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Prologue

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“Who is your community?”*

Rigo asked this question when he interviewed me for my postdoctoral position at Data & Society in February 2020. Among all the questions that I have answered at different job interviews, this one has stuck with me for two reasons. First, the question simultaneously demands a deep sense of self as well as others. You can only answer it when you place yourself in relation to others. Second, the research journey of PhD candidates, like me at the time, tends to be lonely. No one usually knows as much as you about your topic of research; the challenge is to translate what you know into what others might care about. So, the question about your community is also a question about who might care about your work. At the time, I put my academic hat on and answered by talking about the conferences I attended and the research groups I was a part of. Ever since, I have not been able to let go of the feeling that this answer was incomplete.

My contribution to the collaborative effort that brought this anthology together came from a desire to build *a community of storytellers and listeners living with data and artificial intelligence (AI)-based systems in the majority world*. There is a lot of terminology to unpack here; the rest of this prologue is dedicated to it. But a good place to begin is to highlight that this anthology and the wonderful people involved in it answer the question—*who is my community*—at a much larger scale than I could have imagined more than two years ago.

- * Rigo’s original formulation of this question was, “Who are your people?” It drew inspiration from the first meeting between Stephanie Dinkins and Bina48, an advanced social robot. Dinkins asked this question “along with questions about race, love and relationship. Bina48 preferred to talk about singularity and consciousness.” See, Stephanie Dinkins, “Conversations with Bina48.” Stephanie Dinkins Studio. Accessed August 30, 2022. <https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/conversations-with-bina48.html>. Bina48 was also used as a convening device to parse through applications for the AI Assembly workshop hosted at Data & Society during Dinkins’ artist fellowship in 2018. Ranjit’s reformulation of the question points to the tension between hearing and listening. What someone hears may not be what they retain/remember. Listening is the ground for a response, but it may not align with what was said and meant to be heard. The back and forth in a conversation is often organized around repairing the breakdowns that emerge from the tensions between hearing and listening. Yet, on occasions it can also be a generative ground for discovery of new meanings and future action.

Mapping AI in the global south

This project didn't begin with community. It didn't begin with storytelling, either. The project began as an effort to map the ongoing debates over appropriation of digital IDs, national digital identity infrastructures, and associated AI-based systems for development in the global south. Tensions over the meaning and implications of the concept of "development" is a good example of such debates. Development is often associated with circulation of economic resources and technological interventions as aid from "developed" to "developing" worlds. Debates over this circulation are grounded in contests over implied assumptions of what it means to be "modern," "efficient," and "developed." Digital IDs have become the new site for these contests.

Digital IDs have been the focus of my research for years now. I have been interested in how assigning digital IDs to a population has become the infrastructural groundwork for establishing the relationship between data and people.⁽¹⁾ This process is central to ongoing work around digitalization and datafication in the majority of countries in the world to develop and appropriate AI-based systems as examples of "leapfrogging" into modernity. Particularly in the context of state-citizen relations, digital IDs are also implicated in the process of verifying legal identity through which people establish their relationship with the state, such as claiming the status of a citizen or immigrant or refugee. Associating digital identity with legal identity raises its own set of debates around recognition, privacy, surveillance, data protection, and vendor lock-in.⁽²⁾ There was and continues to be a rich set of concepts to be mapped at the intersection of emergent digital IDs and associated AI-based systems in the global south. These include keywords* and argument patterns⁽³⁾ made for and against these developments. A good example here is polarization of arguments over the purpose of identification between the two keywords: recognition and surveillance.⁽⁴⁾ I began mapping such keywords and argument patterns through

* My interest in keywords was inspired by the work of mapping the conceptual vocabulary of culture and society through keywords in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1985). In parallel, Noopur Raval and Amba Kak were also curating the conceptual vocabulary of critical AI discourse at the AI Now Institute in early 2021. See, AI Now Institute, "A New AI Lexicon: Responses and Challenges to the Critical AI Discourse," Curated by Noopur Raval and Amba Kak, with editorial support from Luke Strathmann, 2021, <https://medium.com/a-new-ai-lexicon>.

a literature survey* and interviews with researchers and practitioners.

