*The Received Wisdom*

# Episode 2: Technology, Optimism, and Race Featuring Ruha Benjamin

## Teaser

**Ruha Benjamin** [00:01] And so we think about facial recognition... It might seem like progress to say, “Hey, let's train it to differentiate black faces better,” but at the same time, the better it gets at differentiating black faces, it can become more harmful...

## Intro

**Shobita** [00:31] Hi Jack!

**Jack** [00:32] Shobita, hello, good afternoon-slash-morning. How are you?

**Shobita** [00:37] I'm good. This is our second episode. It's very exciting.

**Jack** [00:39] I know we are now officially a series. We are a podcast with multiple episodes. We've arrived.

**Shobita** [00:46] That’s right, and I see that you've adopted a DJ voice just for the occasion.

**Jack** [00:50] I have through hours of vocal therapy and elocution lessons, I've acquired this sort of sophisticated new 1970s posh British voice that I'm, I'm just going to see how it goes.

**Shobita** [01:00] I think that's good. That's a good look on you.

**Jack** [01:02] Good, um, so what should we talk about this week? What's the, what are the big stories?

**Shobita** [01:06] Well, just a couple of days ago I was really struck by this news that the Gates Foundation and the National Institutes of Health in the U.S. have committed $200 million to quote, bring genetics cures to the poor. And they are specifically interested in Subsaharan Africa and the focus is, they say, to bring affordable and available genetic therapies to people in resource poor countries with a focus on sickle cell disease and HIV. And it sounds on first

glance to be wonderful, right? These are needy countries, uh, HIV and sickle cell disease prevalence is very high in these places. But when I saw it, I was frustrated by it. You know, in these cases, especially when you're talking about giving people genetic therapies, you're talking about long hospital stays, you're talking about the need for better infrastructure, appropriate refrigeration technologies and things like that. And they talk about affordability and availability, widespread availability without any discussion about what that might actually mean or how it might be accomplished.

**Shobita** [02:19] And we don't have a great track record. You know, there are treatments for sickle cell and HIV and even those are not widespread in Subsaharan Africa. And so I started to think about it a little bit more and it sort of struck me and I should say, you know, there's been a, a radio series on National Public Radio here in the U.S., where they're tracking one of the first patients to get a CRISPR for sickle cell. And she's spending quite a bit of time in the hospital and it is quite involved. She has to come back to the hospital over and over. And that kind of infrastructure again is not the kind of infrastructure that we have in the countries where these therapies are supposed to be beneficial. But, and this is perhaps the most cynical part of me, but you know, at the same time, these are individuals, as I said, who are prone to these diseases.

**Shobita** [03:13] And so I wonder, it makes me think that they end up becoming research subjects yet again for the benefit of therapies that are likely to be used in the West. Uh, or in countries that already have this kind of infrastructure that are more wealthy. And you know these days people have been using the word or the term data colonialism. People talk about it as a new kind of appropriation or extraction of data. In some ways though, this is an old way of appropriating and extracting data from subjects in Southern countries. We've seen this in the development of pharmaceuticals. This isn't really new, but it also reminds me of a story that went viral a couple of weeks ago about contractors for Google going to Atlanta, which is a heavily African American city where they gave homeless African American men $5 to scan their faces but didn't tell them that they were working for Google and didn't tell them that they were scanning their faces.

**Shobita** [04:11] In a lot of cases, from what I understand, they said, they told these men that they were doing a selfie game and you know this is in the name of improving Google's face unlock for their Pixel 4 phones. And I just thought to myself, you know, who's winning and who's losing an innovation, who is assumed to be providing the data and who has to take risks and who then doesn't have a benefit and why are we okay with that? You know, innovation is supposed to be disruptive, but in the most fundamental ways of how we treat one another and how we see one another, it's just reproducing new forms of power and colonialism.

**Jack** [04:52] Okay. So let me try to be, this is not a role I'm hugely comfortable with or experienced him, but let me try to be the technological optimist here. I guess my optimistic take would be the Gates Foundation and the NIH are not, you know, megalith companies. We could probably think that they have benign humanitarian interests at heart, which is not to say that

their idea of the public interest isn't necessarily a universal one, but what are they likely to think about the potential here? You know, I mean I'm imagining their version of the argument would be something along the lines of, well here we do have a seemingly very powerful technology that could, maybe, we don't know, but maybe, eradicate illnesses in the same way as smallpox was eradicated. You know, with clear enormous public health benefits. Either technology was able to be developed or that didn't require the sorts of infrastructure that absolutely you're right to highlight. I guess that's sort of a version of what they would, what they would say. And we need to think about whether we would buy that argument.

