72.

Schaeffer's virtual ethnography of the commercial cybermarriage industry, I should add, is a direct influence for this study of platforms and the ways that parties encounter one another in commercialized websites on the world wide web of care. To a degree, cyberspace is a disembodied space where identity is more mobile and flexible than the real world. And in this way it speaks to the potential of the internet to facilitate the imaginary world or *technofuturo* of Carrillo's quote which is the opening epigraph of this paper, a world where care work is disentangled from Latinidad.

The reality is far more complex. For one, as Schaeffer's study and this one suggest, the very notion of flexible and mobile identity is one of the ways that global assemblages code heterogeneous contexts and objects in terms that are amenable to control and valuation. Schaeffer points to the ways that corporate marketing has argued "that the transgressive qualities of electronic mediation reside in the ability of individuals to flexibly recombine their identity and social power in cyberspace, de-linked from the constraints of the body."⁵⁵ Returning here to the critique of Uberization, we can see the ways in which companies like Uber shift the risk onto workers workers by encouraging them to invest in self-branding.⁵⁶

In some cases, not only does network culture fail to dissipate gendered, racialized or otherwise differentiated bodies, but finds new ways to entangle virtual personas to certain emotions, affects, stereotypes and associations to what Lisa Marie Cacho has called "categories of evaluation and devaluation."⁵⁷ When it comes to care work, this notion of affective entanglements and

⁵⁵ Amaya Schaeffer, Felicity. "Flexible Technologies of Subjectivity: Mobility Across the Americas." *Technofuturos*. 2007, p. 233.

⁵⁶ Ticona, Mateescu, and Rosenblat, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Lisa Marie Cacho, "Introduction." *Social Death: Racialized rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, New York, NY: NYU Press. 2012, Cacho, p. 4.

disentanglements is not new. Scholar Rachel Brown refers to this process by which care workers bodies are formed anew through the global circulation as a kind of *sticking*:

“As theorized by Sara Ahmed (2004), an affective lens denaturalizes the a priori subject by treating emotions such as love, care, guilt and abandonment not as stable commodities possessed, in the case of GCC analysis, by a biological mother but rather as continually shaping subjects and their interactions with others. The very concepts “migrant,” “citizen,” “home,” “away” and “care-worker” are constantly formed anew as emotions “stick” to them through circulation, influencing the boundaries bodies draw or the alignments they make between themselves and others. [1] To rearticulate the migrant careworker as one “nodal point” in an “affective economy” is thus to “unmake” the gendered, racialized Third World migrant mother who moves along an a priori chain of care (Ahmed 2004, 89, 59, 46; Vaittinen forthcoming). An affective lens therefore historicizes and politicizes the effortful labor of careworkers by linking embodied lives to a history of emotional associations with similarly raced and gendered bodies. From this perspective, work becomes not only a site of “unfreedom,” but also a potential site of resistance (Keating 2005; Weeks 2011).”⁵⁸

Similarly, Schaeffer describes the ways that “even in virtual space, however, [the Latin American woman] must negotiate traditional femininity, a gendered stereotype that clings to her virtua persona.”⁵⁹ Schaeffer’s study analyzed forums for the repetition of stories, noticing when certain narratives and representational framings gained a greater weight as “truth”.⁶⁰

I attribute this persistence of particular representational frames and stories in part to the role of media (and platforms are a form of new media) in manufacturing hegemony or “scattered hegemonies,” uneven power dynamics and access to resources that characterize the global expansion of information and capitalism.⁶¹ The “media” according to Latina media and communications scholar

⁵⁸ Rachel, Brown, “Re-examining the Transnational Nanny,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18:2, 2015, p. 211.

⁵⁹ Scheffer, p. 73.

⁶⁰ Schaeffer, p. 25.

⁶¹ Naples.

Molina-Guzmán, functions to “reproduce dominant norms, values, beliefs, and public understandings about Latinidad as gendered, racialized, foreign, exotic, and consumable” in a process she calls symbolic colonization.⁶² New media, like traditional media, I argue, employs symbolic colonialism as a “storytelling mechanism through which ethnic and racial differences are hegemonically tamed and incorporated.”⁶³ Through the repetition of certain tropes and representational frames, traditional media also controls and values bodies but it does so indirectly in ways that, I argue, care work platforms can do far more directly. Traditional media has played a role in indirectly mediating the market for care workers through saturating mainstream American film in the 1990s with the “laboring Latina” trope coinciding with the global influx of feminized migrants from Latin America.⁶⁴ Molina-Guzman writes that while only 2% of characters in 2000-2001 were Latina/o, when they do appear it is primarily as secondary characters especially as nurses, maids or nannies and are Hollywood’s way to safely incorporate Latina domestics as “filial, committed workers and inherently morally good.”⁶⁵ Through the romantic comedy genre, humor allowed Hollywood to distance Latina bodies from other Latina/os and the national narrative of threatening “illegal” immigrants to manufacture them as safe for consumption as caretakers of children and domestic servants. In her study of the domestic work industry in Los Angeles titled *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*, Sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo described the racial

⁶² Molina-Guzmán, p. 9.

⁶³ Isabel Molina-Guzmán, “Maid in Hollywood: Producing Latina Labor in an Anti-Immigration Imaginary,” *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media*, New York, NY: New York University, 2010, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Molina-Guzmán, p. 152.

hierarchy and tiers of service and the way that mass media tropes like the British nanny and governesses determined their price.⁶⁶

My intention here is not to argue that the individuals who are made consumable through these processes lack agency. On the contrary, I believe that much of the labor of self-branding is itself performative if not negotiated or challenged. I ultimately agree with Schaeffer that while companies in the global marketplace are complicit in shaping expectations and desirable assets, “An analysis of the Web pages alone, however, cannot explain these relationships at the level of complexity that ethnographic methods provide.”⁶⁷ and that this process “plays out in uneven and even contradictory ways...”⁶⁸ In this respect, I agree with Devon G. Peña who argued that “truth is problematic in the social sciences.”⁶⁹ I draw inspiration from his method of inquiry in *The Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender and Ecology on the U.S.-Mexico Border* which critically examines truth as situated knowledge and critically analyzes biases and inaccuracies that have been unwittingly--or in some cases, purposefully--perpetrated by managers, unionists, and scholars alongside the subaltern voices of workers.⁷⁰

“There is a mass, then, in network culture, as well as segments and microsegments, and an informational dimension that links them all... As in network culture at large, there is a mass psychology of the Net, unfolding, as Geert Lovink put it, within ‘large-scale

⁶⁶ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

⁶⁷ Felicity Schaeffer-Grabiel, “Cyberbrides and Global Imaginaries: Mexican Women’s Turn from the National to the Foreign,” *Women and Migration in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: A Reader*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 507.

⁶⁸ Schaeffer, p. 504.

⁶⁹ Devon G. Peña, *The Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender and Ecology on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Austin, TX: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1997, p. 16.

⁷⁰ Peña, p. 17.

systems, filled with amorphous, more or less anonymous user masses'. [26] There are mass phenomena such as portal sites, the big search engines and free email services, but also the entertainment giants and the corporate news providers."⁷¹

In this sense, information firms and platform capitalists cast a big shadow, have "media power" and control political communication in a way that increasingly mirrors traditional media:

"material access and control of the media is restricted to those who can afford it. The centrality to communication to political life has made a massive investment into media culture by corporate actors and institutional parties both rational and inevitable. It is simply a matter of capital expenditure: it pays off to control the media, and after all, if you have money and power, access to the media almost comes automatically."⁷²

With this in mind, I will now proceed to the methods and findings of this study.

