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LITERATURE REVIEW

From Plantations to Platforms: Examining AI's Relationship to Race and Labor

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> *"The "speculative practice" of study as sketched here is immediately recognizable to any ethnographer: we call it fieldwork. For anthropologists of Black people in the Americas, that field work is never completely out of sight of another set of fields––cotton, cane, tobacco, rice."*
> *- Savannah Shange, Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).* [1]

Introduction

In February 2026 I published *(404) Job Not Found: What Workforce Training Can't Change for Black Atlantans in the Age of AI*. This report offers a broad critique of "AI literacy" based on months of ethnographic research, or immersive fieldwork, among workforce intermediaries and Black job seekers in Atlanta. Specifically, I describe how the zeal for AI among the city's employers, educational institutions, government leaders, and training providers mirrors the national impulse to mobilize excitement for it while largely ignoring the longstanding conditions of precarity, uncertainty, and inequity that characterize Black labor (especially in the American South). As I began to take to the field in Atlanta, I also revisited the existing literature on the relationship between race and labor in the US to inform my analysis of how AI is reshaping work.

AI is being touted as a massive disruptive technology, threatening to eliminate, automate, or augment countless jobs and its rapid rise is notably occurring in tandem with a significant surge in corporate layoffs[2]. Despite this troublesome trend, AI literacy is still promoted as a cure-all for the woes of industry in order to justify the already substantial investments in AI across the public and private sectors. However, as I argue in *(404) Job Not Found*, AI literacy remains vaguely defined and there is a lack of clarity on exactly what skills students and workers need to thrive in an AI-first economy.

My research reveals that the flurry of activity, hype, and funding around AI literacy and other AI boosterism often does nothing to disturb the decades-old logics of racial capitalism, instead it maintains a holding pattern where skills can be discussed and programs can be funded, even while secure employment for Black households remains elusive. This work feels especially vital in 2026, a year that marks one

[1] Shange, Savannah. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco.* Duke University Press, 2019.
[2] Bhaimiya, Sawdah. "AI job cuts: Amazon, Microsoft and more cite AI for 2025 layoffs." CNBC, 21 December 2025, https://www.cnbc.com/2025/12/21/ai-job-cuts-amazon-microsoft-and-more-cite-ai-for-2025-layoffs.html.

hundred years since Carter G. Woodson[3] launched Negro History Week, fifty years since Black History Month was formally recognized during the US Bicentennial, and 250 years since the Declaration of Independence set terms for freedom that Black people are still forced to contest, reinterpret, and expand.

In order to meet the moment, we must raise critical questions about AI's relationship to race and labor. While my report, *(404) Job Not Found*, explores this relationship in more depth, here I gesture to five large dynamics that connect the historical past and present so that we might better understand the impact of AI on the labor market. These are: 1) the push to reorganize education around labor market demands, 2) the Industrial Revolution catalyzed by AI, 3) the power of myth-making, 4) patterns of occupational segregation, and 5) the distinction between job content and job context. These are the primary conceptual frames I bring to bear on the current moment of AI boosterism and its entanglement with race and labor.

The Push to Reorganize Education Around Labor Market Demands

Should education prioritize workforce development over personal development? Black intellectuals, both past and present, would say "no."

Long before AI entered classrooms, W.E.B. Du Bois warned against collapsing education into work, insisting in his July 1905 Niagara Movement speech[4] that "work is not necessarily education." Du Bois instead framed education not as a pipeline to work, but as the "development of power"––a process through which children are ideally trained as intelligent human beings with "a right to know, to think, to aspire," rather than as "servants and underlings, or simply for the use of other people." When the US Departments of Education and Labor announced plans over a century later in July 2025 to jointly administer core Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs, including Career & Technical Education (CTE) and adult education programs[5], they defied Du Bois's warning.

