Imagining, Critiquing, and Doing: An Interview with Ruha Benjamin

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Abstract

During the 10th STS Italia Conference (11-13 June 2025) at the Politecnico di Milano, Chris Hesselbein sat down for an interview with Ruha Benjamin who delivered the conference's opening keynote. This interview is not just in lieu of a transcription of her keynote speech, but serves also as an opportunity to draw out the (dis)connections between imagining, critiquing, and doing. In the interview, Benjamin also reflects on the role of emerging technologies in shaping and limiting our imagination, on the relationship between academic critique and political action and how this has shifted in STS over the past decades, and last, on the importance of solidarity as the bedrock for politically-engaged scholarship.

Keywords
imagination; inequity; emerging technologies; theory and practice; critique and action.

1. Introduction[1]

Currently the Alexander Stewart 1886 Professor of African American studies at Princeton University and Founding Director of the Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab, Ruha Benjamin is the author of four books, *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024), *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (2022), *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019a), and *People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier* (2013) as well as the editor of *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life* (2019b).

The organisers of the 10th STS Italia Conference were especially keen to invite Ruha Benjamin as a keynote speaker because she – besides being a prominent voice in STS – is a scholar who intervenes in issues that carry well beyond the confines of academia. Although it has become a somewhat outmoded term, Benjamin can be said to be a public intellectual in the tradition of scholars that emerged in the 1960-1970s, that is, someone who engages with the public sphere on important issues through popular platforms. This requires not just broad knowledge and an ability to translate complex ideas for different audiences and to deliver them through various media, but often also a willingness to take unpopular if not controversial

positions that might be in opposition to powerful actors and institutions. In other words, this requires taking a stance on what might be "good" or not, which is why we were delighted when she agreed to deliver a keynote speech on the topic of "technology for good". I think it's fair to say that many left the auditorium after her speech with an expanded imagination and an invigorated sense of how to deliver an academic talk as well as what this can instil in an audience.

Some of the recent work in which Ruha Benjamin is involved can be found in the output of the Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab, which brings together students, educators, activists, and artists to develop a critical and creative approach to rethinking and retooling the relationship between power and technology as well as data and justice. A particularly actual and poignant project is *The Phoenix of Gaza*, a documentary film with footage of Gaza shot right before the start of its destruction by Israel in late 2023, which now serves as a last record and archive of everyday life in the currently-occupied enclave. In her most recent speaking and writing, Benjamin has underscored the importance of imagination for developing fairer and more progressive technoscientific futures. My questions in this interview seek to explore the various uses and limits of imagination, particularly among academics in the humanities and social sciences, as well as how the structures we inhabit shape or limit our creativity and courage. I hope you enjoy reading the interview as much as I enjoyed speaking with Professor Benjamin during a warm summer afternoon in Milan last June.

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CH: *So, I'm wondering a bit about the term imagination, and especially if there is a crisis of imagination. Across various fields of research or professional practice, there have been worries, even fears maybe, that we're failing to go beyond the present. Designers and architects lament that we don't have new things. A lot of cultural production and consumption seems to harken back to a nostalgic past, and music is sometimes said to produce not much new. The past is treated as a source of future possibilities rather than the present. And this seems kind of ironic. Mark Fisher (2009), the British writer and cultural critic, likes to quote the following, "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism"[2]. And this strikes me as quite true. And Fisher also commented on music a lot, precisely for this reason. So, are we in a crisis of imagination?*

RB: Yes, I think we are in a crisis of imagination if we presume that imagination is always future-oriented and always liberatory. If we infuse that term only with possibility then perhaps we might come to the conclusion that we're in a crisis. But one of the things that I was exploring in the book, *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024) is how imagination falls along a wide spectrum, from more deadly eugenic forms of imagination to more liberatory, justice-oriented forms. And I think, when we look at the kinds of eugenic imagination that infect so many of our institutions, so many of our policies and even our interactions, interpersonally, that we can see that those kinds of deadly imaginaries are proliferating. Those kinds of imagination don't seem to be in crisis.