⁷¹ Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, London, UK: Pluto Press, 2004, p. 153.

⁷² Terranova, p. 133-134.

Methods

This section presents the findings of a study about four care work platforms. The findings are presented here as fragmented, descriptive and reflective vignettes. Included in this analysis are close readings of visual and textual media materials and reflections on the platforms as objects that exist in cultural contexts and millieus. In this sense, I discuss issues like meta-narratives, style and genre and the feelings they elicit. The findings presented here are not intended to be generalizable beyond each individual platform and they are reflective of my particular, situated, social location, research interests and interpretive lenses. This study is exploratory in that sense.

I profiled four care work platforms and gathered digital data from 2015 to the summer of 2019. The four platforms are three for-profit platforms Tidy, Handy, Care.com and one nonprofit platform, Alia, which is a project of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. I approached these platforms strictly as a voyeur, though I should state at the outset that that I work as a tutor on Care.com. This figured little in my analysis.

These four platforms were selected because they fit a somewhat arbitrary criteria. First, none of the platforms appear to have existed prior to 2015 and were still functioning in 2019, a time frame that appears to coincide with the date when many of these platforms hit the market in the mid 2010s. Second, although these platforms are primarily virtual, I selected these four platforms because they have offline operations in Los Angeles. I did this in the event that I would want to interview participants in real life at a future date and in this way these were a convenience sample. I also selected platforms with operations in Los Angeles as a conscious political decision and ongoing responsibility to domestic work organizations in California. Though I first became curious about care work

platforms through their advertisements, in 2016 I approached a friend and informant at a domestic worker organizations in the Los Angeles to question her about these platforms. I spoke with staff from three different domestic worker organizations - IDEPSCA, the California Domestic Workers Alliance and the National Domestic Workers Alliance - and I learned that organizers find these platforms undermine their economic justice work with low wage Latina immigrant domestic workers. Staff from the three organizations informed me that they were involved in a series of national campaigns that put them directly in confrontation with the leaders of one domestic work platform in particular, Handy. Handy has been hiring lobbyists around the country to introduce “marketplace contractor legislation” to classify workers who work for the app as marketplace contractors rather than employees or independent contractors.[#] In California, unions and worker organizations like the NDWA were not only successful in having the legislation withdrawn in April of 2018 but actually went on the offensive. In September of 2019, thanks to lobbying efforts by labor the California State Senate voted to pass Assembly Bill 5, a bill that would require platform companies to reclassify independent contractors as workers. Though this paper does not discuss the campaign strategy explicitly, it is part of the motivation for this study.

I went into this study with the intention of engaging the platforms on their own terms. By this I mean that I approached each platform as one would approach the close reading of a text. The platforms were a metaphorical text that required considering written words as in the copy writing and testimonials, visuals like graphics and photography but also video. Following from this, I considered whether these could be interpreted as belonging to metanarratives, genres and styles and what these held for the meaning of the platforms. I also approached my reading of the platforms as texts with

some degree of skepticism, critical media literacy and reading against the grain. While I anticipated that the for-profit platform would employ marketing strategies to elicit a response from participants, as I discuss later, I was surprised to find very little emotional pandering in Care.com vis a vis the non-profit platform, Alia. Although my focus in this study was not the users or participants and I did not create an account except for my accounts with Care.com, I went into this study with the idea that I would understand virtual personas as both mediated by the designers of the platforms and spaces of compossibility.

This study also presented new methodological problems. One of the challenges of this method is the fact that care work platform companies do not only literally “code” the “heterogeneous contexts and objects in terms that are amenable to control and valuation” but are constantly re-coding them. In the three years since I first encountered these platforms, some of the digital infrastructures have changed as have the services offered, the text and the visuals. This fact represents a methodological challenge to social and cultural analysis because the object itself is a moving target. One way I reconciled this was to take “screenshots” or “screengrabs” and to create a personal archive of the sites in an ad hoc manner. In spite of my efforts to archive periodically, these findings reflect major gaps. One possible way to address this gap is to use a program like the “Wayback machine” or other internet archiving software in the future. Another methodological challenge I faced is that some care work platforms, like Care.com, exist as both computer and mobile platforms with different interfaces. This calls into question the definition of a platform itself. Is there one platform, Care.com, with two expressions? Or are there two platforms, Care.com’s computer platform and its mobile platform? Related to this question, if the platforms are in fact the companies themselves, then does studying a

platform involve their off-line advertisement and materials? Does studying care work platforms necessarily mean studying the interactions between clients and service providers as they happen in a kind of digital borderlands of online and offline interaction, or in ways that blur the boundaries between the virtual and the real? In this paper, I also include third-party websites like Yelp, Indeed.com, and Glassdoor where users review their experiences on the platform? What is the nature of the relationship between these pages or digital infrastructures with pages exclusively dedicated to the platform, form part of the constellation or networks of its users, but are not officially part of it?

Making Care Work Profitable

The four care work platforms I analyzed are diverse in terms of their digital infrastructures, their models for making a profit (including one nonprofit organization, the services they offer, and their users. This section provides a comparative analysis of the four platforms in terms of these and other factors.

Three of the four platforms, Tidy, Handy and Care.com each have a unique model for making profit from their platform, while the fourth platform, Alia, is a nonprofit which is funded by a grant from Google.

Alia is a project of the National Domestic Workers Alliance's web development wing called Fair Care Labs. A beta version of the application was launched in 2018 and organizers plan to grow the platform to 25,000 users, both "cleaners" and "clients," in 2019. A nonprofit organization, Alia received a large grant from Google as part of their program to fund solutions to "the future of work."⁷³ In 2017, Google awarded four multi-million dollar grants to nonprofits and private businesses, including the NDWA, as part of an effort to address issues emerging from the changing nature of work, or "the future of work" including "the rise of the gig economy, new technological advances, [and] demographic changes."⁷⁴ Alia addresses a major issue which has been called "the benefits problem," where flexible independent contractors are ineligible for benefits like paid time off or sick leave. A recent report on ride-hailing in Los Angeles by the UCLA Labor Center found that 4 out of 5 drivers wanted access to workers' compensation and health insurance benefits which they lack despite

⁷³<https://techcrunch.com/2017/07/26/google-org-commits-50-million-to-help-prepare-people-for-the-future-of-work/>

⁷⁴ Ibid.

many of them working full time.⁷⁵ In this way, Alia is funded as part of a public relations campaign on the part of Silicon Valley which has come under scrutiny in recent years for failing to take responsibility for workers by arguing that they are merely a platform to connect clients and independent contractors who are not their employees and thus not their responsibility. The tragic death of Pablo Avendano while working for the food delivery platform Caviar illustrates the impacts of a lack of any corporate responsibility for the well-being of independent contractors.⁷⁶ Alia is the first “portable benefits app” of its kind that allows people who employ cleaners to make a one-time or recurring contribution to help cleaners attain paid sick time and health insurance.

