SWATI MYLAVARAPU

Reading a Selection from
Ghost Work
By Mary L. Gray and
Siddharth Suri

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MBS (00:00):

We're all investors, our time, our focus, also our money, of course. We choose where to put it. We choose what causes it serves. And when you invest, the question that gets asked all the time is, well, what's the best rate of return? But what if the question was, what does the most good?

MBS (00:23):

Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. Swati Mylavarapu is one of those interesting people disrupting investing, and in particular venture capital. She's a brilliant strategist, a force for good in the world, a fellow road scholar with me. And she is a co-founder of incite.org, a values-based venture capital fund that invests in startups, sure, but also in nonprofit founders and aspiring politicians and civic leaders and activists.

Swati and the team at incite.org focus on, and I really love this phrase, what is world positive? But that of course begs the question, well, how do you know what world positive actually is?

Swati ([01:14](#)):

When my panel asks me, well, how do you know what's good and what's bad, and so that's the complicated answer, but the straightforward answer here is in our work, we've got companies in our portfolio that are working on the future of energy-efficient transportation in America, to new types of biotechnologies, some companies that are really rushing to make better therapeutics available, amidst the COVID pandemic. And so what I appreciate about our work is that it's a really broad-ranging ability to be nimble and help folks that are tackling whatever the current largest challenges of our time are.

MBS ([01:51](#)):

So the world of venture capital is as I understand it, flush with money right now. So are we seeing a rising tide of investment in world-positive work?

Swati ([02:00](#)):

So what is interesting is this paradox where on the one hand, the industry has really expanded. So many more people are participating, so much more capital is coming through in venture capital. And yet it has still stayed focused on such a comparably small portion of entrepreneurs and problems that this capital tool is being used to solve. And that's really where I think the time for innovation has more than come.

MBS ([02:27](#)):

I don't know for sure, but personally I'm imagining lots of investment in miscellaneous tech stuff where really the goal is the big outset. You get bought by a bigger company and you make a shared load of money, but Swati and inside.org think about it differently.

Swati (02:45):

The founders and the entrepreneurs, both the company entrepreneurs and the social entrepreneurs that we're supporting reflect the diversity of our country, that we are making sure that we're backing founders that come from a variety of lived experiences, because that is oftentimes reflected in the type of problems and the types of solutions to those problems that those entrepreneurs are putting forward.

MBS (03:09):

It really is an exciting time when you open your eyes to the possibilities that are brewing.

Swati (03:14):

We're sort of living through this renaissance and new opportunities, new companies that are coming out of the gate, focusing on renewables future, but also better land use, other forms of carbon innovation. And we've gone on to become one of the most prolific early-stage investors in new climate tech and climate innovation companies. And also back some really important nonprofits and advocacy efforts on the policy side here. And there's been no shortage of opportunities. So if anything, we'd love to see more folks getting into these categories and focusing on the opportunities.

MBS (03:50):

So as I said before, Swati, and this is unusual for a venture capitalist, not only works with startups, but also nonprofits and political activists. And I asked her why she chose to work with this broader range of people.

Swati (04:04):

I've learned that it's really important for us to operate as a holistic change agent because we live in a world with whole people and with a whole system. So a really great example is I might make investments in a company like Wright

Electric, that's focused on the future of electric aviation. Companies like Wright Electric also, it matters to them whether or not we have policy makers in office that believe that climate change is real.

MBS (04:34):
Right.

Swati (04:34):
That understand that future transportation innovation needs to take into account the fuel source for primary modes of transportation. So being an investor in some of these areas requires also that you be a concerned and active citizen, that you care about the direction that our government is moving in, that our civil society is moving in. It matters that you take a stand when you're in the business of backing companies that are building a future because our day job as venture capitalists really forces us to ask the question, what type of a future do we believe in? What type of a future are we building? And who are we designing that for?