The other kind of orientation to imagination, which might lead to a different conclusion, is found in our historical imagination. When we look for possibility, I think it's not enough simply to turn towards a kind of future world-building, but to also think about the kinds of

imagination that we've inherited, that we've forgotten, that get buried, that are sometimes considered backwards and primitive even. And part of what the book is trying to do is to also get us to expand our historical imagination. To identify what we don't want to continue, but also to embolden us to do things that might be considered as far-fetched or impossible. And I do think, again, to go back to the question, that there is a line of thinking that might lead to an affirmative response, that we're in a crisis. But I also think that we can see all kinds of deadly fantasies that seem to be proliferating.

CH: *I guess the term crisis is also a bit loaded.*

RB: Exactly.

CH: *And it allows all sorts of extreme measures to be put in place. And that is something to watch out for. I like what you said also because it reminded me of a mantra often repeated in STS, "It could have been otherwise". And this takes us back historically. It's a fundamental insight into how different choices actually could have been made. And it is deceptively simple, but still an elegant way of reminding us that things are not set in stone.*

RB: Exactly. It's really a touchstone for me. To constantly have that vigilance about questioning what's sold to us as inevitable.

CH: *On that note. In your writing and speaking – and especially across your last three books, and of course your public talks, the many public talks you have given in the last few years – there is a distinctly forward-looking, future-oriented, and even positive or hopeful sort of message. But juxtaposed with a really devastating critique of existing inequalities and injustices. Critique comes naturally to academics. We thrive on this. We think it's very insightful. But hope is not at all fashionable. I suspect that this might be out of fear of being seen as naive or unscholarly, even that there's something...*

RB: Unsophisticated.

CH: *Yeah. And you've also called attention to organizations that employ or appropriate new technologies for the achievement of social justice. Now that's a much more constructively-oriented endeavour. Your Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab[3] is, of course, a prominent example of this, and there are several others. But for many academics, this combination of theory and critique with constructive action seems unintuitive or maybe just unimaginable. Do you have any thoughts on why this might be the case? Or on what constrains us in our scholarship in this way?*

RB: I think there could be many factors, but you've certainly put your finger on a kind of very deliberate shift in orientation that I started to make about 6 or 7 years ago around the time that *Race After Technology* (Benjamin 2019a) and *Captivating Technology* (Benjamin 2019b) were published. Part of it is that we know that this is not simply just about our individual orientation, but also about who we're around and how the context around us shapes how we think and what we think. And for me one of the big factors was actually reorienting

myself – in terms of my interlocutors, my collaborators or even audience – away from academia and toward people, organizations, movements that were actually taking the ideas that we elaborate in academia and giving them legs in a way, trying to put them into practice and trying to materialize alternatives. The more I situated at least one foot outside of the academy and inside social movements, that began to shape not just my writing but also the ideas that I thought would be useful and generative.

In fact, I get surprised when people assign my work in their classes, because that wasn't my initial audience, you know. So when people say, "I read this in my class" or "I'm going to cite this", I think "Really!?". I always feel a lot of gratitude when I hear this, but it always surprises me that people are taking my work up in contexts that I didn't initially see as my primary contribution, to syllabi and scholarly literature. I was writing more in conversation with organizations that I talk about in *Viral Justice* (Benjamin 2022) or that I've partnered with through my lab, thinking about what kind of conceptual tools would be useful to name the realities that people are living through, the experiences that they're having, giving a language to shine a light on things so that we can do something about it. For example, the "New Jim Code"[4] being a kind of conceptual lens that is naming a set of tech-mediated harms and injustices that young people, for example, might be experiencing in terms of surveillance in their schools and their neighbourhoods. Putting a name to it is a first step to mobilizing, so that we can do something about it, whether to protest, to pass laws, to build counter-imaginaries around these issues. And so, yes, I think there's an opening where more scholars are thinking along these lines, are realising that peer review is not the only kind of thing that we have to orient ourselves around, or perhaps also expanding who we think of as our peers.