**Shobita** [05:58] And this actually links our interview today with Ruha Benjamin. You know, in her book Race After Technology, she talks about the power of what she calls technological benevolence. So rhetoric around technological benevolence often silences critics. It's, it sort of assumes benevolence and therefore hides any other kinds of problems. And I think when it comes to Gates and the NIH, obviously I would certainly agree that they have had benefits in the world. However, I also think historically they have not thought about the structure within which their therapies are being developed. And the fact that by and large we don't have a good track record of getting therapies to the people who need it most. And there are lots of policies and funding infrastructure that ensure that it's very difficult to get these drugs and therapies to people who really need them. Those aren't just policies and infrastructures that affect Google. They affect the Gates foundation and the NIH and you know, of course I'm going to talk about the fact that there are intellectual property policies at play here. They're intellectual property laws at play here. I mean, you know, both Gates and the NIH have historically been very strong proponents of the sort of pretty conventional approach to thinking about property and capital and the idea that we need to engage the private sector to produce innovation. And all of that is just perpetuating the status quo. You know, the fact that we have sickle cell therapies already and they're not getting into bodies in sub Saharan Africa. Why is that? Right? Why aren't we asking that question?

**Shobita** [07:32] You know, these problems are rarely ones of the existence of a new technology. They're more often ones of access to new technologies and why some people don't benefit from the things that Western citizens, consumers do benefit from. Even though those things had been in existence often for decades. It's so frustrating that in 2019 we are not thinking critically about that, even though we have a huge track record of failure and even in the United States now, we have a huge debate about drug pricing because we're not even succeeding in the U.S. at getting innovation into bodies who need them.

**Jack** [08:14] I am torn because you know, if I look at some of the most important systemic injustices around innovation, you know, one of the obvious ones is that the diseases of poor countries get so little attention. So whenever they do get attention, one doesn't want to bemoan that. But as you say, you know, just please can we learn from history? And it may just be that yes, pursue this line of research, but don't over promise for it. Don't think that it's going to be a quick solution because as you say, they're going to be all sorts of infrastructural requirements and all sorts of knock on costs that won't be accounted for. So at least let's heed those lessons

when we imagine the potential of technologies that you know, at least because nobody's yet asked the questions look like magic bullets. Can I bring in another example of sort of technological optimism that's being discussed a bit within the UK? Cause it's something I've got a little bit fixated on, and I want to get your thoughts on it.

**Shobita** [09:12] Yeah.

**Jack** [09:13] So, um, as you'll know in the UK we're having rather an exciting set of discussions about Brexit. I'd say not exciting. Um, but one of the interesting things for people like us, one of the interesting things that sort of sat behind that discussion at the moment, we have a government who say, you know, once Brexit is out of their way, the second thing on their priority list is science. Now this is probably because they want to be able to tell an optimistic story about the future of Britain. Um, it probably has a massive dollop of what David Edgerton would call techno nationalism, right? The idea that you can claim scientific and technological achievements for the nation. In fact, Boris Johnson actually said that he wants the life saving cancer treatments of tomorrow to say, discovered and made in Britain, which is sort of techno nationalism, red in tooth and call.

**Jack** [10:10] Um, but as part of that, you know, there's been more and more attention focused and focused by scientists as well on a sort of very interesting man behind the scenes. Uh, sort of éminence grise, a guy called Dominic Cummings who a few of us had been utterly fascinated by and he's a huge fan of turning Britain into a sort of new Silicon Valley. He's a huge fan of being able to tell a story about, about science and the way that that can help Britain write its future. He basically has utter disdain for anything that he regards his bureaucracy and he sees science and technology as sort of disruptive to that. Some scientists have been saying, Oh, isn't it great to have somebody right at the heart of power who really gets science and he wants to talk about Elon Musk and talk about Google and at a time at which you know, the suspicion is that a bunch of politicians are trained in classics and philosophy and they don't understand science and they don't understand scientists and therefore science is going to be unloved by the future government. And I guess my point would be, be careful what you wish for, scientists, because the sort of disrupter character may not be a friend for long.

**Shobita** [11:23] I mean it's fascinating for a lot of reasons, but I guess the first, the first question I have is does he really get science? I mean this image of science as hyper disruptive and all about innovation and tech. I'm not sure it's actually about science, but it's also not the picture of normal science. What it seems to me, a friend of science is, is a, is someone who understands that there's lots of failures and successes and occasionally you might be successful, but it requires coordination and collaboration and infrastructure. Um, who is supportive of that edifice of science and not the kind of flash in the pan that seems like it's setting up as you said, be careful what you wish for if that's what you envisioned science to be.