MBS (05:16):
Swati, I honestly don't know much about the venture capitalist world. And so I'll be cliched and over simplistic about this, for sure. But as I understand it, when people are putting money into companies and startups, they're providing primarily financial support. And for a limited time, they're like, we want an asset, we want to return within a certain amount of time. And that's why there's that pressure to scale and grow big and pivot so you can make the most of the impact that you're trying to have. Now I'm wondering with you and incite.org's focus being more holistic and different from the traditional venture capitalists. I guess I'm wondering two things. First, do you operate on a different timeline than the traditional venture capitalist? And secondly, the support you offer, does it go beyond the financial? I mean, is it different in any way from what traditional founders get?

Swati (06:12):

In an earlier life, I was a historian by academic training and background. And one of the wonderful opportunities when I spent a part of my career at a firm called Kleiner Perkins, which is actually one of the original venture capital firms in Silicon Valley was an opportunity to dive into some of the history of this industry. And it's interesting because venture capital in earnest has really been around for less than 50 years. So spending time with people like Brook Byers, who is the B in KPCB and hearing about the first fund that Kleiner Perkins raised and who the early investors were and what they made investments in, you realize, in its earliest form, the folks that got into venture capital, they didn't just see themselves as asset managers, as commoditized financial position players that were putting money in to take a lot of money out.

Swati (07:06):

Yeah, that was one element of it, but they also thought that they were building stuff. They would be thought partners to their entrepreneurs. They would take on these big audacious bets to build things that mattered, backing companies that were spinning out new technologies from the post-World War II era, some of the early R and D efforts in those days. You had to really have that creativity and that desire to build and do hard things with your founders when you were doing stuff like investing in Genentech before there was evidence of what a major, at that time, modern biotech company could be, for example. What was the computing industry in those days for you to believe that making investments in companies like Hewlett-Packard was going to be fruitful? What was it to back a company like Intel? So I give those examples to say there was a time not so long ago when this industry was really predicated on being creative capital. It wasn't just one X in for 10 X return capital.

MBS (08:09):

Right.

Swati (08:09):

It was really about getting in there and being in the weeds, building stuff with the company teams themselves. And I like to think that at Incite, we get a little bit back to those roots. My husband and I are both entrepreneurs. My husband, Matt, was part of the early teams at Apple working on things like the iPod and the iPhone when they were a real game changing category, creating innovations. He went on to start a company called Nest. I spent some time in the earlier years at Square, when we had a coffee shop in the middle of the office to really learn who we were building for and what we were building.

MBS (08:43):
Right.

Swati (08:44):
And what I'm learning, what we really bring to our work, and Incite is this idea that we want to be in there with our entrepreneurs, as entrepreneurs, helping them build this vision of a better future that they have. So it's a lot more hands-on support than just cutting a check. And I think we really value that work and we find that our entrepreneurs really appreciate having that hands-on perspective too.

MBS (09:08):

Oh, that's interesting. I mean, I knew Matt was your co-founder, but I didn't realize he was a life partner with you as well. That's such an interesting combination of skills that you must bring to those conversations.

Swati (09:19):

Oh yeah. A fun story. We were prom dates in high school, so it goes way back.

MBS (09:24):
Oh, that's sweet.

Swati (09:24):

But when I talk about the deep values orientation, too, that we bring to our work, I mean, this is part of it.

MBS (09:32):

I love that because I can imagine you're working together during the day, but at the end of the day, you sit together over a meal and you go, well, how are you feeling about the work you're doing? And you're going to be able to say, well, I'm feeling good about it. And you know that because we're in it together.

Swati (09:48):

That's right.

MBS (09:49):

So, Swati, tell us about the book you've chosen?

Swati (09:52):

Yep. So I am typically a huge fiction reader. I'm not a big non-fiction reader, but I read this book at the end of last year. It just really expanded my thinking. And I appreciated it so much. It's called Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass. And it's co-written by an anthropologist and a computer scientist. So, Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri. And it was based on some research that they both did in partnership with Microsoft's sort of research shop, but it was an anthropological study of a few thousand people that participate in the sort of new AI technology-informed labor market around the world.

MBS (10:47):

Right. So how did you come across it?