CH: *Yeah, it's such an obviously important thing. And most major STS conferences now have Making and Doing sessions, for example, which seems to indicate an increasing orientation towards not just conventional scholarship in that sense. But I'm surprised to hear that you're surprised that people assign your work! Because I also assign chapters from Race After Technology. It's super accessible, especially for my students who do not have a background in the social sciences or humanities. They're mostly engineers. And they often like the book a lot as well, they find it easier to talk about it and so on.*

Speaking of breaking out of conventional scholarship or bridging the activist-scholarship divide, I'm also wondering about something. On the one hand, it feels almost like a lack of confidence that academics might have, or perhaps you could also say bravery, to defy our own disciplinary conventions, even though STS is probably more promiscuous than most perhaps more standard or older disciplines. But on the other hand, it's also a lack of creativity right? I think we worry about whether researching, thinking, and writing can really at the same time be combined with making and doing. Writing is a form of doing, one could say, but to write beautifully is another sort of challenge. But your writing feels to me like you make a conscious effort to not write in the standard academic manner, is that right?

RB: Yes, absolutely. When I was an undergrad student I studied sociology and anthropology but my minor was creative writing. So that was always in the background. Writing is something that I loved and appreciated, the beauty of language, the provocations, the poetics.

But during my grad school training that kind of pleasure was snuffed out. It was an orientation towards language that felt very insular. It wasn't about inviting people into conversations, it was about gatekeeping. It seemed more about speaking in a manner that all the insiders understand. I still think that there's a place for that, so I don't want to pit this as an either/or between specialized and accessible language. I will just say that I make a conscious effort to write and speak in a way that invites more people into the conversation. People who might not have the degrees, or academic training in a particular field, etcetera. And so, it's more a question of what we're using the language for, and who we see as our main audiences and interlocutors that then has an impact on how we go about doing it. So, I don't want the takeaway to be that it's a battle between arcane and accessible language. Context and purpose matter.

CH: *Of course. Well, it felt very real what you said about grad school. It's not that long ago for me. I also remember this. I don't think I'm a good writer or somebody who enjoys writing. But I'm very happy when I've written! I guess that's one of the clichés they say about writing. But I remember even losing the pleasure of reading in graduate school. I found it difficult to just read for fun. To read to relax.*

RB: Totally. I did not enjoy writing in that way in grad school. And so part of my approach to writing now is to consider that whatever I want people to experience as a reader of my work, I want to feel as I'm writing. If I want someone to enjoy it, I want to enjoy writing it. I think of it as contagious, and so that's part of what motivates me. I can't expect you to enjoy it as a reader if I feel like I'm pulling my teeth out as I write.

CH: *Yeah, you can tell! Did the writer enjoy writing this or not? It's very familiar, unfortunately. Well, so, moving from writing to stories. In your keynote, you talked about two predominant stories about technology. One is a doomer narrative that comes out of Hollywood, and the other a boomer narrative that comes out of Silicon Valley. And sometimes, of course, they overlap. They're both utopian as well as dystopian and present technology as inevitable and inexorable: this technology has to happen, it's going to happen. You didn't underline this in your talk yesterday, but you could say that these stories are conveyed through different media. One is cinema or film and the other is a social media narrative. Much of our cultural imagination is, of course, shaped through news and popular media. And much of the work of shaping these narratives now happens on social media platforms. These are operated by Big Tech companies. And we know that marginalised communities do manage to sort of carve out places in these spaces and find each other. But I'm nonetheless wondering what your thoughts are about the imaginaries emerging there. And how much does it matter that this is happening on these platforms specifically?*

RB: It's really a thicket in terms of what the possibilities and the downsides and the harms are. I definitely think it's not a deterministic story, that the platforms are created and therefore they always and forever have these impacts or outcomes, because as you remind us, there's all kinds of ways that people appropriate and use these tools. One book that gets into this is *#HashtagActivism*, which shows how marginalized groups, long excluded from elite media spaces, have used hashtags to put forth counternarratives, pre-empt political spin, and

build networks of dissent. And I've written a little bit about that in *Viral Justice* where Black creators pushed back against how their content was being used. Even still, I think that we're always going to hit up against certain walls where, for example, people get shadow banned, certain words and ideas are censored. But then again, people find ways to play with language, spelling, and memes to trip up the algorithms and communicate by all means available.

So it's a constant tug of war between top-down kinds of surveillance and censorship and people's creative responses. Part of this is a question of short- or long-term processes, and I think that in the long run, the goal should be to move completely away from these commercial platforms. I had a chance to meet one of the founders of the Platform Cooperativism Consortium[5] a few days ago in Brooklyn. And hundreds of different projects have emerged out of that. I think that opens up different possibilities for what worker-owned or cooperativist decision-making could look like as well as the sharing of profit and so on. So I'm more oriented towards investing in that, rather than always being in a reactive mode. And that's just one example for us to learn from and build on.