**Jack** [12:01] Totally, totally. I think, you know, being a friend of science in most cases is a relatively boring thing, right? It involves recognizing that actually, you know, long-term stable

funding provided in a way that yes, targets what a society needs but also allows for serendipity is a rather boring bureaucratic endeavor a lot of the time. And it's not, the model that Dominic Cummings is so keen on is DARPA, right? It's the idea that, well if only, we had agencies that were able to take risks and fund exciting things and occasionally they would lead to great Ayn Randian heroes. Like Elon Musk would benefit from some of that largess and go on and spin it up and create world changing companies. That's the model. It's not the sort of classic National Science Foundation.

**Shobita** [12:58] So then it seems to me like a lot of this, again to tie it to back to the Gates and NIH, is about a kind of techno optimism let's say more broadly and also about perhaps rallying the troops in an environment of extreme anxiety and uncertainty around Brexit. And I'm just wondering if you think that's what's partially going on, what's behind this? Is it about trying to at least get some of the elites who might be enticed by this vision on board or is it genuine? Is it something else that he thinks this is going to be the ticket for Britain post European Union?

**Jack** [13:38] I think that is a part about that. There is a part about what does Britain's national project look like once we are apparently free from the shackles of the European Union that these people think have been holding us back all this time and being able to tell a story about Britain's progress.

**Jack** [13:53] But part of it is also genuinely what Dominic Cummings believes. And we know this because he has the most extraordinary thing. Before he came into government before Boris Johnson invited him in. This is his power behind the throne if you like. Um, Dominic Cummings maintained an extraordinary blog, dominiccummings.com go and have a read of it because there are thousands and hundreds of thousands of words on what he thinks about various things where he rails against class structures. He rails against what he sees as a grotesquely old fashioned and ineffectual civil service and in Britain. And he thinks, well, if only government can be a bit more scientific. And I don't think he means scientific in the sense of, um, that we were just talking about, you know, sort of careful experimentation. I think he means in a sense of, you know, uh, giving individuals more autonomy and being able to, you know, bust things up and tear things down whenever it suits them without so much reliance on institutions.

**Jack** [14:48] So he does, he genuinely thinks this stuff. Now clearly in British politics at the moment, the eventual outcome means that given that nobody has actually done any policy making for a couple of years, um, much to the misery of, of millions of Britons, the most likely outcome perhaps is this vision never gets to be realized. Um, but it's quite interesting to think through what the realization of such a vision would be and how it would meet the sorts of naturally more institutionally conservative instincts of civil service policy makers. But yeah, tell us about about the guest this month should be, because I was gutted to miss this conversation because I think she's absolutely fascinating, and the work she's been producing has been extraordinary.

**Shobita** [15:30] Yeah. So I spoke to Ruha Benjamin who is a professor at Princeton University and she published a book, Race After Technology: Abolitionists Tools for the New Jim Code, and we focus mostly on that book. But I think what's amazing about Ruha and the interview is that she is able to bring together ideas that you and I talk about and think about a lot in science and technology studies or science, technology and society. And she brings them into conversation with critical race studies, thinking in nuanced and sophisticated ways about race. We are including in our website a number of links of articles to both short and long form pieces that she's written, but she writes in Race After Technology as well as in these pieces to a broad audience. And what that means I think is that a broader array of people can start to understand the consequences, the real consequences and in her case the racial consequences of innovation and modern technology. And as we've been talking about these ideas of techno utopianism or techno optimism, she grapples with squarely and and does so in a way that's accessible to all of us. So I'm really excited about the interview.

## Interview

**Shobita** [16:49] Hi Ruha!

**Ruha** [16:51] Hi Shobita!

**Shobita** [16:53] I am so excited to talk to you today and you deserve double congratulations because you have two books coming out. Thank you. Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code and Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life. But I wanted to focus mostly on the one that you authored singly.. And maybe the best place to start is what inspired you to write it?

**Ruha** [17:22] So I think, you know, there's kind of a longer genealogy and set of interests that I carry over from my first book project on the social dimensions of regenerative medicine and stem cell research that were just sort of percolating and were kind of always there about how power and science converge thinking about the democratic context or lack thereof around science and technology. So there were kind of interests that were always there that then I sort of channel into this arena of the data sciences and machine learning and AI. But the more immediate sort of origin story is that a couple of years ago I was just noticing a number of headlines, a first kind of round of headlines that we're trying to draw attention to the problem of what people call machine bias or algorithmic discrimination. And the way that it was being framed, I think as a kind of hook into the conversation was, um, around the problem space of racist robots.