Swati (10:50):

Somebody recommended it to me. I think I was talking to a friend of mine about how I really believe that anthropology was an underutilized skillset and profession and something that I thought I'd love to see more representation of in the tech industry. And they said, "Well, there's this really great anthropologist who just won a MacArthur Genius prize, and you should read the book that she just put out. It's called a Ghost Work."

MBS (11:15):

Fantastic. Now, how did you pick the two pages to read from? I mean, it's one thing to pick a book, that's kind of hard enough, then you have to try and pick the two pages that capture the essential message of the book. Where did you go in the book?

Swati (11:30):

I picked two pages that are from the end. So the conclusion section, because I think the book does a really beautiful job of getting you some really rich ethnographic studies of individual people's experiences and their lived realities-

MBS (11:47):

Right.

Swati (11:47):

... but then they also pull back up to help you see the forest for the trees towards the end, and have some really important aha moments that I think reframe some of the individual stories into a bigger set of takeaways on what comes next and what the implications are. And I think it's an important time to read something like this too, because for two reasons, one, some of these future of labor market participation questions are really fundamental to what I think we're being asked to re-imagine on the other side of this pandemic in America-

MBS ([12:21](#)):

Right.

Swati ([12:21](#)):

... but also because it's a great example of what you and I have been talking about, Michael, the idea that you can be in the work of building a company or building a technology product or service, but increasingly we have to be aware of the context in which we are building these things. And what are the unforeseen implications of bigger societal shifts that the systems and companies we might be building participate in? And how do we step back to see that bigger picture and ask those tough questions?

MBS ([12:51](#)):

Yeah. There's a writer and a founder who does work, I think similar to yours, I would guess her name is Jacqueline Novogratz and her company's called Acumen, which you might've come across or heard about.

Swati ([13:01](#)):

Right.

MBS ([13:02](#)):

And her latest book is called Manifesto for a Moral Revolution. And the phrase in it that really resonates for me, I keep talking about it is, "What if we could give more to the world than we take?" And I think that speaks to this bigger context. And I think this is kind of similar to the reasons for the work you do at incite.org and it's what this arena is about. It's about tech. Yeah, sure. But it's also that politics and it's about philanthropy as well, because it's all in service of a bigger game, which is to make this world a bit better.

Swati (13:32):

Yeah. Actually, of all people, one remark that I remember hearing David Rubinstein give, he once explained philanthropy isn't about tax status and 501(c)(3)s and setting up a foundation and making grants. Philanthropy is simply about the love of people.

MBS (13:50):

Right.

Swati (13:50):

And if you think about it from that perspective, it's a really far-reaching concept and it's something that it could touch any aspect of our day-to-day work. Another thought that I had recently was, when I used to explain what we do at Incite to folks, it was not uncommon to get the reaction of, "Oh, you guys do like that social enterprise stuff." And part of what I explain these days, as I say it, we do enterprise stuff. And if you think about it, all enterprise is fundamentally social.

MBS (14:22):

Yeah. Okay.

Swati (14:22):

So I think there's a set of norms that are emerging here that really ask us what we expect from business and it poses a legitimate question, why shouldn't we all expect more and expect better?

MBS (14:34):

Oh, that's so good. I'd never thought of that before, but as soon as you say that, it's like one of those moments for me, which is, oh, as soon as you call it social enterprise, you disassociate it from actual enterprise. And shouldn't all enterprise really be in the service of the social?

Swati (14:52):

That's right.

MBS (14:53):

So good. Swati, I'm excited to hear these two pages. Over to you.

Swati (15:06):

"The days of large enterprises with full-time employees working onsite are numbered as more and more projects rely on an offsite workforce available on demand around the globe. Our employment classification systems, one in the 1930s to make full-time assembly line work sustainable, were not built for this future. As machines get more powerful and algorithms take over more and more problems, we know from past advances in natural language processing and image recognition, that industries will continue to identify new problems to tackle.