Another thing that I've written about as a prototype for thinking about what it would look like to create digital public spaces that are encoded with different values, is Breonna's Garden. This project grew out of tragedy when, in 2020, Breonna Taylor was murdered by police. And so a group of artists, technologists, and designers collaborated with her family and her sister, Ju'Niyah Palmer, to create an app and a virtual and augmented reality experience that they describe as a place to express and share grief but also organize in different ways towards justice. It's like a seed of a project that shows how things can unfold if the process is different in terms of who is designing and what values are shaping it.

CH: *Yes, I very much remember the Virtual Reality (VR) example, especially because it's also, in a way, surprising. I mean, we think of a lot of the VR stuff as completely co-opted by Meta and Zuckerberg, of course. And the whole metaverse discourse is of course very totalizing. And actually, this brings me very nicely to my next question, which is, when talking about imagining different worlds, how do we bring this in relation to how Big Tech companies engage in future-making? Because they also present us with imaginaries. They use much the same rhetoric and language actually.*

RB: Exactly. Exactly.

CH: *They make it sound great in many ways. But they are actually in such a strong position to shape our imagination. And so, if imagination is an antidote to or a way of making strange what is taken for granted or seen as normal, how exactly does imagination denaturalize such dominant narratives? It is sort of self-evident, of course. Thinking differently allows one to do different things, but how does it maybe also denaturalize what is presented to us as natural by very dominant companies?*

RB: That's an interesting question. Part of what I'm hoping to achieve by championing imagination is that I want us to think more and more about what we want to make *unimaginable* as well. It's not just imagination as a straightforward good, but there are certain possibilities,

ways of organizing life, that I think should be unimaginable. Even if we think about the most obvious, such as genocide and ethnic cleansing as the most extreme examples, but even things that get naturalized all the time, like homelessness or paying for health care. Things that are just so normal we don't even think about. It's just part of the air. Everyday forms of slow violence that should be unimaginable. And I think the mundane forms of harm can get lost when all of the attention, the hype and doom, is focused on Artificial Intelligence (AI). Before AI was on the scene, there were all kinds of analogue threats to people living good and meaningful lives, threats which are perhaps being amplified by emerging technologies.

CH: *Yeah, AI is fascinating in the way it has sucked in so much of our energy, both positive and negative, and is also used as such an umbrella term. But all of this also always seeks to underscore its power, right? That it is something intelligent and it will seek to dominate us. It's not at all obvious to me, actually. And it reminds me also, speaking of the Big Tech platforms, the social media platforms, the way data about us is collected. There were these claims being made, and Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism also talks about this, about how Facebook has 200 or 2000 of your likes, and then they supposedly know us better than our partner does or our parent does or even ourselves. Better than we know ourselves, which is such a claim to make. It's a lot of data for sure, but just to say that...*

RB: It knows us.

CH: *That it knows us better than our most intimate friends and family or partners seems ridiculous to me actually. Of course, not to say it's okay to have so much data. It does say a lot about us, but it's a very specific slice of us and I think we almost grant them too much power. And I find this kind of worrisome.*

RB: Agreed. I think we have to be able to critique and name things without granting them too much. When we name something, we give it power. And so that's why I've become such an evangelist for naming the alternatives. As much as we're trying to critique platform capitalism, the New Jim Code, the algorithms of oppression, etcetera, what do we want instead?

CH: *So speaking of technologies and emerging technologies. Something I find quite interesting is that, even though the supposed neutrality of technology has long been contested within STS, over the four to five decades since the field emerged it has nonetheless shifted from what were sometimes described as politically "neutral" approaches – I'm thinking of the symmetry principle, Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, the Strong Programme, and the recurring debates about how relativist we are – toward a more explicit critique of research agendas, technological developments, and narratives of innovation. And of course, AI is maybe the prime example of this, or at least the most recent one. But there's also a bit of a tension there. And I wondered how you grapple with the tension between this social constructivist approach that seeks to examine ongoing practices and negotiations and so on, with the much more critical and activist approach that really seeks to intervene earlier, much more forcefully in techno-scientific developments.*

RB: This is hard. I don't quite know how to diagnose the shift or why that sort of tension persists. I think one factor may be the kinds of people with different experiences and backgrounds that get drawn into the field. If we look at who is behind the papers, the books, etcetera, perhaps the demographics are shifting, becoming more representative of the wide array of human experience. And where you're coming from, say, an Indigenous community in South America, and you see what mining has done to your community. And so you're not going to study mining from a purely neutral "both sides" or detached perspective. And taking situated knowledge seriously, the luxury of holding everything at arm's length says something about what your own life experience has been up to the point of becoming a student of or a scholar of a particular industry or scientific field. So that's perhaps one factor.