Tidy, on the other hand, charges clients a set amount for “cleanings,” which are available in different packages. Tidy sells four types of cleanings which are progressively more expensive: Tidy, Tidy+, Tidy XL and Mighty Tidy. *Figure 1.1* below is a screenshot of these services as they appear on Tidy’s homepage. The image illustrates that the first three packages include one housekeeper and the fourth, Mighty Tidy, is the only that that includes two housekeepers. The packages are also differentiated by time, with the first including one hour, the second two and a half hours, the third four hours and the fourth also four hours.

⁷⁵ <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/publication/more-than-a-gig/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.myalia.org>

OUR CLEANINGS

You can fill each cleaning with a set of To Dos completely customized by you, or choose from what is most popular with other clients.

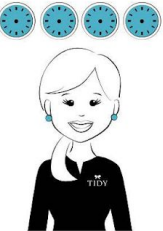
TIDY	TIDY+	TIDY XL	MIGHTY TIDY
1 Homekeeper. 1 Hour.	1 Homekeeper. 2.5 Hours.	1 Homekeeper. 4 Hours.	2 Homekeepers. 4 Hours.
Our quickest clean, best for focused needs or very small homes.	Our second most popular clean, great to get more details done in the home.	Our most popular clean, long enough for general cleanings of most homes.	Our deepest clean, enough for a deep, detailed cleaning of many homes.
			

Figure 1.1

Tidy's packages vary in price, though this information is not available on the homepage. Users, rather, get an individual quote by following the instructions on a different page and only after first inputting their information. *Figure 1.2* below illustrates the page called 'TIDY Pricing.' In the following screengrab, I entered my Zip code, 90063, into the first field to illustrate how this is a required field (indicated by a green check mark on the right hand side). Ironically, the text on this page describes this as "fair and transparent pricing" when the process of individualizing pricing in fact has the effect of masking and mystifying the actual price.

TIDY Pricing

At TIDY, we believe in fair and transparent pricing. You can have your whole home cleaned or just the parts you care about. Choose the length of cleaning and you can customize it with TIDY To Dos.

1 ENTER YOUR ZIPCODE

2 SELECT SERVICE

<p>TIDY 1 person 1 hr</p>	<p>TIDY+ 1 person 2.5 hrs</p>	<p>TIDY XL 1 person 4 hrs</p>	<p>MIGHTY 2 people 4 hrs</p>
-----------------------------------	---------------------------------------	---------------------------------------	--------------------------------------

3 SELECT FREQUENCY

Recurring **One Time** Same Day

Easily book a one time cleaning on TIDY in under 5 minutes, online or via our App.

Figure 1.2

Tidy’s narrative methodology employs the phrases fair and transparent to effectively mask the prices of their packages. This is where what I am tentatively calling ‘third-party appendage’ sites (TPAs) like Yelp become important. TPAs do not have a material interest in profiting directly from selling Tidy’s cleaning packages, in masking or mystifying. In fact, the opposite is the case. The

legitimacy and authority of Yelp reviews is derived from the perceived lack of interference, which enables fair ratings of businesses and transparency. One Yelp reviewer, Maria W. from Brea, CA, explained why the \$275.00 for a Mighty Tidy cleaning left her feeling as though she did not receive the value promised for the price she paid as well as a lack of channels for communicating with the company:

“I booked a Mighty Tidy to prep for a graduation party. A Mighty Tidy, by their own definition, is 2 cleaners to come deep clean your house. One person showed up on time and she was great...where is the other person? Well, needless to say, she couldn't complete everything on her own in 4 hours and I ended up having to clean the rest of my house myself. 275.00, NOT WORTH IT!! I have never hired a cleaning service before and I am starting to think I never will again. I know I definitely will not use Tidy. Oh...and they don't have a phone number, you have to communicate via email.”

A number of other reviews which I do not discuss further in this paper expressed feeling similarly with regards to transparency and fairness, which is perhaps a factor in their decision to review the platform on a TPA. Not all reviews were negative, of course. But even positive reviews like that of Cassi C. from San Diego who gave the company a 5 stars (out of 5) noted a lack of fairness and transparency, in terms of the company's profits, a relation of the price she paid *vis-a-vis* the wage made by her cleaner. She wrote:

“The one thing I don’t like, though, is that tidy takes 50% of what you pay for the service. So, even though you are paying \$100 for a cleaner, they are only receiving \$50 for their work.”

Further research is needed to understand, among other things, the nature of the packages in terms of their pricing, the profits yielded by Tidy, their value and valuation, and the wages paid to workers. One avenue toward accessing a more accurate and ‘transparent’ account of these is by studying TSAs in detail.

Handy does not sell cleaning packages like Tidy, but instead they sell various ‘services.’ Handy’s services include Cleaning, Installation, Handyman, Outdoor Projects, and Home Renovations. *Figure 1.3* features a screenshot of the drop-down menu called “All Services” that provides a detailed list of the services divided by category.