Swati (15:39):

"Thus, there is an ever-moving frontier between what machines can and can't solve. We call this the paradox of automation's last mile. As machines progress, the opportunity to automate something else appears on the horizon. This process constantly repeats resulting in the expansion of automation, through the perpetual creation and destruction of labor markets for new types of human labor. In other words, as machines solve more and more problems, we continue to identify needs for augmenting rather than replacing human effort. This paradox explains why on-demand services, commercial ventures that combine humans and APIs to source, schedule, manage, and deliver access to goods and services are more likely to dominate the future of work than AIs and bots alone.

Swati (16:31):

"Automation versus human labor is a false dichotomy. As many in the world of AI and computing know, ghost work, the human computation behind

augmented services is a relatively new form of computing power that combines the speed and precision of software with human ingenuity. Ghost work is a great tool for solving problems that machines alone can't solve efficiently on their own. For example, MTurk workers generated training data used to power the algorithms that later solved easier pieces of the image recognition problem. Scientists and engineers then turned their attention to more sophisticated image processing tasks. As AI progresses, we will see this pattern repeat using workers recruited from on-demand labor platforms to solve problems in new domains.

Swati ([17:18](#)):

"Even as ghost work has proven vital for the advancement of AI, it is transformed an informal crowd into the primary computing device, a distributed human computational system for a range of on-demand services from DoorDash and Upwork to Uber. These intelligence systems blend AI and humans in the loop to source, schedule, manage, and deliver access to a paid service through an API. They could be reworked to also value the kindness of strangers and recognize the strengths of online social networks as assets fundamental to good jobs in the future.

Swati ([17:54](#)):

"As more people turn to ghost work or have their formal employment turned into ghost work, we have a chance to learn from labor history and people's experiences of ghost work today to tackle its technical and social malfunctions. There is still time to bring jobs out of the shadow of AI and make them equitable and dignified employment of which all parties involved will feel proud. Drawing on what we have learned from research participants and studying the dynamics of on-demand labor markets, we've got a few technical and social fixes to suggest for moving the future of work forward."

Swati ([18:25](#)):

And then the last section, "What we can do to update jobs for the future of work. Imagine what society could achieve if businesses, consumers, governments, and citizens fully recognize the value of human creativity and the pooled collective effort of so many humans contributing to on-demand services. What potential benefits could flow from projects channeled, at least in part through APIs and software if we invested in them as a new category of employment, the most likely mode of employment through at least our grandchildren's lives to achieve the possibilities hinted at in the stories that open this chapter and to avoid the disasters they might harbor?

Swati ([19:04](#)):

"We must first recognize that on-demand platforms aren't just software. They are bustling, dynamic, online labor markets that consist of humans on both sides of the market. These markets link an on-demand collective of workers to businesses that need human creativity and insights. They serve customers who enjoy the benefits of humans in the loop, whether they know it or not. The platforms facilitating the connection when designed to recognize all humans involved as equally valuable and necessary to a business's bottom line could open new work opportunities and reduce frictions that currently come with finding and hiring someone to start work on a particular job."

Swati ([19:47](#)):

And then they go into like a really great set of 10 suggestions, but I thought that framing was so powerful.

MBS ([19:56](#)):

Oh, that's powerful. I mean, I'm sitting here going, oh, I've just realized what a cyborg actually is because I always thought it was just like the Terminator, you're a half man and half machine.

Swati ([20:07](#)):

Right.

MBS ([20:07](#)):

But in fact, if you realize that a cyborg can be distributed, that it can be this combination of AI with humans throughout, suddenly you realize we're living in a cyborg environment.

Swati ([20:19](#)):

Exactly. And in a way though, that helps us forget that humans are involved.

MBS ([20:24](#)):

Right.

Swati ([20:24](#)):

And in that way it can be really literally dehumanizing. I think that's a big part of the argument that Mary and Siddharth make in this book. And that was so eyeopening. There is at its core, a question of values. What do we value more, the service that's semi-automated, or the idea that people are still instrumental to the provision of these services?

MBS ([20:44](#)):

What did reading this book change for you?