The other thing is, just in terms of public awareness about tech-mediated harms, I experienced in my short career a very palpable shift. From the time I started writing *Race After Technology* in 2016 to the time when it was published in 2019, in those few years so much happened that many more people were aware of, whether it was Cambridge Analytica or Trump's election and Facebook's role in that, or the Snowden files. When I started writing, I thought, when I publish this critique of emerging technologies, I'm going to have to really convince people that technology is not neutral and we have a responsibility question everything about it. But things shifted so fast, that by the time the book came out, most people came to the conversation with a sense of "Yeah, yeah, we get it! But now what do we do about it?". The everyday awareness about tech-mediated harms had grown, what some have called a "techlash", that is, backlash against Big Tech. So people came to the book wanting something more actionable. "Okay, you're telling us what we know. You're giving us language. Thanks. But now what?". And so that pushed me with the next two books to address that question even more, because I found people didn't need as much handholding when it comes to what we would call "opening the black box". They were saying, "We're living in the black box. We get it. Now how do we get out?".

CH: *Especially the students. They're very aware. Yeah. It's often crystal clear to them.*

RB: Even those coming from computer science! So it's not even just a humanities thing. Many times the computer science students will be even more aware, because they've been inside of it, so they come to it with a sense of like, okay, what do we do?

CH: *I very much recognize this, and I'm somewhat surprised by this among my Master's students and PhD students, and particularly, as you said, the computer science students and engineers. But then I also wonder about something else, to follow up on the previous question, about the shift in STS as a field. I get the impression that some people think that the technology has also changed and I wonder about the nature of technology in that sense. And of course, if we're thinking about the 1970s, we can think of nuclear energy, for example, or biotech that's then coming up and concerns about the first sort of genomic interventions and so on. And then there was the 1990-2000s, GMOs and nanotechnology and so on. And yet, it's this sort of, I don't want to say crisis again, but the sort of sense of crisis maybe, at least around, what one could call connected technologies, artificial intelligence, algorithms. And the terms have also shifted over time. But there seems to be this sense that a qualitative shift has happened in the technology. Is that true?*

RB: Hmm. I like how...

CH: *Because I was trained as a historian originally...*

RB: I know, so you're like, "No, there's continuity!".

CH: *I guess I'm just sceptical of the claim that it's necessarily new.*

RB: I like how you put it – a *sense* of it being new – because I think that's even more important than whether, objectively or empirically, it is. Even if it's not, if there's a sense of it, that has its own effects, right? So I like that way of framing it, because it's a reminder that subjective experience has power on its own. And so, part of this is what you were describing, the social media, the data collection, and the fact that we are a part, an essential part of these technologies. It's not just something happening in a lab, far removed from us, with downstream effects. We are a part of it. And perhaps it's that more close-up, intimate experience that raises the awareness. One of the shorthands I often use is "what we have access to has access to us". The idea that if we're all users, then we get used. I think there's now a much more palpable sense that we are being used even as we're getting access to all these conveniences. That creates an opening for people to have their critique grow out of firsthand experience. You don't have to read a paper about nanotech or genomics or rely on scholars or journalists to tell you X, Y, or Z is happening. Instead, you are seeing firsthand how the algorithm manipulates you. That kind of experience might be more galvanizing, or at least it's what we experience in the classroom. Students coming in already having started forming a critique.