**Ruha** [18:22] And so a lot of the headlines were sort of initially sort of surprise and the stories were how could this be, how can the robots, how can the technology be racist? And then very quickly I saw a kind of shift to a framing that was kind of started from the premise that of

course the technology is racist if their designers, or the context in which they're designed are inequitable and racist. And so it kind of evolved. And I kind of followed the popular framing of this and then I sat back and thought about how this field that you and I both are part of science and technology studies has been thinking about these kinds of questions for a long time. Perhaps not as much about the racial dimensions of science and technology, but certainly more broadly around the social dimensions. And so my motivation was to put this field of science and technology in conversation with this popular problem space of racist robots and to think about what our field has to offer in that conversation.

**Shobita** [19:22] So the subtitle and one of the themes throughout the book is, um, you talk about the new jim code and I'm just wondering if you can tell us what you mean by that.

**Ruha** [19:33] Absolutely. And so the new jim code, the kind of short definition of that is the combination of coded inequity. And so specifically thinking about how computer coding programming is coupled with, um, an imagined objectivity around technology. And so how social and racial harms can be perpetuated within a veneer of objectivity and neutrality that in many ways makes it more dangerous and more concerning than forms of racial oppression in the past where, especially in hindsight, it's kind of more obvious who the protagonists are, who the agents are in racial domination, we can point to specific laws or judges or institutions that perpetuate it. And now where we kind of, are outsourcing decisions in almost every arena of our lives, whether it's health care, employment, criminal justice, you know, almost every arena is using automated decision-making.

**Ruha** [20:35] Often the way that it's framed is to make better decisions, less biased decisions, more efficient, um, judgments. And so it's this process of outsourcing decision-making without really thinking what goes into that, what's shaping these automated decision making systems and the role, especially that prior forms of racial discrimination, racial oppression play as a starting point for this new system of the new jim code. And so the new jim code has a lot of, I think of as like cousin concepts because there are a number of scholars and thinkers that are, are sort of converging around this problem space. So we can think about Virginia Eubanks' work around automated inequality in what she calls the digital poor house or Safia Noble's idea of algorithms of oppression and technological redlining. And so there's a number of ways in which people are trying to conceptualize it. So by naming it the new jim code, I really want to draw attention to the historical undercurrents, the historical inputs, shall we say, into this new fangled form of racial and social control.

**Shobita** [21:41] One of the things that you do so nicely in the book is to categorize those historical inputs as you say. Uh, in terms of engineered inequity, default discrimination, coded exposure, and technological benevolence. Can you kind of give us a sense of what that scaffolding does for you?

**Ruha** [21:59] Yeah, so you know, when I started, you know, again, I was motivated to differentiate and to think about the various forms of coded inequity along a spectrum from the

most obvious that things that we see where the designers and the people who are implementing it are very um, self conscious about this. This, we're creating this to create hierarchy and to create difference among different types of groups and to reward some people and to penalize some people. So where the harm we could say is much more obvious and explicit and then kind of moving along the spectrum to think about not only does it get to a point like default discrimination where there the people who are designing it and implementing it are just kind of ignoring the social context.

**Ruha** [22:47] So it's not that they're being explicit about trying to harm and create hierarchy, but they're ignoring these historical inputs and thereby replicating it too. Then we think about coded exposure where there is a kind of ambivalence because there's a potential for harm, but also the people who are potentially harmed can often experience some at least short term forms of benefit and recognition through this kind of coded exposure where say if the default settings of a lot of technology and media is whiteness, you know, so to add some color adds some racial representation and on the surface it seems like progress, right? And so we think about facial recognition. If the default setting is whiteness in this facial recognition system, can't differentiate among black faces then it might seem like progress to say, Hey, let's train it to differentiate black faces better. But at the same time the ambivalence enters because the better it gets at differentiating black faces, it can become more harmful in terms of the systems in which it's employed, whether it's policing or other forms of surveillance.

**Ruha** [23:51] And so coded exposures, trying to name that ambivalence where there is some seemingly some benefit in the short term, but the harms are still percolating to the, the last dimension of this spectrum that I call technological benevolence, where the people who are creating it and implementing are really self conscious about trying to redress historical forms of bias and inequity. The purpose of the technology, at least the stated purpose is to do exactly the opposite of what the people in the first part of the spectrum are. We're just trying to create hierarchy, hou're trying to actually be better than humans and it's an acknowledgement of human discrimination and biases. But even in that context, I point out the different ways in which, um, racism and other forms of inequity can still be reproduced even if the intentions are to do the opposite. And so these different concepts are just trying to name, different ways in which coded inequity takes shape so that we can just have a more well-developed vocabulary to have the conversation and then ultimately to create the interventions that we need to create more just forms of design.