The study of keywords for AI led me to consider the term “AI” itself. There are many good reasons to avoid using the term “AI.” For one, it is increasingly turning into an empty signifier that hides more than it clarifies.⁽⁵⁾ However, for our purposes, AI is useful precisely because of how often agency is ascribed to computational systems in everyday life. During fieldwork in India, I came across many variations of the argument—street-level bureaucrats want to help citizens, but their computers will not let them. In some cases, it was a genuine expression of helplessness, in others it was a way to pass accountability to computers. In either case, this folk explanation of computational agency is increasingly becoming a motif in stories of everyday experiences of living with data. On some occasions, what is called “AI” takes the explicit form of recommendation or decision-making systems; on other occasions, it is much more subtly produced in the messy reality of how individuals contend with the presence of these systems in their lives. The storytellers in this anthology further showcase the occasions and forms in which this so-called *intelligence* manifests.

AI as a tool

Mapping the conceptual vocabulary of AI in the global south quickly took me away from keywords such as bias and fairness,⁽⁶⁾ accountability,⁽⁷⁾ transparency,⁽⁸⁾ explainable AI,⁽⁹⁾ and responsible AI.⁽¹⁰⁾ These keywords are ubiquitous in ethical AI conversations in the global north. There are many similar thematic concerns in the global south,⁽¹¹⁾ but there are also considerable divergences.⁽¹²⁾ These divergences were not surprising per se. After all, the concerns around data and AI diverge considerably across countries. What I find more notable is a key similarity between these “traditional” AI ethics keywords: all of them are grounded in thinking about AI from a design perspective. AI is seen as a tool. And as a tool it can be embedded with features that ground a particular understanding of the concepts that drive its design. For example, decision-making models can be embedded with a particular definition

* Some of the concepts and patterns mapped through this literature survey were later repurposed to support the collaborative effort of the workshop participants in producing a reading list, see Sareeta Amrute, Ranjit Singh, and Rigoberto Lara Guzmán. “A Primer on AI in/from the Majority World: An Empirical Site and a Standpoint.” New York: Data & Society Research Institute, September 14, 2022. The survey has grown ever since with contributions from the workshop participants and is available in the form of a public Zotero library: https://www.zotero.org/groups/4504962/ai_infrom_the_majority_world.

of fairness; they can be designed to formulate a particular kind of explanation for their recommendations or decisions. In designing for these concepts in AI-based systems, the hope is to control what such systems do in the world, to purposefully work toward certain outcomes while minimizing others.

AI as an everyday experience

In contrast, the conceptual vocabulary of scholars in/from the global south focuses more explicitly on how these systems work for some, often at the expense of others, but not for everyone. The challenges of contending with AI are often mirrored in mundane moments of everyday life where people navigate inequities in power relations along well-recognized intersections of gender, race, class, caste, and ability. AI is increasingly treated as a part of everyday life. Its unevenness is articulated through a spectrum of keywords and frameworks such as postcolonial computing,⁽¹³⁾ decolonial computing,⁽¹⁴⁾ data extractivism,⁽¹⁵⁾ data colonialism,⁽¹⁶⁾ indigenous data sovereignty,⁽¹⁷⁾ dignity,⁽¹⁸⁾ solidarity,⁽¹⁹⁾ and data justice.⁽²⁰⁾ These keywords offer a vocabulary to think through the challenges of digitalization and infrastructure building in the majority of the countries in the world.

At the same time, these keywords also capture the everyday experiences of living with data and AI. For example, dealing with an issue like “the server or the network is down” is not simply a hardware or infrastructural challenge, it is also a reflection of how AI-based systems unevenly layer over unequal social structures. For some it is a minor inconvenience, for others it is a matter of losing a day of work waiting in line for welfare entitlements that are only granted after digital authentication of their identity. Such experiences often manifest in the everyday struggles to interface with both the inputs and outputs of data-driven systems. Mundane moments of seeking alignment with inputs can be extractive and motivate claims to sovereignty and justice; experiences of contending with uneven outputs often instigate solidarity and are implicated in concerns around dignity. In using these concepts to describe living with data and AI, the aim becomes less about design specifications and more about surfacing inequalities and violence within specific social structures that AI-based systems perpetuate. Critique is only the beginning here; ongoing developments in this field—concepts as diverse as ubuntu,⁽²¹⁾ buen vivir,⁽²²⁾ and the pluriverse⁽²³⁾—aim to propose new avenues for action.