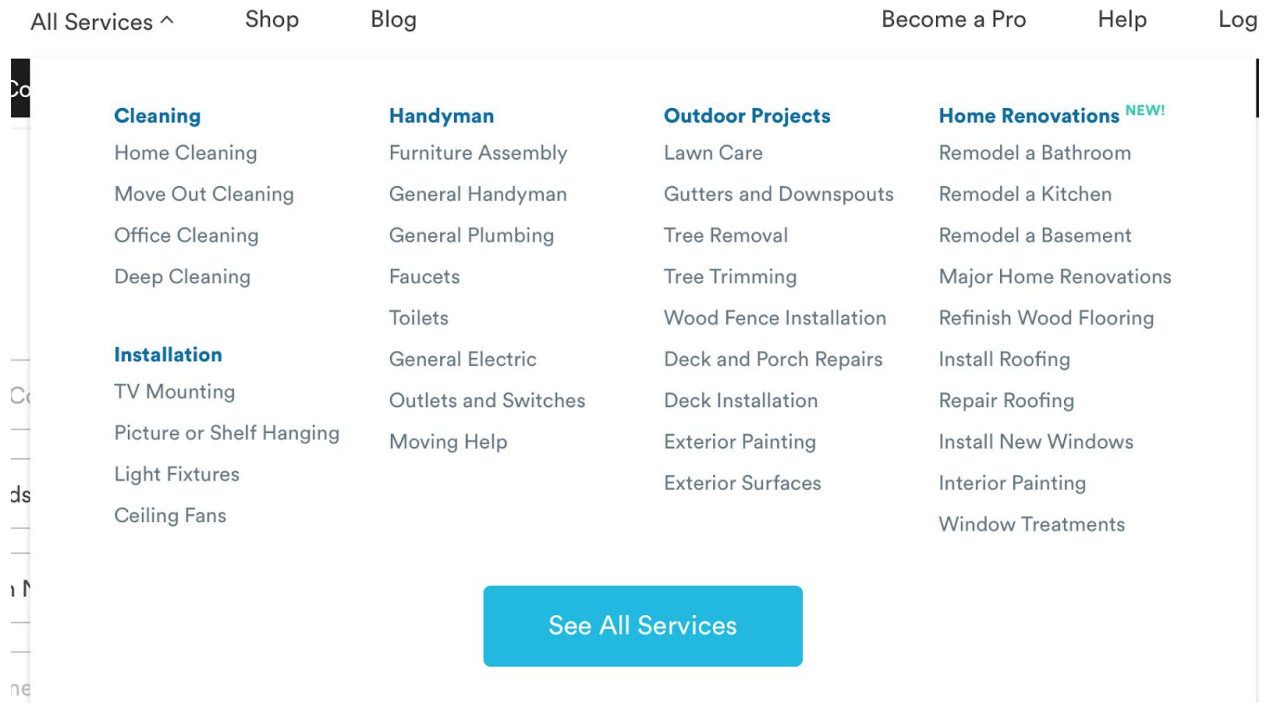


Figure 1.3

Handy uses a quoting system to price their services. They do not feature prices on their homepage. *Figure 1.4* below illustrates Handy’s quoting system for Home Cleaning. Handy’s pricing system is calculated by an algorithm that recommends a number of hours according to the data one enters about the number of bedrooms and bathrooms in the home which is automatically updated and shown at the bottom of the screen. In this image we can see that the preset 1 bed, 1 bath home. At the bottom of the screen, small text reads: “For your home, we recommend: **3 hours.**” The form requires one to include a zip code, date, time, phone number (optional) and email to receive a quote.

The image shows a screenshot of the Handy website's 'House Cleaning' service selection form. At the top, the title 'House Cleaning' is displayed in a large, bold font. Below the title, there is a rating of five stars and the text '3,232,050 Reviews'. The form consists of several input fields: a 'ZIP Code' field, two dropdown menus for '1 beds' and '1 baths', two dropdown menus for 'Tue Nov 19' and '8:00 PM', a 'Phone Number (Optional)' field, and an 'Email' field. A prominent green button labeled 'Get a Price' is located at the bottom of the form. Below the button, there is a small line of text that reads 'For your home size, we recommend 3 hours'.

Figure 1.4

Though I did not visit Yelp to read reviews of Handy, future research would include analysis of reviews on TSAs as well as the purported 3, 232, 050 in-site reviews. Are these reviews available to see? If so, what metrics do social scientists use to assess transparency? Handy, in addition to selling services, offers bundle packages, “extras,” and coupons, like its 50% off discount on the first home cleaning when one signs up for a plan. Handy also sells products like a marketplace platform, including beds, air conditioners etc. that can be purchased with installation. Handy also advertises “retail partnerships” with online marketplace vendors and brick and mortar businesses like Wayfair, Walmart, Google Home, Nest, Equity Residential and Leesa. A newer aspect of their business model, Handy has a separate portal for retail partners that features information about what it entails and a “case study” of its success with Wayfair. This trend toward retail partnerships, it should be noted, is

not unique to Handy. The platform Taskrabbit, was acquired by IKEA to provide similar installation services for their clients.

Care.com immediately comes across as a different kind of platform from Tidy and Handy. Care.com does not sell house cleaning packages or other services. Care.com’s homepage does not advertise any products. Rather, it features two portals which take you to different channels, as shown in *Figure 1.5*. To proceed on Care.com’s website, a user must choose between two options “I need a caregiver” and “I want a care job.”

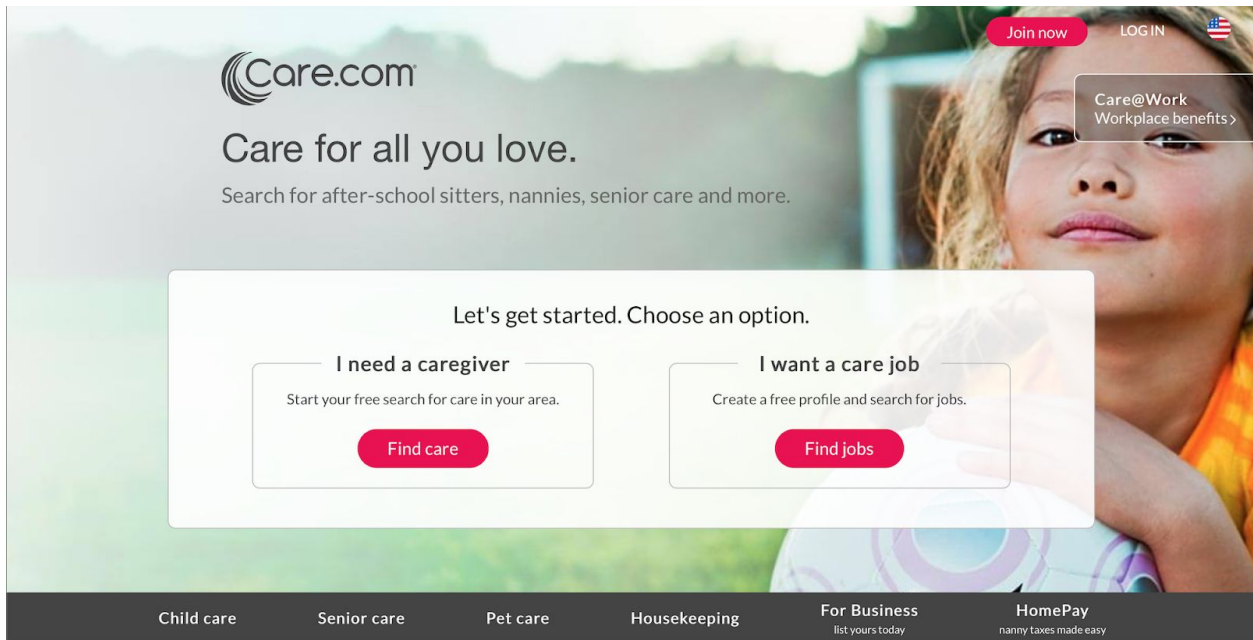


Figure 1.5

After selecting one or the other option, you are taken through a series of windows asking follow-up questions. These look similar to Tidy and Handy’s quoting and pricing systems. If one selects the “I need a caregiver” option, they are directed to another page that asks, “Who is going to need care?” One

can choose from the options: ‘My kids,’ ‘My parents,’ ‘My pets,’ and ‘My home.’ A screengrab is included in *Figure 1.6* below.

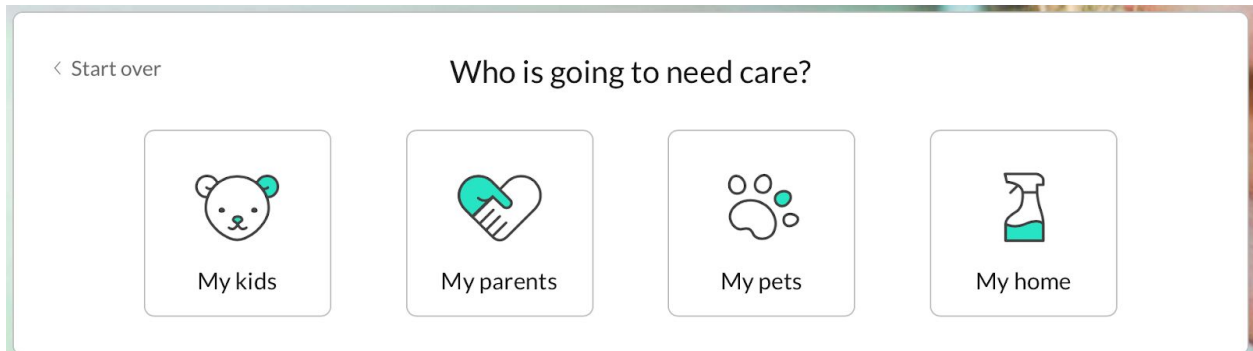


Figure 1.6

After selecting one of the options, one is directed to another page inquiring about your needs in even greater detail. Choosing “My Home,” for instance, will direct you to a window that asks “How Soon Do You Need Someone?” from which one can select “right now,” “within a week,” “within a month” or “just browsing.” If one selects “My kids,” the options are even specific, as shown in *Figure 1.7*.