"We're not training the next generation of technology workers," said the curriculum director of a national STEM education nonprofit for Black male youth speaking with me over Zoom. "We are a youth *development* organization." Her words stand in stark contrast to the current national rhetoric around STEM and AI education, particularly the calls from inside the White House to promote early learning and exposure to AI concepts as essential for "preparing students to become active and responsible participants in the workforce of the future."[6] Notably, new research from the Brookings Institution's Center on Universal Education found that the risks of utilizing generative AI in children's education overshadow the benefits because generative AI can undermine children's foundational development, depending on how it is used.[7]

[3] Known as "The Father of Black History," Woodson's project of documenting Black life and history began in 1915 when he founded the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) in response to educational systems that systematically excluded Black knowledge, positioning historical study itself as a corrective to erasure.
[4] W.E.B. Du Bois. "Niagara Movement Speech". Speech, 1905. From Teaching American History. https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/niagara-movement-speech/.
[5] US Department of Education. "U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor Implement Workforce Development Partnership." US Department of Education, 15 July 2025, https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-and-us-department-of-labor-implement-workforce-development-partnership.
[6] The White House. "Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth – The White House." The White House, 23 April 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/advancing-artificial-intelligence-education-for-american-youth/.
[7] Burns, Mary, and Rebecca Winthrop. "A new direction for students in an AI world: Prosper, prepare, protect | Brookings." Brookings Institution, 14 January 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-new-direction-for-students-in-an-ai-world-prosper-prepare-protect/.

DuBois's warning takes on a renewed importance in 2026 as the Trump Administration continues to integrate AI into education primarily as a means to "develop an AI-ready workforce."[8] While proponents of the Administration's approach may argue that it aligns skills with labor market needs, opponents fear that it creates a reductionist view of students as just future factory workers[9]. Moreover, numerous critics have pointed out that conflating CTE with job training will make both less effective.[10] When the Trump Administration first proposed to merge the Labor and Education departments in 2018, Richard Trumka, then-President of the AFL-CIO, cautioned that "Merging Education and Labor instead of the business-centric Commerce and Treasury departments is another indication that this is simply about increasing privatization and handing out more power to corporations at the expense of working people."[11] His statement underscores how efforts to reorganize education around labor market demands are rarely neutral. It aligns with my own research findings, and those of others, that AI education initiatives cannot be understood apart from the nation's longer history of labor extraction, racial hierarchy, and contested access to opportunity––histories that are deeply rooted in America's economic landscape.

AI and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

A number of prominent organizations — McKinsey & Company[12], World Economic Forum[13], and UNESCO[14] — are already promoting the idea that the rapid adoption of generative AI has catalyzed a so-called fourth Industrial Revolution. To these powerful entities, the label is meant to evoke progress, but a more critical, histo-cultural analysis of past industrial revolutions, reveals another, more dire truth: greater efficiency does not guarantee greater equity.

Economists and journalists alike have argued that technological progress in the US labor system often fails to deliver broad-based benefits and instead exacerbates existing inequalities. This pattern was evident during the first Industrial Revolution with the invention of the cotton gin, and it remains a concern today.

Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793 while living at the Mulberry Grove plantation near Savannah, Georgia.[15] He was inspired by the pressing demand to increase cotton production speed and efficiency by automating the separation of cotton fibers from its seeds, thereby reducing the manual labor of painstakingly cleaning each plant by hand. Whitney's hand-cranked machine could separate seeds from 50 pounds of cotton per day which was a dramatic leap from the one pound per day that the average enslaved Black laborer could clean by hand. The invention of the cotton gin transformed cotton into a major cash

[8] The White House. 2025. "America's AI Action Plan." The White House. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf.
[9] National Parents Union. "Education Doesn't Belong at the Department of Labor: Unpacking the Latest Interagency Agreements." National Parents Union, 19 November 2025, Education Doesn't Belong at the Department of Labor: Unpacking the Latest Interagency Agreements.
[10] Goetz, Braden. Hearing on "From Classroom to Career: Strengthening Skills Pathways Through CTE" November 19, 2025. Congressional Testimony. 19 November 2025.
[11] Trumka, Richard. "Merging Education and Labor Departments Bad for Working People." AFL-CIO, 21 June 2018, https://aflcio.org/press/releases/merging-education-and-labor-departments-bad-working-people#:~:text=The%20proposal%20to%20merge%20the,on%20Congress%20to%20defeat%20it.
[12] Bristol, Henry, Enno de Boer, Rahul Shahani, and Federico Torti. 2024. "Adopting AI in manufacturing at speed and scale." McKinsey. https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/operations/our-insights/adopting-ai-at-speed-and-scale-the-4ir-push-to-stay-competitive.
[13] World Economic Forum. 2020. "Fourth Industrial Revolution | World Economic Forum." The World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/focus/fourth-industrial-revolution/.
[14] UNESCO. 2023. "The Fourth Revolution: big data & artificial intelligence." The UNESCO Courier. https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/fourth-revolution.
[15] HISTORY.com Editors. 2010. "Cotton Gin and Eli Whitney." History.com. https://www.history.com/articles/cotton-gin-and-eli-whitney.