Planning an academic workshop

Mapping this emergent, epistemically rich, and diverse research field of AI in/from the global south is not a singular task. It requires a community, and community grows with seeds of collaboration. Collaboration between Rigo and me began over conversations on organizing an academic workshop to engage with researchers and practitioners: a workshop that would build a cross-disciplinary community around a common topic. Our challenge was how precisely to articulate this topic.

Rigo: *“This distinction between tool and experience is too neat. It seems ‘artificial.’ The world is too messy to exist in binaries.”*

Ranjit: *“Agreed! The distinction is just a way to orient ourselves. Mapping needs to start somewhere. It is a starting position to engage with an evolving conceptual vocabulary of AI in the global south. It would be ridiculous to say that nobody thinks of data and AI as tools in the global south, or that struggles of living with these systems don’t get attention in the global north. It is just that their conceptual vocabulary tends to emphasize different concerns and these concerns map onto different ways of thinking about AI.”*

Rigo: *“What role do you see for this position in the workshop? Workshops are designed to gather a community around a theme. The challenge is to describe a theme such that it is broad and specific at the same time. Broad to ensure that people can see their work (represented) in the theme and specific to ensure the conversation has purpose.”*

Ranjit: *“Broad would be an understatement if the workshop’s theme is AI and the global south. I have been having a hard time making it specific. So, in terms of positionality, I want to focus more explicitly on everyday experiences of living with data and AI. Something along the lines of dispatches from the field when you’re doing fieldwork or stories that you often use to explain some aspect of your research or just fieldnotes. The most interesting parts of the interviews that I have been doing is when people tell me stories from their research. But I am not sure that this is specific enough.”*

Rigo: *“If the focus is on everyday experiences, then stories are more accessible than field notes for submissions. We all tell stories. So, anybody with a good story can submit to participate in the workshop. It is often the call for submissions that make workshops specific. For example, if the call is for paper drafts, you will likely get academic participants. Stories will open this space. Practitioners have stories; workers have stories.”*

Ranjit: *“We can call it a storytelling workshop.”*

Rigo: *“Yes, storytelling is specific enough for a workshop call because we can invite people to become storytellers, and we can invite them as listeners. Listening goes hand in hand with storytelling. We workshop the story by creating listening cohorts for each storyteller and then, we can also do a listening session when we all listen to them together.”*

Ranjit: *“Yes, that makes sense. A story is only as good as the cohort that listens to it.”*

The craft of storytelling

The workshop was always imagined as part of the work of mapping; now it centered on storytelling. Encounters with data and AI require contending with the uncertainties of navigating systems that are often only understood through their inputs and outputs. Storytelling offers a medium to make sense of these uncertainties. It provides a way to voice one’s own truth, make sense of mundane and ongoing struggles with computational systems, reconcile these struggles, and open a space for healing. Some stories can also build a shared understanding around a particular research topic while situating a shared sensibility about how a practitioner’s job is to be done. For example, Julia Angwin et al.’s story of Machine Bias⁽²⁴⁾ provides an illustrative case for teaching bias in AI ethics conversations in the United States and showcasing the role of third parties in auditing algorithmic systems. Stories have deep pedagogical value. They connect abstract concepts with real experiences. They represent a situated perspective that grounds critique. A story is more than a description. It is useful; “the usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim.”⁽²⁵⁾ A story has counsel that makes its listeners think for themselves.

Therefore, our workshop arrived at a central question: What stories do we tell of a world that has increasingly come to rely on AI-based, data-driven interventions to resolve social problems?