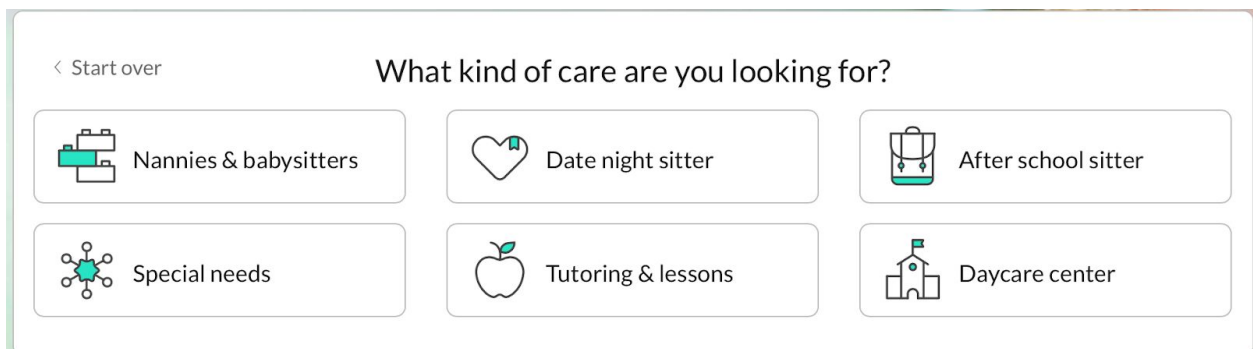
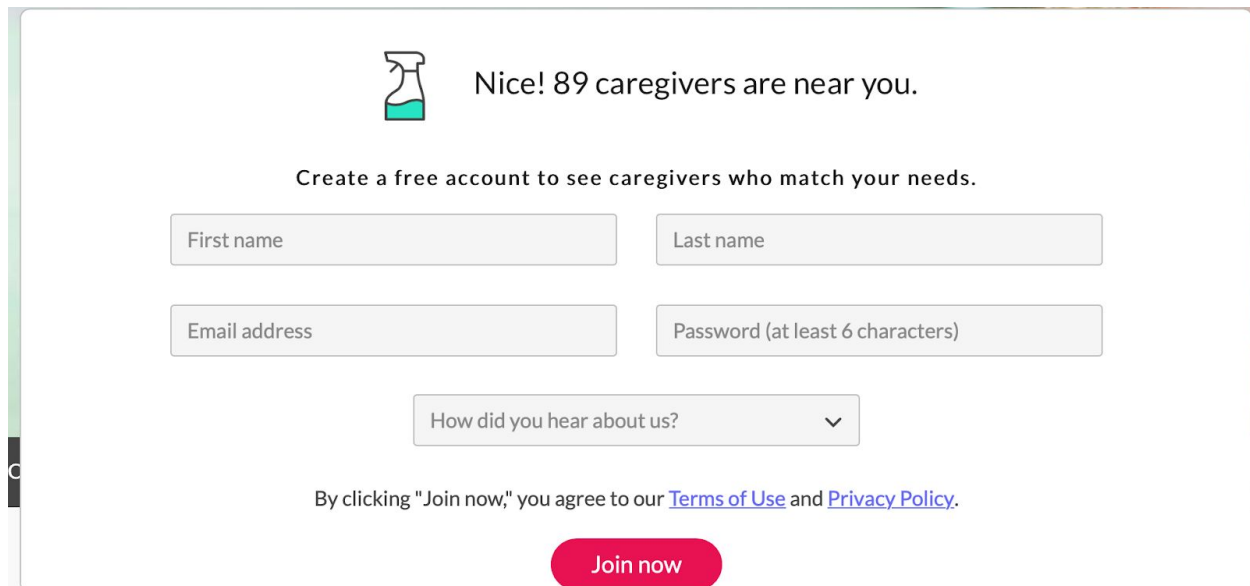


Figure 1.7

In this way Care.com uses algorithmic technologies to select from a pool of candidates from the “I want a care job” portal. After navigating a number of windows, one is invited to create an account similar to the ways that Tidy and Handy does in their quoting and pricing system though no pricing is

yet set. Rather, the final screen indicates a number of caregivers available who fit the criteria. In *Figure 1.8* below, we see a sample of my inquiry for caregivers for “My home” who fit my selected criteria: 89.



The screenshot shows a registration form for caregivers. At the top, there is a green spray bottle icon and the text "Nice! 89 caregivers are near you." Below this, it says "Create a free account to see caregivers who match your needs." The form consists of four input fields: "First name", "Last name", "Email address", and "Password (at least 6 characters)". There is also a dropdown menu labeled "How did you hear about us?". At the bottom, there is a red "Join now" button and a line of text: "By clicking 'Join now,' you agree to our [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)."

Figure 1.8

How, then, are the prices set for services? From my personal experience or autoethnographic findings as a Care.com tutor, I know that prices are negotiated by individual parties. Care.com matches users in the ways I just described after which point users are responsible for making contact, self-representing by creating bios and composing messages to one another. Caregivers set their ideal rates for particular services and people looking for caregivers set ideal amounts they are willing to pay. In my experience, informal verbal contracts for gigs are negotiated between parties. More qualitative research, like ethnography and interviews, is needed to learn about these negotiating practices. As a Care.com tutor, I receive weekly emails which sometimes contain resources (original content created by Care.com paid authors) about best practices for negotiating wages and the average wage by region. More research in the form of content analysis is needed about these emails, but also forums hosted by Care.com. Still,

none of this still explains how Care.com yields a profit. One way that Care.com makes money is by charging caregivers a premium to be featured higher in the algorithm. In this system, a caregiver can almost rent virtual space for as long as one is willing to pay the premium in a similar way that Google rents spaces for sponsored content. More research is needed about the ways Care.com yield a profit from being the “middleman” between caregivers and the people who hire them.

As technoscientific objects, care work platforms, as I discussed earlier, literally code and constantly re-code content. They include multiple forms of media including written copy/text, photos and video as well as the interactive and algorithmic pages I have already discussed at some length in the previous section. Here, I consider the content of the platforms in more detail, analyzing them through a close reading practice and some critical media interpretation. This section offers a close reading and analysis of a handful of representational frames or bounded objects I encountered as a voyeur across the four platforms between 2016-2019. In my analysis of each of these representational frames, I consider the ways in which each uses multimedia content to create and repeat normative familiar and new stories and narratives. These representational frames take the form of the curated content offered by each platform, but they also reproduce and establish hegemony and “truth” into which users step in. My screengrabs and transcriptions are an attempt to freeze some of these representational frames in time, while understanding their ephemeral and now historical quality. They reflect the boundaries and negotiations around what at the time of their capture is admissible and proper behavior for users, particularly the kind of behavior and affect that is consumable and hireable on these primarily market-driven apps.