**Shobita** [25:02] What was so interesting about what you were saying before was that you were tracking this movement from the question of how can robots be racist to the, of course robots are racist and here are solutions, right? It seems to me like certainly the latter two that you talked about, coded exposure and technological benevolence are perceived solutions, right? But you in the book point out the problems and limitations with those as solutions. So what are the solutions that we tend to think of as solving that problem and what do you think are potentially better solutions?

**Ruha** [25:38] Yeah. I think one of the pitfalls that I am trying to wrestle with, especially in the latter half of the book, is you know, the way that when the problem is defined solely in terms of technology creating bias or the robots as the source of bias as opposed to the humans that create the robots or the institutions that incentivize the creation of those robots.

**Ruha** [26:01] So the larger social infrastructure when we point to the only the devices or the technology as a source, then the solution becomes narrowly defined also in terms of creating a technical fix for that technologically defined problem. And so part of what I'm trying to open up is to think much more broadly about the process in the context of tech design and that when we limit our focus to a new app for this or a new technological system to address let's say bias in policing or, or inequality in education simply by narrowly defining it in these ways, we're limiting the scope and the effectiveness of whatever kind of intervention, and so partly what the book is a call to is to broaden the frame of just design, which implicitly also says that we have to think carefully about who is part of the process. It just can't be the people who have that sort of technological knowhow.

**Ruha** [27:00] It also has to be the people who are most affected by it, especially those who are adversely affected by new developments. Um, it has to be the communities these folks live in. And so a lot of the solutions that I, specific organizations and interventions that I point to, are people who are working in community whose work around tech justice is grounded in specific locales rather than sort of overarching principle statements or simply the passage of a law that is sort of disconnected from the day to day life of people who are engaging with these technologies.

**Shobita** [27:37] One of the most beautiful examples in the book is a comparative one between Jay-Z's, I guess Jay-Z's funded app Promise and the kind of imagination of Appolition. Yeah. And I'm wondering if you can talk about those two in comparison to one another because I think that that really brings out what you're trying to do because it's on its face, right? Promise seems like it has a lot of promise and only in contrast with this other imaginary, do you really clearly see the problems?

**Ruha** [28:14] Absolutely. And so you know what you're referring to, like these two apps, right? So like you said, on the surface they seem very similar. Like, so if we were doing a comparative study of it, it would be like comparing apples to apples on one level, right? Where they're both apps that are in some way or another trying to address the crisis of hyper incarceration and the new Jim Crow. Right? And so one is a, an app that you know, is being developed by a kind of startup in collaboration with various municipalities, getting a lot of startup funding, Jay-Z being one of the contributors. But when you look a little more closely, like under the hood to see who is supporting it and what do they hope to gain and how is this app circulating in the world.

**Ruha** [28:59] One of the things that's quite striking is the way that it streamlines and facilitates even better surveillance of those people who are either being let out on parole or who

are being monitored pretrial. And so it seems like it's addressing the problem of the caging of people, right? That's part and parcel of mass incarceration by saying you don't have to stay in the cage. You know, this app will let us monitor you and check in. And, and so on. Um, but when you start to look closer at it, it's just a high tech form of surveillance that seems more humane but is not. And then you look at Appolition, which has a very different circulation where in case, again, it's trying to get people out of cages where an individual who downloads the app, all of their spare change will go towards a bail funds.

**Ruha** [29:49] But these bail funds are being managed by local organizations that have long been doing the work of abolition. And that's where it gets its name. Trying to help individuals who cannot afford bail, which, you know, the vast majority of people being held in jails in the U.S. um, are there because they can't afford the bail, not because they've been convicted of anything. It's like pretrial. And so these organizations have been doing this work and so this app Appolition helps facilitate that, gets more people involved. And the money that's generated through this app doesn't go back into the system. It's actually recycled, you know, once an individual's out, that money's still in circulation. And so one of the key distinctions between a reform, what abolitionists call a non reformist reform, a reform that we can get behind versus a reform that is a short term fix is that it's not an investment in the expansion of the carceral system. And so if your reform is putting more money back into the system and making it bigger and more effective than it's not a true abolitionists tool. And so putting these two in contrast allows us to see in finer grain what are the underlying principles that we should be looking to, but also what is the underlying social infrastructure? What are the organizations or companies or individuals that are getting behind and supporting this as one way of delineating and also deciding which ones we're going to get behind.

**Shobita** [31:16] One of the things that seems key, you sort of mentioned this, but I wanted to put a fine point on it, is that you're also talking about changing the relations of power and particularly empowering new actors in this space. Right. Um, community organizations to be central in thinking about technology when those decisions might have been made inside of companies or laboratories or maybe in conversation with, as you said, municipalities. And I'm wondering, so I know that you give talks or engage quite a bit with technologists and policymakers to some degree and I'm wondering how did they receive this kind of information? Let's say, I know I'm kind of resisting the word critique because I think you're doing much more than that.