CH: *That's a powerful reminder actually. Everyone already knows this on some level, but that you as data build the technology is a crucial thing to remember. Although it does also feel a bit impotent or powerless. I mean, you have the awareness, but then what? This also makes me think about terminology. I've had this two- or three-year, maybe longer, frustration with some of the terms we use in STS, which are often the same terms as those used by tech companies. You mentioned the word user, and you nicely drew out how "using" also means "being used", but nonetheless our conceptual vocabulary often mirrors that of the industry. And it's very easily co-opted. And this also reminds us again – I'm not necessarily arguing for constantly coining neologisms, which can be an annoying academic habit – that sometimes even our own words and concepts need to be denaturalized. And this is one of the most difficult things I guess, especially as an early-career scholar, because who are you to propose new terms? But I find this quite an important issue.*

RB: Absolutely.

CH: *I really liked what you said about AI, people, and companies, and how it reminds us that we're part of this. And maybe that's part of why we're so preoccupied with these "new" technologies. But what about the change in business practices? Is there something more structural, in terms of how these companies operate or are able to exert power? I'm wondering if you*

have any thoughts on how that might have shifted over the past fifty years or so? And that STS has not only changed because generational changes have happened or because the field has become more diverse, also in terms of disciplines and people, or the technology that has changed, but maybe more because the world has also changed?

RB: Yeah, absolutely. I wouldn't describe it, again, necessarily as "new" but as intensified. The experience is much more intense in terms of how we are the product. And the idea of attention, our attention, being such an important determinant of whether any new technology is successful. That it holds our attention, that it's constantly drawing our attention, and how that then has these ripple effects on so many other aspects of our lives. The things that we're not doing because we're scrolling.

CH: *Or imagining.*

RB: Exactly! So the idea that then we're living inside their imagination of what we should be doing. And I think that – "infect" is my go-to word – is important just to make clear the normative dimensions of how it infects all areas of our life. If we think about just the last year and a half, how the rolling out of generative AI has completely thrown education into a free-for-all in terms of people who could have spent probably their whole lives not caring about AI who are now forced to deal with it on some level. And hearing about people retiring because they just don't want to or can't deal with this. I think that's one example where we can see how it's not simply about you choosing to buy a product or not. This thing is now completely shifting the expectations, the norms, the interactions in your profession, whether or not you've chosen it or not. I think we're seeing this infection, more people becoming aware of it even if we don't know what to do at this moment.

CH: *Yeah. I've also been surprised by the way I've seen colleagues take up generative AI. And I must say also seeing it appear in my students' work, of course. Well, I should also admit I'm sort of a slow person. I would say I'm not that fast in forming an opinion about things, which is sometimes embarrassing but also sometimes maybe healthy. I'm also not quick to take up things such as ChatGPT. I briefly played around with it a bit but was really bored. I found it fundamentally uninteresting. Impressive what it could do in many ways, but also completely baffling. Why would I want something else to write for me? Not that I enjoy writing so much, like I said earlier, but I nonetheless value it because it forces you to iron out your own thoughts and so on. And I just didn't care that much about ChatGPT in that sense.*

But now I am also wondering about the art of asking questions. I guess they're called prompts, in terms of interacting with a chatbot, but I wonder if in doing that there is also a kind of creative act. In some ways this forces you to interpret the interface and the technology in order to be able to work with it. And I've come to realize that some of my students also seem to treat it like that. And perhaps it's closer to a search engine, and that it's maybe not quite taking away as much creativity and thinking from students as I assumed. It's not really a question to ask of you specifically, I got sidetracked, but maybe you have some thoughts.

RB: No, I appreciate those reflections, but I think you're right. The whole idea of an entirely new field or capacity of prompt engineering, the art of asking questions. Then it becomes what we do with the responses, or whether we take the responses to be facts or do we understand that there is fabrication on that end too. I think we're just in the early days, and so I understand people's strong reactions, but it's worth thinking specifically about the point that it's not simply the technology that we need to be concerned about but also the entire ecology in which it operates. Even if, let's say, students are being creative in their question asking, if the responses are predicated on the theft of the work of writers in terms of the copyrighted books that are used to train it, or the theft of the work of artists, all that has to be part of the frame of our assessment. And even if it still requires some creativity on our part to elicit those responses, what's happening on the backend in terms of the training and the development of those models? I always want us to go backstage and think about the bigger picture.