Alia: Allyship in Cyberspace

At a time when marketplace platforms have come under scrutiny for taking no liability for independent contractors,⁷⁷ Alia has emerged on the scene as a solution to the so-called problems with the future of work. Alia is a portable benefits app that enables workers to accrue benefits that go with them without the need to be formally hired. New research is still discovering the depths of the problems with work in the new economy. For instance, the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment at UCLA recently found that a not insignificant number of independent contractors working through marketplace platforms work full time; however, as independent contractors they are ineligible to receive any benefits like paid time off, sick leave, let alone luxury benefits like retirement plans or paid parental leave.⁷⁸

The following screengrab in *Figure 1.9* was captured by me in 2019 from Alia.com. The screengrab features an automatic pop-up window that a user encounters upon visiting the landing page. It features two panels. On the left side of the window is a photograph of a woman and a child and, on the right, a menu of options that reads “I hire a house cleaner,” “I am a cleaner” and “Soy un limpiador”.

⁷⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/06/gig-economy-death/561302/>

⁷⁸ <https://irle.ucla.edu/2018/06/11/more-than-a-gig-a-survey-of-ride-hailing-drivers-in-los-angeles/>

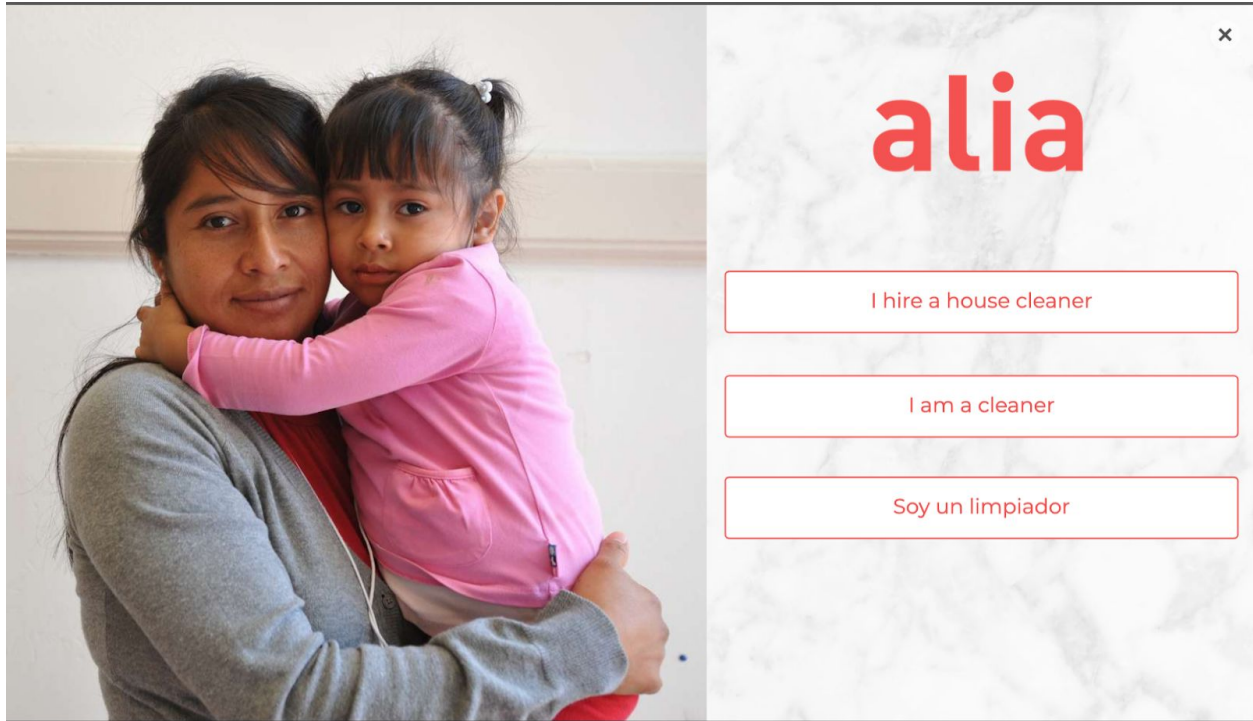


Figure 1.9 Alia Mother and Child on Landing Page, 2019

The photograph looks minimally doctored and the woman and child are not recognizable celebrities. In fact, the woman and child's humble clothing, a heather gray sweater on the former and Pepto pink sweater on the latter, along with their slightly unkept hairstyles function to give the impression that these are lay people, not professional actors. Their body language reveals intimacy, modeling a *real* the daughter's tight grasp of the mother's neck and proximity to her mother's face with her own as well as the mother's grasp of the daughter's lower back demonstrate intimacy. I argue that we should read this image against the backdrop of the film *Roma* (2018), the autobiographical social realist film by Alfonso Cuarón. The photograph, like Cuarón's film which domestic worker organizers and reformers have been using as an organizing tool, shares a counter-hegemonic point of

view. For instance, by casting non-professional actors, both the film and this photo center the care worker (as a multi-dimensional character) rather than their clients. This is significant on Alia when we consider Safiya Noble's argument in her book *Algorithms of Oppression* that profit and other motives tend to drive information companies and determines who becomes the privileged audience and kind of information privileged online.⁷⁹

The photo is juxtaposed with text that tells us more than the name of the platform. In the Spanish language, *aliada* means ally. According to the Merriman-Webster dictionary, *aliada* or ally comes from the latin word *alligare* meaning "to bind" as in associate one thing to another. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an ally variously as a "a person or group that provides assistance and support in an ongoing effort, activity or struggle." Colloquially, the term ally additionally suggests a power differential to refer to "specifically [...] a person who is not a member of a marginalized or mistreated group but who expresses or gives support to that group."

If we think about the term ally as a kind of post-Cold War alternative to the term comrade which, from the word in various Romance languages meaning "one who *shares* the same room," we can consider how Alia here elicits a specific kind of association. Not as horizontal as the term comrade, the colloquial use of ally to refer to a person who is is not marginalized or mistreated but who nevertheless offers assistance and support here reflects a liberal political discourse of empathy.

In reality, the representational frame presented here reflects somewhat mixed messages about allyship. The photo centers care workers, while the text reflects the contemporary discourse of allyship

⁷⁹ Safiya, Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018, p. 18.

that still centers the client's empathy. The rest of the text in this window offers options for one of three different portals including, interestingly, a portal in Spanish.

While the average user may not be familiar with the work of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, the NGO behind Alia, some background on its ally work may be instructive here. Alia, I argue, is a good example of how real-life organizing and digital organizing overlap. In 2010, the NDWA launched a program called "Hand-in-Hand." This network of domestic workers and employers was forged in the trenches of the struggle to pass Domestic Workers Bill of Rights legislation in New York City. When the legislation passed, organizers reflected on the fact that a huge asset was the allyship of Jewish employers who had testified for domestic workers throughout the campaign. "Hand-in-Hand" has become a full-fledged NGO today. They say that "Hand in Hand helps employers recognize that their homes are workplaces—and that we have both legal obligations and opportunities to make our homes workplaces that they can be proud of." They argue that many clients are themselves subjects who should not have to shoulder the burden of paying for care work alone--working women, seniors and people with disabilities--but that by joining domestic workers they can push for structural changes in the system to make it accessible. They say that Hand-in-Hand members join because they want a sense of community and to be part of a movement with shared values. As an undergraduate researcher at a domestic workers' center, I was privy to report backs from workshops that took place as part of the Hand-in-Hand program. I heard stories of workshops where organizers would ask employees, many of whom were themselves working women, if they wouldn't want paid sick leave when they fell ill. When they overwhelmingly responded "yes, of course" the workshop leaders would respond with, "well we think domestic workers should have that right too."