**Ruha** [32:04] Yeah, I mean it's a great question and this is part of like the worst that I see the book doing is actually, it's like a conversation starter to put me in more of those conversations to gather a new set of data about how organizations and individuals are, are like how they're taking this sort of intervention. And so I'll just say, I'll probably be better able to answer this in a year. The more that I talk about it, right? But even right now, one of, if I have a few impressions, one is that I'm finding more and more individuals, um, who work within the tech industry for whom this intervention set of critiques is resonant, who are thinking more critically about their responsibility and their role within the industry. And we see examples of this through,

you know, the movement Tech Won't Build It as well as other tech worker led movements in which they're pushing their companies to not just be more ethical but to think about the political and social dimensions of the various contracts, whether it be with the military or with ICE and various surveillance technologies who are pushing from within.

**Ruha** [33:12] So I see a lot more individuals, and kind of, organizing around this much more than when I started the project. And so even within the last two years, I feel like there's been a very palpable shift where this no longer feels like a critique from the outside kind of throwing stones at a glass building. But I feel a lot more comradery and solidarity from across the tech sector. Now that doesn't say that the organizations and the companies themselves are receptive to it. But there's a critical mass growing, I think within the tech industry. And one of the specific kind of regulatory challenges I think we have to push for is to have those individuals who are whistleblowers and who are calling attention to this protected within these spaces. Because what we saw with Google and other places, the more that workers are raising their voices and signing petitions and walking out and doing all of these actions, um, they're also in danger of being fired and having other kind of retroactively actions against them.

**Ruha** [34:14] So we need safeguards against that to actually enable that kind of activity. And so what I'm kind of saying is that I distinguish in my mind the receptivity among a number of data scientists and programmers and technologists of all sorts and the companies themselves, which I think are likely to be much more resistant. Who by the way, are very adept at giving lip service to all of this, whether it's community based, whatever. Um, but in, in practice their actual policies and the way that they move in the world are quite antithetical to that kind of empowerment that I described towards the end of the book.

**Shobita** [34:52] What do you think has changed over the last couple of years that has led to this increased enlightenment? <laughter>

**Ruha** [35:02] You know, it's interesting, you know, I, I have my folk theories. I think part of the political shift with Trump's administration, you have just a lot more people who, you know, can't really take for granted that the government or the policies that are being rolled out in their name that you just feel like there's a greater sense of harm and danger politically.

**Ruha** [35:25] And I feel like I'm, when it comes to ICE for example, and it comes to military contracts, people who might have been say, let's say under the Obama regime sort of lulled into a false of progress that we're making, as people just seem much more alert to the fact that we can't take these things for granted. And so one of my reservations though about relying solely on kind of tech worker driven movement building around tech justice is that, you know, so much of the surveillance and surveillance technologies that we're seeing gain public attention when it comes to migrants and comes to the border were already being rolled out and used in black and Latinx communities, you know, by police and everyday forms of surveillance and caging that we didn't see a tech worker movement around. Right? And so if we rely only on the conviction and the enlightenment of, you know, tech workers as the driver of change, then it's going to be fickle

in some ways and only determined by what those individuals care about, what gets their attention, what is sort of repulsive to them. And I think we can't rely solely on that. And especially thinking about the use of carceral technologies in black communities. I think that so much of what we're seeing now has these precedents that no one really cared about or talked about a few years ago.

**Shobita** [36:52] You're raising a really important point, which is that we're often relying on the individuals both moral code, but also ability to see the technology in a nuanced way. And I'm wondering what for you, maybe from your teaching or from your research, are there go-to primers that you might give someone that you would say, listen, you should rely to some degree on your own sense of discomfort or yuck factor, but there's more to it than that?

**Ruha** [37:23] Um, yeah. One of the things that I'm sort of doing in the book is bringing together this popular angst, the kind of tech worker, you know, ethical, moral, sort of fervor in conversation with these intellectual fields, both science and technology studies, but also critical race studies. Because one of the things that that does is that it shows that there's one, this longer precedent, this longer genealogy, that if we both as academics and activists engage more deeply with, then there's certain things that we might have seen coming that we wouldn't just rely on sort of a Trump administration to bring to a head. But we would've seen and been organizing around these things, perhaps under an Obama administration as well. And so partly it's to really immerse ourselves in these intellectual traditions that are always on the lookout and can show us when things are coming, but also be connected to community organizations and not simply ones that are about like creating tech literacy or making tech more diverse but are working, you know, in terms of empowering communities around, you know, housing and food and healthcare.