Swati ([20:47](#)):

I think oftentimes in my work in building and shaping new technology ventures, I also have been guilty of thinking, oh, it's about supporting a really great technology. It's about really great software or a really wonderfully delivered, delightful experience or device. And what the book is helping me remember is actually, these are all systems that are human enabled, certainly human consumed, but also human enabled in the development and delivery of

whatever the service or experience is. And there's a really important conversation to be had about whether or not, and if so, how much we value the human effort that's required in the production and provision of these services. And to some extent, we've had this conversation and made decisions, because for example, there's a reason why founders are as respected and valued as they are. I mean, literally they are super represented on cap tables for a startup.

MBS (21:48):

Right.

Swati (21:48):

But what about the delivery worker? What about the person who's working behind the scenes to help an algorithm get smarter?

MBS (21:57):

Does the book make you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the way that ghost work will play out?

Swati (22:03):

I think the book does a really good job of studying and exploring and posing questions. It left me feeling fundamentally optimistic. There's a section at the end where Mary and Siddharth make the point, for example, we're having conversations in this moment, especially amidst this pandemic about whether or not protections like universal basic incomes make sense.

MBS (22:23):

Right.

Swati (22:23):

And part of the point that they make is conversations around social protections and what policy measures we want to put forward are really important, not just

because they're necessary to protect the poor folks that might lose their jobs because of technology, but because actually, as a society, what we're deciding is that we really value people to be available on demand to help deliver these services. And so there should be some measure of social protection that comes along with that as a recognition of the value of expecting to get something delivered or be able to get an answer at the drop of a hat or the sending of an email or the click of a button on an app.

MBS (23:08):

Does this influence your investment decisions in terms of what you look for in organizations?

Swati (23:15):

I think part of what it clarifies is, you asked me earlier, how do you kind of make the determination that a founder, a team, a product or service aligns with the world positive impact that you want to have? We love founders and teams that ask these kinds of questions that make real the fact that they are also grappling with some of these really tough, ethical considerations, that are realistic about the idea that while they have this vision to make the world better, that there are going to be some important conversations, sort of broader contexts in which they operate, whether that means policy conversations that need to be had, bigger societal shifts that are needed. We really love teams that acknowledge that there are these hard, real questions that impact the worlds in which they're creating and producing things.

MBS (24:14):

So how do you get into these conversations with these founders or these individuals? And again, all I've got about venture capitalism is the cliche. So I'm imagining some founder shows up and they're like, here's my 10-slide slide deck. And I've been polishing it for months and I've got my messages down pat. And here's the compelling argument and here's the problem I solve. And here's

the growth potential. It doesn't feel that in the traditional pitch deck structure, there's a lot of space for a conversation like this. So I'm curious to know, I guess, how these conversations show up when you're in a interaction with a founder or with an individual, and you're thinking of investing in them.

Swati ([24:55](#)):

Yeah. Well, very simply we ask these questions during our diligence process. Part of the reason why a typical pitch deck for a consumer company will show their year on year growth numbers, their organic growth versus paid acquisition numbers is because they've gotten in the habit of investors asking those questions and expecting to see the answers. And so, from a similar perspective, we ask these questions, how do you think about these elements of the broader policy environment that you work in? How do you grapple with these really tough, normative questions that are facing the industry that you operate in? How do you deal with the fact that you might have in four years, a legislative environment where half of the folks in power don't believe in climate change?

MBS ([25:49](#)):

Right.

Swati ([25:50](#)):

What part do you play in those broader conversations and how do you engage in some of those efforts? And it could also be the case that it's not necessarily through the company, but it's something that these entrepreneurs as whole human beings take an interest in personally. And that's really useful information too.

MBS ([26:09](#)):

Is there a company in your portfolio who you think is doing a really interesting job at finding this balance between leaning into all the power that AI can give

you, but also remembering that it's a human-enabled processor, human-enabled system?

Swati (26:23):

I think we're actively looking for more companies that are thinking about this in a super helpful and constructive way, less on the company side, but increasingly on our philanthropic side and the efforts that we're supporting in nonprofits. One of the organizations that we were early supporters of is called Paid Leave US, PL+US is their acronym. And five years ago, PL+US was one of the first nonprofits in the country to start advocating for paid family leave as just a basic worker protection and economic right for people in America as something that was important for more than just women working in the tech industry when they have their first child.