crop for the United States, accelerating the South's agricultural economy and laying the groundwork for the mechanization of labor that would come to define American manufacturing. By drastically reducing the time it took to separate cotton fibers from seeds, the cotton gin was celebrated as a technological breakthrough that promised greater efficiency, and more importantly, greater profitability for White plantation owners and industrialists. This came at the direct expense of Black freedom and autonomy, intensifying the South's exploitation of enslaved Black labor.

Reflecting on the cotton gin as a transformative technology, Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson note in their book *Power and Progress* that "improved productivity most definitely did not mean higher wages or better treatment of Black workers".[16] Industrialists quickly bought into the notion of automation not only as a means to increase output, but also as a mechanism to control labor because it reduced reliance on human workers while simultaneously suppressing their wages. Instead of easing the burden of labor, automation became a tool to restructure it. Automation scaled exploitation while obscuring the human costs behind the machinery of progress. As Karen Hao summarizes in *Empire of AI*, "These two features of technology revolutions––their promise to deliver progress and their tendency instead to reverse it for people out of power, especially the most vulnerable––are perhaps truer than ever for the moment we now find ourselves in with artificial intelligence"[17]. Hao's observations speak to the current moment where across corporate boardrooms, government task forces, and philanthropic initiatives, AI is increasingly being positioned as both the engine of future economic growth and as the solution to persistent labor market inefficiencies. If Georgia's history is any indication, the arrival of a new technological era does not guarantee equitable participation or benefit.

The architecture of today's labor market, like those before it, is engineered for efficiency over equity and managed by tracking systems that surveil, sort, and dehumanize Black workers. AI, with its prioritization of productivity over people, is merely the latest interface of an older operating system in the United States that was built on racial capitalism. As Ruha Benjamin calls out in *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, racial inequity is not a glitch in the system, it is the code itself.[18] It is the embedded logic of an old world order that haunts the design of the new.

AI's Productivity Myth

Researchers have argued that the concerted push for generative AI is more than a technological shift, it is a reorganization of labor that is reproducing existing inequalities under the rhetoric of progress. It is within this context that Eryk Salvaggio of *Tech Policy Press* highlights the ideological role of the "productivity myth" as a recurring theme in the public discourse around generative AI[19]. In their 2024 primer on Generative AI, my Data & Society colleagues Aiha Nguyen and Alexandra Mateescu further show how this myth reduces human creativity to the sum of its outputs, thereby masking the complex social, cognitive, and emotional

[16] Acemoglu, Daron, and Simon Johnson. 2023. *Power and Progress: Our Thousand-year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity.* 1st ed. pp.131: PublicAffairs.
[17] Hao, Karen. 2025. *Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman's OpenAI*. pp.89.: Penguin Publishing Group.
[18] Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code.* Oxford: Polity Press.
[19] Salvaggio, Eryk. 2024. "Challenging The Myths of Generative AI | TechPolicy.Press." Tech Policy Press, August 29, 2024. https://www.techpolicy.press/challenging-the-myths-of-generative-ai/.

labor involved.[20] As they argue, the productivity myth disproportionately prioritizes the interests of AI companies and investors, while overlooking the human labor involved in creating, refining, and supervising these systems––labor that is often invisible but essential. The 2025 report *Ghost Workers in the AI Machine* by TechEquity, produced in partnership with the Alphabet Workers Union and Communications Workers of America, brings this invisibilized workforce into sharper focus. It foregrounds the contributions of US-based data workers who perform tasks such as data collection, content moderation, annotation, model evaluation, and even "AI fauxtomation" which is the practice of impersonating AI outputs to maintain the illusion of automation.[21] The report rightfully presents these workers as skilled experts whose knowledge could shape the future of the field and critically highlights that both their visibility and ability to have their voices heard by the tech titans who pay for their labor is diminished by their precarious employment as subcontractors and temporary workers. These competing logics of visibility and erasure, skill and disposability demonstrate that even as AI systems promise to create new forms of economic opportunity, they continue a legacy of asymmetries of power and recognition within the labor market.