CH: *Yeah, that's absolutely fundamental, also the environmental backstory as well is important to remember.*

I have one final question for you, but it's a big one and perhaps also the most personal one. You've not shied away from taking strong positions on what some might call controversial, or what I would call pressing topics, such as genocide in Gaza, for example, or on some of the limitations of certain versions of identity politics. And you have done so in a very public manner. There is a, to me, terrifying public dimension to this. I'm quite an introverted person myself. But an example would be the convocation speech you gave at your alma mater, I believe, Spelman College in 2024, which went viral on social media [6]. These sorts of public acts are often portrayed as courageous and brave, one of the keynote discussants yesterday called it "resilient". Some of this language sits quite uncomfortably with me, because it almost suggests that it's just something that happens, that is extraordinary to speak out. And to some extent it is extraordinary, but also it shouldn't be. And this pattern of being outspoken, there's a long tradition of this of course. I mentioned Toni Morrison and Edward Said in my email to you before, how they very much tried to speak truth to power. Being a public intellectual of this kind involves a certain level of, well, risk, essentially. This can be professional, it can be personal, and it can have legal repercussions. We see this increasingly in Europe, for example, but also in the US we're seeing huge changes in this regard. In the case of genocide, this topic has been taken up by students first and foremost – not just in the US but also in Europe and especially here in Italy – rather than tenured faculty. Here at the Politecnico di Milano, yesterday, some tenured faculty have finally started saying something. And this is 18 months after students started speaking up. What are your thoughts on this apparent retreat into conservatism and self-preservation that afflicts so many academics?

RB: I agree. That is a huge, huge question. There are so many things that come to mind. For example, the Spelman convocation speech, I wrote it very quickly over the weekend, right before the day. I had no idea that it was going to hit a nerve. And even now I'm still surprised. If I knew that it was going to circulate so widely, I would have put more time into it! I would have given it a little more thought!

Another part of it is that I don't think I've ever stopped being a student. When I, for example, was applying to graduate school, my professors were really surprised that I wanted

to get a PhD because I was always a troublemaker. I was always much more on the activist side than the scholar side of the hyphen. And so, even now, with my own students, I feel a kinship with them and I feel constantly emboldened by them. In almost every historical rupture and movement, we've seen students in the vanguard. In terms of the civil rights movement, I've heard stories of civil rights activists, who when they were young, their parents were very opposed to them doing things even though they too would ultimately benefit in terms of laws changing and so on. The parents and the adults around them were always more conservative. That's a long-standing thing. They say, "Don't take the risks, protect yourself, think of your career". That dynamic is pretty predictable. So in the context of the university, I identify much more with the students than the administrators. When it came time, for example, for my students to take risks, they knew they could come to me. And it was a no brainer. And I was put on probation for supporting them.

But on the topic of courage, going back to the bigger question, I don't think courage is simply an individual attribute. Whether we are able to be courageous or not or take risks or not, I think a lot of this has to do with what our support system is and whether we think people have our backs or not. So, for example, before I stepped into that role of walking into a building occupation with the students, I contacted trusted people to say "Okay, if I get fired, can I come work there for a year while I figure things out?". We need to know that people have our back. Taking risks is not a commentary on our individual virtue but on whether we are supporting each other, catching each other when we step over the ledge.

CH: *Yeah. That's such a beautiful way of putting it. A very human way also. Because besides the individual, we very much would like to get away from this being an attribute of only certain specific groups or people. This "Oh they are more activist" or "They are more courageous". Because it's also about solidarity across these groups.*

RB: Exaaactly.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] The interview transcript below has been lightly edited for clarity and readability.

[2] This quote is from Fredric Jameson's 2003 article *Future City* published in the New Left Review:

> Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.

[3] Housed in Princeton University's Department of African American Studies, the IDA B. WELLS Just Data Lab brings together students, educators, activists, and artists to develop a critical and creative approach to how data are conceived, produced, and circulated. The lab seeks to rethink and retool the relationship between stories and statistics, power and technology, data and justice.

[4] The "New Jim Code", coined by Ruha Benjamin, names how ostensibly neutral algorithms and data systems automate racial inequality, thus renewing Jim Crow-style control under a veneer of objectivity.

[5] Platform Cooperativism Consortium (PCC) is a network that promotes the development of digital platforms based on cooperative principles – worker- and user-ownership, democratic governance, and shared value – offering an alternative to extractive "platform capitalism".

[6] The full convocation speech can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_12_E3LAeg.

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