MBS (27:10):

Right.

Swati (27:11):

I think now, we've spent 12 plus months living in a pandemic that has killed an unprecedented number of Americans and made an even larger number of us, really sick to make the point that paid family leave is really important and it's a pretty universal need and opportunity. So I think we're really interested in also other efforts to expand some of these conversations around what new types of economic protections and what new work contracts might look like.

MBS (27:39):

Oh, that's so interesting because the diminishment of unionization, it's not just in the US, it's around the world. And losing that collective ability to understand how to protect workers, to give them the ability to, I guess, have a conversation with management, that's part of the unbalancing of the power within capitalism. And it's very interesting to think that now something like PL+US for

instance, is in some ways a re-invention of a conversation that used to happen between a union and an organization.

Swati ([28:05](#)):

Well, one of the changing realities in the last decade plus in this country has been that work has taken on a different meaning than it did for our parents' generation, that it's not just a contract between a firm and a full-time employee. I think the modern age values has seen an uptick in demand for flexible work. And that's really great and super important, but I think it begs a different question of if these protections and guarantees aren't coming from a firm, where else do they come from and what are they really?

MBS ([28:43](#)):

Yeah. Swati, this has been such a great conversation. Thank you. I'd never heard of this book before. So thank you for exposing me to that and really making me think more deeply about the complexities of humanizing workplaces. I mean, work is a source of meaning for so many of us, but with the rise of AI and the incredible power of that, how do you find this balance between technology and being human centered? A final question and it's the one I ask at the end of most of these interviews, it's broad and it's tricky, but let me ask you anyway, is there anything that hasn't been said that needs to be said in this conversation between you and me?

Swati ([29:27](#)):

I think just a reminder that a lot of us engage in our work because we are really motivated to build something. And for me, it's just a constant reminder and a question I ask myself, am I building what matters the most? Am I building something that makes me feel like that was worth what limited time I, and each of us have to be here and to do good work? Does it live up to that?

MBS (30:00):

This was a provocative conversation for me. I mean, I guess I'm thinking about three things. First, how do we help organizations stay human centered? I mean, as I'm recording this, Amazon is in the news about its, I guess HR algorithm, firing frontline workers who aren't productive enough. I mean, I always thought machines would replace the boring frontline staff, and often they do, but things sort of get a little darker when machines are our managers and we're left doing ghost work. And ghost work is such an evocative title. It's a physical manifestation, but it's soulless.

MBS (30:39):

Second, and this is what Swati said at the very end, it's like, am I building what matters most? And this of course is so strongly connected to my new focus around helping people define and take on worthy goals, work that is thrilling and important and daunting. But what's landed most deeply for me and it is connected to the first two points is what investments am I making? My time, my focus, my friendships, my community, my money, my life, all of it's being spent, but am I active enough in the way that I decide how to spend it?

MBS (31:20):

For more information about Swati and incite.org, go to that website, incite.org. I also subscribed to their newsletter where it means I get kind of regular updates on what they're up to, who they're supporting and you really start seeing the breadth of their investment and just how interesting that is. And of course thank you for listening to the podcast. I do appreciate it. It means something. You have a choice of podcasts and most people only have six or seven that they really subscribe to and listen to. So if you subscribe and listen to this one, thank you for making me part of your short list.

MBS ([31:56](#)):

If you want more, of course, there's The Duke Humfrey's, it's our free membership. You can just go to mbs.works and you'll find it there under the podcast tab. You get transcripts of all the podcasts, plus unreleased episodes, and some other downloads that I've created for you as well. If there's somebody who you think should hear this interview with me and Swati, please forward the interview onto them, because we grow by word of mouth. And of course, if you're willing and able to give us a review on your favorite app platform for the podcast, that is excellent as well. I do appreciate those little stars because it helps other people find the podcast. You're awesome. And you're doing great.