In many cases, they played to the shared value of valuing women's paid work and their life obligations. *Alia* does similar work as the real life workshops. Kira notes that she can tell employers who want to be allies "Now we have *Alia*. Here is a concrete thing. Sign up for *Alia*."

Tidy: "The Trusted Homekeeping Company"

Tidy was the first care work platform I encountered and my first introduction to the ways that care work platforms utilize material culture and digital architecture offline and online to create certain representational frames and entice users. This was in the Spring of 2016 when, walking through my Los Angeles neighborhood, I noticed a peculiar handbill. Clustered on metal gates up and down the street, these handbills were not particularly extraordinary given the pervasiveness of ads for credit cards, car insurances, appliances, etc. This particular ads stood first at an aesthetical level: they were not printed on the same glossy paper as the others and did not feature the same loud, primary colors. It was the ads' subtlety that stood out amidst the sea of eyesores. Printed on thick paper like a wedding invitation, it had rounded corners a discrete typeface, with a black bow and the words "Tidy, the trusted homekeeping company." By emulating a wedding invitation, Tidy's advertisement appropriates a familiar medium. In this way the style of the advertisement does the work of what Louis Althusser called interpellation by hailing a subject into a familial, intimate representational frame that I as its target was drawn to accept.

Figures 1.10, 1.11 and 1.12 below illustrate a portion of what I saw upon my visit to Tidy.com. These screengrabs are taken from the homepage. Though I noticed some subtle changes to the landing page between my first visit in 2016 and my latest visit in 2019, these components remained relatively

consistent during this timeframe.

Figure 1.10 below shows two client reviews that one finds when visiting the Tidy homepage. The first review is from a user named Patty C. from Los Angeles, CA. A very small photo of a smiling Patty is featured alongside the quote “Everything was wonderful, we were very impressed. The girls left it perfectly clean and with some surprising personal touches!” Next to Patty’s photo and quote is a second photo and review by Johanna E. from Dallas, Texas that reads “I have used other housekeepers and TIDY has something special. My house is clean now ALL the time!” The heading of this section says “used by **thousands** of clients near you” (emphasis in original).



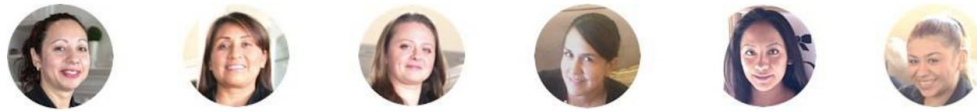
Figure 1.10

The two featured reviews are overwhelmingly positive. Despite the fact that the heading suggests that there are thousands of clients who have used the platform, nowhere else on the homepage (or elsewhere on the platform for that matter) are these thousands of other reviews made available. Instead, the platform’s designers, by foregrounding these two curated reviews, represent what they want the client to believe is the truth about the services, that *everything is wonderful*, your home will

be left *perfectly clean* and you can even count on *surprises* and *special* experience.

Part of the critical reading practice I am proposing here is considering representational frames such as this one by Tidy as producing, concealing and obscuring a partial truth rather than the truth. *Figures 1.11* and *1.12* below are two other components of Tidy's static homepage, and emblematic of the representational frames and truths the company portrays about itself. The first image in *Figure 1.11* is a screengrab of a component about the homekeepers or care workers. When I first observed this section in 2016, the headline read "Modern Housekeepers" whereas in the screengrab below, taken in 2019, we see that the headline now reads "Professional Tidy Housekeepers," a subtle word change but one that reveals the shifting discourse around what is considered valuable in the labor market. A more thorough consideration of this is important though outside of the scope of this paper. Here, as with the two customer reviews above, we see the way Tidy curates the text and images of its many housekeepers, showing only 6 photos and four check marks that read "Are thoroughly background checked and verified." "Speak English and are legal US residents," "Pass a highly selective TIDY Certification process" and "Bring green, non-toxic, pet and baby safe products." Recognizing the potential drawbacks of assuming the race and gender of individuals based solely on their photos, it is nevertheless significant to point out the fact that the six individuals appear to be women and most of them appear to be Latina.

PROFESSIONAL TIDY HOMEKEEPERS



✓ Are thoroughly background checked and verified

✓ Pass a highly selective TIDY Certification process

✓ Speak English and are legal US residents

✓ Bring green, non-toxic, pet and baby safe products

Figure 1.11

Each of the six women are smiling and looking directly at the camera. Though they are headshots, on close inspection it appears that they are wearing a black polo shirt or a uniform.

Figure 1.12 below is another module on Tidy’s static homepage which has the heading “Extra Care for all Tidy Clients.” On the left hand side of the module we see another three headshots, but this time two of the three women are blonde and one is brunette. They could all be Caucasian. They are the “Tidy Concierge” that a client can text or email for questions and to make custom requests.

EXTRA CARE FOR ALL TIDY CLIENTS

TIDY CONCIERGE

Text or email the TIDY Concierge for any questions, to make custom requests for your cleanings, and more.



TIDY SATISFACTION GUARANTEE

We offer our TIDY Satisfaction Guarantee. If you are unhappy with your first cleaning for any reason, we will offer you a credit for another recurring cleaning. To give you peace of mind, we ensure Homekeepers pass a background check and protect you against losses due to damage.*

Figure 1.12

Tidy's static homepage reflects a racialized division of labor between the blue collar cleaners who are primarily Latina women and the white collar concierge who appear to be primarily caucasian. Whether this is an honest reflection of the cleaners and office workers matters but it is secondary to the point here about how the company curates its truth which also leads us to imagine who is its imagined clientele. Tidy housekeepers or independent contractors are women of color. Like many platforms, Tidy represents itself as a middleman, not an employer which also helps explain the smiling affect of the six women workers who must self-represent and self-brand themselves with an ethos of entrepreneurship. What I intend to show here are the ways in which Tidy as a platform is client-facing, directed primarily at its target audience, users who will pay for services. I argue that this representational frame effectively whitewashes and middle-class washes the companies' image.

Contesting Tidy’s Representational Frames: Third Party Platforms Yelp and Indeed.com

As part of this study, I was able to spend some time triangulating and supplementing Tidy’s page with other third party platforms, particularly Yelp and Indeed.com. My goal in doing this was to consider how users contest representational frames on care work platforms and express their own “truth.”

In 2018, I analyzed reviews of Tidy in the Los Angeles area from Yelp.com. Given the way that Tidy is organized as a company in cyberspace, I had to find the two pages on Yelp that mapped onto the Los Angeles area, since Yelp’s digital architecture is set up for brick-and-mortar businesses with locations. Nevertheless, Tidy users in the Los Angeles area appeared to cluster around two different Yelp pages, Tidy Costa Mesa (639 reviews) and Tidy Florence-Firestone (175 reviews). Several similar pages containing the word “Tidy” in the name (Tidy Town Cleaners, Tidy Maids LA, etc) also contained what appeared to be reviews for the Tidy app but they appear to be different companies with completely different websites and I do not analyze those reviews in this paper. *Table 1* below contains an overview of the ratings I analyzed. Tidy Costa Mesa’s Yelp reviews begin in July 2014 compared to Tidy Florence-Firestone’s which begin in October of 2016.