Descent into ordinary data-driven life

Over the past couple of years, several scholars have hosted fiction-writing workshops around AI.⁽²⁶⁾ Speculative fiction has also become a part of the methodological toolkit of researchers to think through possible future uses of AI-based technologies.⁽²⁷⁾ Speculation prompts us to engage with storytelling as a method to do research, as well as (re)present research. As Robert M. Davison writes, “In fiction, it is entirely acceptable to require the reader to fill in the missing gaps, using their imagination and thus facilitating many permutations of a storyline. In research [stories], we tend to ensure that our discussion and conclusion are firmly anchored in the data.”⁽²⁸⁾

When does a story become data? We wanted to place value in stories of ordinary, everyday experiences of living with data and AI for the workshop. When ordinary stories are valued, they become data. Placing value in ordinary stories and using them as resources to unpack living in a data-driven world was at the heart of the workshop. Ordinary is a hard concept to pin down, but beyond its import in understanding everyday routines and habits, “ordinary” is moments when we relate to others.⁽²⁹⁾ My everyday experiences are not the same as your everyday experiences. Thus, storytelling is a way to ground ourselves as listeners in the everyday of the storyteller, to engage with the ethics of living with any technology, to reflect (for example) on whether a technology’s function is a bug or a feature. For example, when the server or the network is down more often than it is up, then being down is a feature of a digital service rather than a bug. This descent into the ordinary is crucial to understanding how we are all implicated in living with data and AI—a reflection of our collectively imagined futures and contested pasts.

The search for parables of AI

Storytelling is relational; it places storytellers in a relationship with a community of listeners. It is this relationship that turns a story into a parable. A story becomes a parable when it is valued by its listeners—when they take on the responsibility of passing it on. Parables are stories that listeners can identify with; they see a part of

their own experience mirrored in it. When stories cause communities to organize or when they represent a theory within scholarship, they become parables. The power of a parable emerges from several interconnected aspects: first, they leave room for multiplicity in how we interpret them, yet they preserve a concrete reference to real life experiences. Second, they can capture a breadth of experiences in such a way that they reflect common sense.⁽³⁰⁾ Parables stick with their listeners. It is this stickiness that allows some stories to be passed on beyond the storyteller to the researcher (who may occasionally be the same person) to a community of listeners and their networks, to ultimately becoming a part of what we think is common sense in the proverbial economy⁽³¹⁾ of a social problem.

The Politics of Bridges

Among the many stories that make up Science and Technology Studies (STS) as an academic discipline, Langdon Winner's story⁽³²⁾ of racist bridges in New York remains iconic as it stands in for (or as a reference to) how politics is embedded in things. Integral to the success of this paper is the parable of Moses' Bridges. While Winner used many different examples to illustrate how technologies exhibit political properties, the story of bridges over the parkways on Long Island, New York, built under the stewardship of Robert Moses, the city planner, remains an exemplary story for how technologies can be designed to perpetuate a racist form of order.

Using evidence from Robert Caro's biography of Moses, Winner argued that Moses intentionally designed these bridges to be low so that only cars could pass through them, and buses could not. As a result, "automobile-owning whites of 'upper' and 'comfortable middle class' [...] would be free to use the parkways [and] poor people and blacks, who normally used public transit, were kept off the roads."⁽³³⁾ The bridges in Long Island materially instantiate "Moses's social-class bias and racial prejudice" and "limit access of racial minorities and low-income groups to Jones Beach, Moses's widely acclaimed public park."⁽³⁴⁾ The story is not simply an illustration of intent that permeates through the design of technologies, but it is also a reflection of the long-term consequences of such intentionality. While Long Island

bridges recede into the background of everyday life in New York, they continue to embed a distinct form of inequality that favors cars over public transit and by extension, privileges those who can afford a car over those who cannot.

Since its initial publication in 1980, this paper has been widely appropriated across academic disciplines to ground the common sense understanding of how ordinary things like bridges are deeply political. It has become a part of the proverbial economy^(35) of thinking through the politics of design and long-term consequences of design decisions. Initially, the story was critiqued for its theoretical underpinnings in drawing a straightforwardly causal relationship between the intent of a designer and the consequences of a technology. Such straightforwardness is rarely observed in practice since technological consequences are unevenly experienced and frequently diverge from their designers' intentions.^(36)

While the debate on theoretical contribution of the story continued, Bernward Joerges, a sociologist of large technical systems, put together a critique of its historical accuracy in 1999^(37) that “brought to the surface the disquiet, which [was] simmering in informal discussions for many years, about Winner’s partial seizure of Caro’s demonization of Robert Moses.”^(38) Joerges noted that for Winner’s story to hold true, two conditions must be satisfied:

First, the only way to reach the beaches were the Long Island parkways. He found that “blacks could gain physical access to Long Island beaches via many routes. [...] Even today, when many more blacks drive cars, [...] not many poor blacks seem to gather on Jones Beach. There existed then, and there exist today, many reasons for black families to go elsewhere.”^(39)

Second, Moses was pursuing racist politics in designing low-hanging bridges. He found two different explanations for low-hanging bridges: “that commercial traffic was excluded from the parkways anyway; and that the generally good transport situation on Long Island forbade the very considerable cost of raising the bridges.”^(40) He went on to provide further evidence that low-hanging bridges were the norm in America during the time. “Moses could hardly have let buses on his parkways, even if he had wanted differently.”^(41)

Was the design of low-hanging bridges intentionally biased against the poor and the blacks who used public transit more often than the rich and the whites? To look for an answer to these questions misses the point of Winner's parable, as he himself argued, "I am not interested in theories, I am interested in moral issues. My point is not explanatory, it is about political choices."⁽⁴²⁾ Winner interprets technologies as instruments of social control and situates their morality in the form of order they perpetuate. While there can be arguments made for and against Winner's argument, especially by treating technologies as contingent accomplishments, the core contribution of the parable of Moses's bridges remains a powerful story that is passed on by its listeners to teach morality of design decisions in STS courses and showcasing how STS practitioners must interpret politics of everyday things.

The search for such parables is not an individual project, nor does it end with organizing a storytelling workshop, publishing an anthology. We hope that our effort offers a step toward a broader search for parables of AI for our readers. It is this networked community that will investigate—on a planetary scale—the diverse ethics, politics, and everyday experiences of living with data and AI. Thus, we believe that the search for parables of AI is a much larger project that will: (1) explore storytelling as a research strategy to engage with the scale and complexity of living with data and AI; (2) build a networked community of experts, activists, and practitioners willing to narrate their stories and listen to stories of others; (3) curate an anthology of stories from this community; and (4) demonstrate how storytelling events and training workshops are crucial ground for public engagement in the process of developing a shared vocabulary around the uneven challenges of living with data and AI. This anthology is only one beginning.

Storytellers from the majority world

The workshop was an experiment in organizing a global online event. Online video conferencing helped us overcome some place-based challenges, but not all of them. Just a day before the workshop, we received an email from one of our listeners based in South Africa who couldn't make it because they were dealing with electricity load

shedding. They could not be online at night. This was a reminder that living with data-driven technologies and AI produce infrastructural problems that differ from place to place. In the opening note for the workshop, Christine Mungai, Lead Curator at Baraza Media Lab in Nairobi, reflected on what keywords remind us of: Why is the global south, home to the majority of the world's population, not addressed as the majority world? What does this reframing imply in how we conceive of the world and what we remember about our place in it? The keyword "majority world" was coined by Shahidul Alam,⁽⁴³⁾ a photographer, writer, curator, and activist from Bangladesh. Drawing inspiration from his work, this anthology features storytellers in/from the majority world.

Beyond the literal implications of majority through numbers and scale, majority world is our effort to describe how the majority of people often find themselves at the receiving end of computational systems; but this does not mean they do not have agency. The majority world is a standpoint centered on building communities in terms of what they have, rather than what they lack.⁽⁴⁴⁾ It is a relational framework; it is a unifying metaphor; it is a site to gather, exchange, and analyze diverse stories of becoming subject to data and AI, of responding to such subjecthood. We hope that this site of gathering grows like ginger from any part of its body. Our experiment in bringing together these stories from different parts of the world was meant to illustrate that the parables of AI are in the making. The task is to, as our partner Dibyadyuti Roy put it, "cultivate a rhizomatic praxis in motion." It is to create the space from which these stories can emerge and converge, which will allow us to trace the keywords and patterns in the complexity of living in a data-driven world. This space is the site that provides one answer to Rigo's question with which this prologue began: Who is your community?

*Your community is who listens to your stories and passes them on to others.**

* In answering the question of community, Ranjit managed to also find his people (the original formulation of the question). People have their own ways of listening. Sometimes listening takes directions that may seem at odds with hearing, but there is always room and space for alignment between the two. All it takes is time and moving at the speed of trust.

Endnotes

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