**Ruha** [38:33] So for me, one of the things I'm hoping to do with the book is to connect these longstanding organizing traditions, intellectual traditions with those who are newly alarmed with the tech dimensions of it, but to show that the larger social dimensions are already there and there've been people working in critiquing and organizing around it. So it's not like we have to reinvent the wheel every time some new like sinister surveillance technology comes on the scene because there are people, and here my colleague's, Simone Browne's work is critical. You know, I would say, look at this book, *Dark Matters* that shows that the technology doesn't create the surveillance, right? There's a social context in which black bodies have always posed a threat in this nation. And there have been old school forms of surveillance well before the digital age that have been targeted towards keeping track and controlling and oppressing black people that then get a new dimension in the digital age.

**Ruha** [39:33] But that book to me does a really good job of showing the historical precedents and how racism creates the desire and the need for technologies of surveillance, not the other way around. And so it shows us how the social context produces technology that then seem inevitable. And so we should really keep our eye on the social context and not just follow every new technology that comes on the scene. And I think one of the byproducts of that shift in

focus where we're not just like chasing every new device or every new harmful system or whatever, but keeping our eyes more broadly attuned to the social context is that it also widens the terrain of who we think of as experts or important to be part of the conversation and the interventions. Because if you just limit it to the technology as the problem, then also your solutions become about how do we only create better technologies?

**Ruha** [40:30] And so there's only some people who have that expertise, right? And so that's part of like what I'm thinking about with techno benevolence is that when you look at the larger social field as generating certain kinds of harms and harmful technologies, then it means that you have to actually engage the people, the organizations that have long been in those trenches as sources of expertise and insight that it's like we would call a, you know, a mandatory passageway. You have to talk to people that are engaged in these arenas as well, not just simply the tech people.

**Shobita** [41: 02] Right. I mean I think you're going from, you know, a technical fix to a social problem, to a technical fix, to a technical problem. But what you're saying is no, there needs to be a social fix to the technical problem. Technical fixes are seductive, right? Because they appear simple both in terms of the technical dimensions of the fix itself but also in terms of having clearly delineated expert communities who can opine on the fix itself. What you are suggesting is much more complex obviously and veers into the unknown. So how do you make the case to someone who is lured by the technical fix that actually a social fix is what we really need to be thinking about here.

**Ruha** [41:47] Part of the case may be that we look to prior examples of technical fixes that may have addressed something for a short time, but where the larger problem resurfaced or reemerged so to show, the inadequacy of those historically so that we can think a new about whether we really want to be effective. And as you say, like where I ended up in the book is a much more diffuse set of interventions where my real motivation is to draw more and varied people, communities, insights into this problem space. Because I don't think the people that think of themselves as experts, whether it's the philosopher or the ethicist who's being hired by this or that company, I think that those become placeholders for more substantive change. They become something you can put on the website and say, we have this ethics committee or this philosopher in chief, or whatever it is.

**Ruha** [42:45] And you know, the underlying social inequities and power dynamics remain the same. And so you don't get the same gratification both in reading and also meet in writing the book where I can say, okay, here's the 10 point platform, here's the formula, here's the fix, here's the gadget. Because you don't have that, because I don't think that that's how the problem operates. And so the solution I think has to be, as you say, much more open ended. And it has to do with not only policies and regulations, but it has to do with a culture shift. And also thinking about process over the products that we might want to create that are better. And so partly when I'm sort of deconstructing in the last part of the book is just even how we think about innovation. Like who are the innovators? Is that that individual who created the app or is it

this larger social movement that's actually pushing for really substantive forms of decarceration. And so I think we have to rethink kind of our fundamental concepts and our imagination of what innovation is, where it happens. And you know, what use it is, if it's, you know, not really getting us to the kind of world that's livable for everyone.

**Shobita** [43:56] The fact that there is this growing political consciousness, I hope that that means that the kinds of more complicated stories and solutions, the fixes that you're talking about, might reach a more receptive audience.

**Ruha** [44:10] Yeah, I'm optimistic just because I've had a chance to talk to some of the people, individuals working from within the tech industries and what it feels to me, like the way that I think about it sometimes they're like, these are people who, you know, ended up in STEM fields but who were exposed to something akin to STS and sociology, and a critical lens as let's say students are in their communities where they are bringing together what I'm trying to do in the book. They're already bringing it together in their worldviews and in their conception of like, their role in the world. And so I see the seeds of this kind of pedagogy and these critical interventions blossoming now in this tech worker movement. So it seems really genuine and like it's going to be long lasting. It's not something where Twitter, you know, hashtag something that's going to fade very quickly.