	Tidy - Costa Mesa	Tidy - Florence-Firestone
Total Reviews	639	175
1 star	506	167

2 stars	43	5
3 stars	10	1
4 stars	18	2
5 stars	63	0

Table 1

From the table we can see that 79% of Costa Mesa reviewers gave Tidy a 1 star rating, while 95% of Florence-Firestone reviewers did so. This data contests Tidy’s representation through highly curated customer reviews. Why were so many consumers on Yelp dissatisfied with Tidy’s services in the Los Angeles area, or, put another way, how did Yelp’s reviewers contest Tidy’s representation and assert their own “truth”?

While a more systematic analysis of these reviews is in order, I will offer a sample of reviews from one or the other page, Costa Mesa or Florence-Firestone, that highlight the experiences of Tidy’s customers.

Many 1-star reviewers like Donna G. from Redondo Beach, CA were concerned with cancellations and poor communication, which contributed to an overall feeling that the service was not worth the money they paid. In 2018, Donna wrote:

“DO NOT USE!! They cancelled on me the DAY OF!!!! No email sent to inform me. I had to log into my account to find that it had been cancelled. I hD looked forward to this cleaning because I had house guests coming. Ended up cleaning the whole day. Who runs a company this way???? This is atrocious!!! I hope they go out of business and SOON!!!”

Similarly, Maria W. from Brea, CA wrote:

“I booked a Mighty Tidy to prep for a graduation party. A Mighty Tidy, by their own definition, is 2 cleaners to come deep clean your house. One person showed up on time and she was great...where is the other person? Well, needless to say, she couldn't complete everything on her own in 4 hours and I ended up having to clean the rest of my house myself. 275.00, NOT WORTH IT!! I have never hired a cleaning service before and I am starting to think I never will again. I know I definitely will not use Tidy. Oh...and they don't have a phone number, you have to communicate via email.”

Others like R.Z. from Portland described how the company's lack of transparency made them feel as though they were untrustworthy, and questioned whether they were manipulating Yelp.

Many customers included photos with their reviews to show areas of their homes which did not meet their standards of cleanliness. In my cursory analysis, I also noticed that many reviewers did not hold the individual cleaners solely or even primarily responsible with their dissatisfaction, rather questioning the company's quality control, and in some instances, even pointing to their perception of their exploitation of workers. A closer analysis of these is needed as well as more similar work with Handy and Care.com.

Conclusion

The initial impulse for this project was an experience I had being interpellated by a wedding invitation-like advertisement from Tidy, one of the care work platforms discussed here. In the beginning, I reluctantly described care work platforms in terms like “Uber but for care or domestic work” (a phrase that interestingly enough some care work platform companies have begun to utilize in advertisements since I began writing this thesis). Care work platforms, although they share some similarities with ride hailing platforms like Uber, deserve to be discussed in their specificity. This means situating platforms like the ones discussed here Alia, Tidy, Handy and Care.com and others, within globalization processes like the globalization of care work, global capital and information society or network cultures. Care work platforms, as I have argued, are global assemblages.

Latina/o and Chicana/o Studies scholars are uniquely situated to study care work platforms for a number of reasons. First, the field of Chicana/o Studies and Latina/o Studies is imbued with a sensibility for the global and transnational and for borderlands analyses, for thinking about how global capital and migrant subjects are made and re-make globalization processes. It is also true that care work in the United States today is shaped by legacies of what has been called racial capitalism and feminized work that has been “othered” in the West and that today this means that Latinas are overwhelmingly overrepresented in certain aspects of the care work industry like housekeeping. And within Chicana/o and Latina/o studies, there is also a current of thought known as *technofuturos* which is preoccupied with stewarding a future in which Latina/os and Chicana/os can live with dignity utilizing technology as a resource.

As I show in my findings, these kinds of *technofuturos* are either here, on horizon or exist as a potentiality built into the digital architectures of care work platforms, but they are far from a given. On the contrary, the ability and tendency of technoscientific objects like care work platforms to code and re-code heterogenous objects in a global assemblage in many cases means the reinscription of certain normative truths, values and norms that continue to marginalize care workers. For this reason, more careful and critical reading practices and social and cultural analysis is needed. This thesis is one attempt to establish the vocabulary and methodology for future research on this front, analyzing the economic and representational imperatives of four Los Angeles-based platforms.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barker, Drucilla K. and Susan F. Feiner. *Liberating Economics: Feminist Perspectives on Families, Work and Globalization*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 2004.
- Brown, Rachel. "Re-examining the Transnational Nanny," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18:2, 210-229, 2015.
- Cacho, Lisa Marie. "Introduction." *Social Death: Racialized rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. New York, NY: NYU Press. 2012.
- Carrillo, Teresa. "The Best of Care: Latinas as Transnational Mothers and Caregivers." *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*. Minneapolis, MN: Lexington Books. 2007.
- Chang, Grace. *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. 2016. 1-19.
- Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York, NY: Random House (Vintage Books), 1983.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara and Arlie Hoschilds. *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks. 2002.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Contradictions of Capital and Care." *New Left Review* No. 100, July-August 2016. <https://newleftreview.org/II/100/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>
- Fuchs, Christian. "Marx's Capital in the Information Age." *Capital & Class*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2017.
- Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Encarnación. *Migration, Domestic Work and Affect: A Decolonial Approach on Value and the Feminization of Labor*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2001. 210-243.
- International Labor Office. *Domestic Workers Around the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protections*. Geneva: International Labor Organization. 2013.
- Mezzadra, Sandro and Brett Neilson. *Border as a Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2013.
- Mirabal, Nancy Raquel. "Historical Futures, Globality, and Writing Self: An Introduction to Technofuturos." *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*. Minneapolis, MN: Lexington Books. 2007.

- Molina-Guzmán, Isabel. "Maid in Hollywood: Producing Latina Labor in an Anti-Immigration Imaginary." *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media*. New York, NY: New York University, 2010.
- Moody, Kim. "High Tech, Low Growth: Robots and the Future of Work." *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 26 No. 4. 2018.
- Naples, Nancy. Changing the Terms: Community Activism, Globalization, and the Dilemmas of Transnational Feminist Praxis." *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.
- Noble, Safiya. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York, NY: New York University Press. 2018.
- Ong, Aihwa and Stephen J. Collier. "Ch. 1: Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems" *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Blackwell Publishing. 2005.
- Peña, Devon G. *The Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender and Ecology on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Austin, TX: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1997, p. 16.
- Schaeffer, Felicity. *Love and Empire: Cybermarriage and Citizenship Across the Americas*. Duke University Press. 2013.
- Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*. Malden, MA: Polity Press. 2017.
- Terranova, Tiziana. *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. London, UK: Pluto Press, 2004.
- Ticona, Julia, Alexandra Mateescu and Alex Rosenblat. *Beyond Disruption: How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work and Ridehailing*. New York, NY: Data and Society, 2018.