Occupational Segregation and Asymmetries of Power in the Age of AI

The expansion of AI-enabled work builds on labor markets that are already structured by occupational segregation. According to reports from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO)[22] women and workers from Black and Hispanic communities remain underrepresented in the high-tech sector where wages tend to be higher. These populations are more often concentrated in technology roles outside of the high-tech sector, where median earnings are lower. The bifurcation between who does the work and where the work is housed reflects a contemporary form of occupational segregation in which historically excluded workers are not only underrepresented in the most lucrative corners of the tech economy, they are systematically routed into lower-paying, less secure positions that limit upward mobility and reinforce gendered and racialized hierarchies in the name of progress.

Although the Trump Administration claims that, "the AI infrastructure buildout will create high-paying jobs for American workers," [23] this claim is already falling short for Black women in particular. Research from the Brookings Institution notes that clerical and administrative jobs––many held by women of color––face particularly high exposure to automation.[24] These roles have long served as vital pathways to stability and upward mobility for lower-middle-class workers, especially Black women without college degrees. Their erosion threatens to deepen existing racial and gender disparities in employment and economic security. This is already evident in data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) which revealed that more than 300,000 Black women left *(author's note: were pushed out of)* the workforce between February and June

[20] Nguyen, Aiha, and Alexandra Mateescu. 2024. "Generative AI and Labor: Power, Hype, and Value at Work." Data & Society. https://datasociety.net/library/generative-ai-and-labor/.
[21] Tech Equity Press, Alphabet Workers Union, and Communications Workers of America. 2025. "Ghost Workers in the AI Machine: U.S. Data Workers Speak Out About Big Tech's Exploitation." TechEquity Collaborative. https://techequity.us/2025/09/30/ghost-workers-in-the-machine/.
[22] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. 2024. "High Tech, Low Inclusion: Diversity in the High Tech Workforce and Sector 2014-2022." Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. https://www.eeoc.gov/special-report/high-tech-low-inclusion-diversity-high-tech-workforce-and-sector-2014-2022.
[23] The White House. 2025. "America's AI Action Plan." The White House. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf.
[24] Kinder, Molly, Xavier de Souza Briggs, Mark Muro, and Sifan Liu. 2024. "Generative AI, the American worker, and the future of work | Brookings." Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/generative-ai-the-american-worker-and-the-future-of-work/.

2025[25]. Black women consistently experience higher unemployment rates than the general US workforce, with data showing that the unemployment rate of Black women spiked to 7.5% in September 2025[26], compared to 4.4% for the US population as a whole[27].

After navigating years, sometimes decades, of coded gatekeeping and routine exclusion, some Black women are choosing to opt out altogether, prompting a shift toward entrepreneurship. "I would say that those challenges have now turned into opportunities because I'm seeing a lot of women pivot out of that space to start their own ventures," and one Atlanta-based AI strategist, "and they're leveraging artificial intelligence as their thought leader to help them come up with what's next for them." While this trend reflects a powerful form of self-determination, it is also indicative of the structural inequities that push Black women out of the labor market in the first place. In Atlanta, I witnessed in real-time the practice of "augmentation washing" or, what Sarah E. Fox and Samantha Shorey define as "the language of empowerment, collaboration, and shared control to sanitize deeper changes to labor relations"[28]. I've seen how, depending on the person, AI can shapeshift in utility to become both a potential instrument of liberation and the latest beacon of hustle culture, serving as an alluring personal assistant for self-determination in a precarious economic climate. For those with the access, skills, and networks to harness it, AI offers new possibilities. But, for many, it simply shifts the burden of innovation onto the individual, reframing structural barriers as personal challenges to outmaneuver.