**Ruha** [45:03] I think these are people who really care about justice and equity, who are pushing for some of these policy changes and just culture changes in terms of how we imagine technology in relation to society.

**Shobita** [45:15] So maybe to shift gears a little bit, but I noticed that you are involved and you started this Just Data lab. Yeah, I think it probably ties to a lot of what we've talked about, but I'd love to know what it is and what you envision with that. Yeah, I was really inspired by participating in the inaugural Data for Black Lives conference at MIT and this was a conference that brought together all kinds of technologists, community organizers, academics, and so it created a space for this kind of conversation that rarely happens where we bring these different people together. And again, all people kind of motivated to think about how do we channel knowledge, data, storytelling, narrative, etc, towards justice and equity in all kinds of contexts and healthcare and law, et cetera, et cetera.

**Ruha** [46:06] And so participating in that just really motivated me to create a kind of local version of that that would create a space. And for me, the other kind of set of insights and communities that I am incorporating in the Just Data lab is um, artists and creatives of different sorts to participate in both the critique and creating different models of knowledge production. And so it's my effort to kind of move beyond like pointing out the problem of biased data or discriminatory design to create a context in which we can actually generate knowledge and data that highlights the problem, yes, but actually also is in concert with communities doing this kind of work that can be really useful for all kinds of things. It's something that's just getting started.

And I really want to include students and have a class that is not just a class at the university that can be adopted in various kinds of settings and workshops.

**Ruha** [47:05] That is about bringing together people with different kinds of expertise and knowledge and skills to generate data and information and knowledge that is a contributor to this larger movement for black lives. It sounds like that is in some ways maybe de-centering the technology as part of the vision. Is that...

**Ruha** [47:25] Yeah, exactly. It kind of goes back to what we're talking about in terms of the importance of paying attention to the process of who's included, who's participating is as important as like whatever the interventions are, end points are to what we imagined we want to do.

**Shobita** [47:42] So I suspect that in the coming weeks you'll be spending quite a bit of time talking about this book in various places, but I'm wondering beyond that sort of what are your next steps, next projects? What are you thinking about going forward?

**Ruha** [47:55] There's a project that I kind of put on the back burner a couple of years ago when I started working on this Race After Technology and the edited volume, which brings me back to thinking about genetics, race, identity, power, and so I'm going to turn the fire back up on that project. I'm sort of wrestling with like kind of what to do with that, but tentatively called the emperor's new genes. It's about belonging, biopolitics, borders, and thinking about the way that genetics gets enrolled in various kinds of identity projects and national identity projects, sovereignty claims and so on. But also in terms of the policing of individual identity, you know, in terms of migration and in terms of, um, indigeneity.

**Shobita** [48:39] I wonder, I mean then this gets back to one of the things that I really like about Race After Technology. What lessons has that kind of expansive view provided for then going back to thinking about the genetic side of things?

**Ruha** [48:54] You know, I think that that's a question that I'm sort of just picking up and thinking about. Okay, so now that I did this, how is it going to inform the next project? One of the things that I'm considering is to be much more explicit about developing this idea of speculative methods and thinking about creativity and the imagination as part of science and technology. And so like that's always been a kind of undercurrent and an interest. Um, but one of the things I'm considering is really developing at least part of this emperor's new genes project, thinking about the role of imagination and not just imagination as a force for good, but also the various kinds of dystopias and you know, power laden imaginaries that shape the deployment of genetics as a tool for policing identity, policing borders. And so like one thought is to perhaps take some actual headlines about genetics and the use of genetics and various kinds of policies and to write about them in a creative mode, like developing a story out of a headline that shows, you know, the competing kind of imaginaries that often gets flattened in the telling of a new story, right?

**Ruha** [50:11] And so bringing it to life in a more speculative, imaginative mode. And I've experimented with this a little bit in other contexts. I have a couple of stories and fictional field notes up on my website that were just initial forays into this arena. And so I'm thinking about whether to draw that out a bit more and to employ a bit more rigor around the creative dimensions of science and storytelling in this next, um, project.

**Shobita** [50:37] That sounds so interesting and exciting for you.

**Ruha** [50:42] Thanks.

**Shobita** [50:44] Is there anything else that you wanted to mention that I may have forgotten to, or...

**Ruha** [50:49] No, I'm just so glad that like my first book interview was with you.

**Shobita** [50:52] Me too!

**Ruha** [50:54] I really appreciate it.

**Shobita** [50:55] It was such perfect timing.

**Ruha** [50:57] Yeah. So perfect.

**Shobita** [51:00] All right, well, thank you so much. Ruha.

**Ruha** [51:02] My pleasure, thanks Shobita!