From Examinations of Job Content to an Emphasis on Job Context

Much of the scholarly literature on AI and the future of work focuses on task substitution which is defined as the process by which specific human tasks are replaced by automated systems. More recent research argues that focusing solely on what tasks AI can perform overlooks the broader dynamics at play. Labor economist Owen Davis emphasizes the importance of examining job context alongside job content[29]. While *job content* is what a worker does, specifically the tasks they perform, *job context* refers to the broader circumstances and conditions that shape how work is done (i.e. management functions like staffing, direction, evaluation, and monitoring). Job context is also concerned with worker power or, the degree of influence workers have over their working conditions, job security, reskilling options, and long-term career outcomes. For example, a worker with little job security and few protections might approach reskilling very differently than one with access to a strong union and employer-sponsored training. In the age of AI, workers may feel pressure to adapt quickly, but their actual capacity to do so depends heavily on their relative power within the labor market.

Davis draws on Harry Braverman's labor process theory (LPT) to argue that AI-driven automation of managerial and human resources functions threatens worker power by enhancing surveillance, enabling

[25] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2025. "Table A-2. Employment status of the civilian population by race, sex, and age - 2025 M07 Results." Bureau of Labor Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm.
[26] Gallagher Robbins, Katherine, and Areeba Haider. "The economy lurches towards disaster as Black women's unemployment skyrockets | Jobs Day November 2025." National Partnership for Women & Families, 20 November 2025, https://nationalpartnership.org/economy-lurches-towards-disaster-black-womens-unemployment-skyrockets-jobsday-nov-2025/.
[27] Federal State Bank of St. Louis. "Flash Report: U.S. Unemployment Flows in September." Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 20 November 2025, https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2025/nov/flash-report-unemployment-payroll-rise-september.
[28] Fox, Sarah E., and Samantha Shorey. "How Augmentation-Washing Hides Labor Automation." TechPolicy Press, 22 December 2025, https://www.techpolicy.press/how-augmentationwashing-hides-labor-automation/.
[29] Davis, Owen F. 2024. "Artificial Intelligence and Worker Power," Working paper. Owen F. Davis. https://ofdavis.com/papers/ai/.

wage suppression through predictive analytics, reducing worker autonomy, undermining collective action, and deepening labor fragmentation through algorithmic control. One key concern, of course, is *deskilling,* or the process by which technology reduces the need for human expertise or judgement in work tasks, thereby diminishing the bargaining power of workers and making them more interchangeable in the labor market. These dynamics are especially prone to amplify the power of employers in non-unionized or precarious labor contexts like Georgia where union density is low and workforce development initiatives are often mediated through public-private partnerships between government and business. These conditions underscore the limits of research that centers job content alone and instead point to the need for a contextual analysis of work that foregrounds the political economy shaping workers' lives.

Conclusion

The bulk of the existing research on AI and current labor market demands is dominated by macroeconomic forecasts, skill taxonomies, and productivity-oriented analyses. While valuable, these approaches often overlook the social, cultural, and political contexts shaping how people engage with and make sense of AI. Addressing this gap requires research that centers human experience and community knowledge, rather than treating education and work as technical systems to be optimized. Ethnographic inquiry, with its emphasis on proximity, context, and lived experience, offers a critical methodological intervention that makes it possible to not only document how AI is reshaping education and labor, but to understand how people across generations are interpreting, negotiating, and, at times, resisting these transformations on-the-ground.

My study, *(404) Job Not Found: What Workforce Training Can't Change for Black Atlantans in the Age of AI* addresses this need. A product of months-long participant-observation, my ethnographic study offers a critical analysis of how AI is discussed in academic spaces, promoted by industry, implemented by government, and understood within civil society. Through this mode of qualitative research, I was able to better understand the political economy of AI and its direct impact on the lives of Black Atlantans, gleaning insights that could have only come from proximity, context, and lived experience. Given this, I encourage more research to apply ethnography to studies of the political economy of AI making the case that it is essential for any researcher committed to examining power by tracing how technologies shape workers' lives and communities while reproducing inequalities.