

Caitlin McDonald:

For this episode, I'm joined by Mutale Nkonde who's the founder and CEO of AI for the People, a nonprofit focused on the social justice implications of the use of AI in public life. Mutale is currently a practitioner fellow at the Digital Civil Society Lab at the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, and also a fellow at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School. She's also a member of the Tik Tok Content Advisory Council and a key constituent of the 3C UN Roundtable for AI. Before this, she was an AI policy advisor and was a part of a team that introduced Algorithmic Accountability and Deep Fakes Accountability Acts to the US House of Representatives. Welcome, Mutale.

Mutale Nkonde:

Hi, how are you?

Caitlin McDonald:

I'm doing great, and it's really great to have you on our podcast today. So to kick us off, I'd actually like to start today's podcast with a quote from Joseph Weizenbaum who I've previously mentioned on this podcast series as the author of the ELIZA chatbot, which is one of the first examples of a conversational computer program which is based on neurolinguistic programming. And in 1976, Weizenbaum wrote *Computer Power to Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation*. And in the introduction to that book, he says, "All empirical science is an elaborate structure built on piles that are anchored not on bedrock as it's commonly supposed, but on the shifting sand of fallible human judgment, conjecture, and intuition." And I'm starting with this quote today because I'd really like to talk about the fundamental fallibility of AI, which is its promise of neutrality or objectivity.

Mutale Nkonde:

Right. That's actually a really great entry point because one of the things that I've been looking at certainly over the last two years is, how do we change narratives around technology? So the dominant narrative is that the algorithm is based on mathematical reasoning, and that mathematical reasoning cannot be questioned because it's maths, because one plus one equals two. It's linear, and it's devoid of social meaning. But one of the things that I've certainly done in my research over the years is actually looked at how meanings of specifically race, racism, and sexism become encoded into the underlying models that create these mathematical structures. And to really think about Cathy O'Neill's work where she suggests that algorithms are simply opinions written into code. When we look at the societal impact, we realize that to be more of the truth.

Mutale Nkonde:

I recently spoke at a FinTech conference. And I was discussing with people there how loans in the United States can be given or denied based on a number of criteria, one of which in this particular algorithm that Berkeley had looked at back in 2017 included how many other websites you went to to search for a loan. So that particular input does not speak to creditworthiness. It doesn't speak to financial history. It's just this idea that someone in the developer class had that people who are truly credit-worthy go to lots of different websites. And I was able to point out how that actually becomes a proxy for people with financial education because they already have this idea of shopping around. And the people who are most likely to be given that type of financial education are going to be typically white, are going to be typically from the middle classes, are going to be typically people who have lived in environments where creditworthiness and ownership were normalized.

Mutale Nkonde:

And so if you are a low income person, if you are a black person, if you are somebody who has not been given that training for whatever reason, you were then going to be discriminated against this idea of mathematical reasoning. So much of my work actually deals with moving people away from that premise, but specifically through arts and culture. And that's kind of the juncture that we found ourselves today. After this, I'm going to be on a hip hop panel with the artists who are thinking about mathematical reasoning in terms of social medias. And it goes on and it goes on and it goes on.

Caitlin McDonald:

And that's fantastic. I wish we were having a hip hop panel. That'd be so much cooler than talking about [inaudible 00:05:13] definitely very cool as well.

Mutale Nkonde:

Very cool. I am definitely on the not famous people's panels. So hopefully, that would make you feel better.

Caitlin McDonald:

Amazing. Yeah. And actually on that point about inequality, I was just reading an article today which says that redlining, which is the practice of discrimination in neighborhoods, is actually even more prevalent now than it was even 20 years ago. So neighborhoods are even more segregated than they were, which is a really disappointing finding. But it also goes to show that a lot of these issues that we're talking about predate digital issues. But it's the power of the digital to essentially allied your ability to see that happening, which is one of the real problems because you might not even know that other people are getting exposed to information that you don't have access to.

Mutale Nkonde:

And also, just to go to redlining very quickly, zip code data here in the United States that operates in the same way a postcode would for listeners in the UK, that is really a remnant of a federal government policy that segregated housing by race. So I live in New York State. I've lived in New York City for the last 15 years. And I live in a neighborhood that has been historically black because black people living in New York could not live in the new developments because part of the redlining policy was within the deeds at which people that developed what became our suburbs in Long Island and in other places was a legal covenant that said, "This will not be sold to somebody of the Negro race." That's literally the wording. And then once the developer sold it, the homeowner signed another covenant that said they would not resell to somebody from a Negro race.

Mutale Nkonde:

So if you have my zip code, you also have this history of segregation. But when we're building algorithms, what we tend to do is say zip code data, it's very cheap. It's tracked, mapped with census data. So you know median income of the people that live in that area. You know median age. You know educational level. You know health outcomes. And depending on what you're building, this type of market insight is incredibly valuable. And certainly when I speak with tech companies, or even I was recently involved in a launch called Techno-Racism, a report that came out through the UN, you have to explain this and very, very kind of nobody is asking a question about race, but these are the proxies. And so if we're talking about mathematics, let's make it clear that we're not talking about pure maths. We are literally talking about random facts that then become statistical models.

Caitlin McDonald:

Yeah. And it's such an important point because as you've just said, often, people don't realize that these correlations exist. And so they say, "Well, we don't actually have race as part of the model." And yet there is a differential impact on people from different races when you're using data like postcode data and zip code data to inform the models that you're doing. So it's really important to pay attention to outcomes rather than simply to your intentions, I think.

Mutale Nkonde:

And there is another piece to that too because at least here in the US context, IP laws actually protect algorithms. So it's not even like when I was involved in the Algorithmic Accountability Act, for example, one of the things that we advocated for and we put into statute was this idea that government agencies could investigate the algorithm to see inputs and see how they're weighted. And then based on those inputs, do impact assessment. So we would know this, we would know whether it had differential impact prior to it going on the market. And our argument was that we do this in the Food and Drug Administration. We're seeing this with COVID, right? We're not just like, "Oh, my God, we have a cure and we're going to start using it." No, there is an actual clinical trials, and there's a process that has to go through.

Mutale Nkonde:

And that didn't get out of committee, but I think that the legal landscape has changed significantly and people just seem to be more aware of algorithmic bias. And so I'm looking forward to... Well, I don't say I'm looking forward to the next 40 days, but there is the potential that this conversation can be picked up again.

Caitlin McDonald:

Absolutely. And actually, something that happened in the week that we're recording this is that Twitter came under a lot of fire for having an automated system that was essentially cropping photos on the timeline. And despite the fact that Twitter developers were coming out and saying, "We actually did test this prior to release to make sure that there was no facial bias," and there's also a lot of confusion. So some people thought that the algorithm was using facial recognition, which it isn't. But it certainly was in many people's kind of informal experiments targeting the white face rather than a darker face. Not even just with actual humans, but also with cartoon characters. People were putting photos of dogs, different things. And the way that it was determining the interest factors of the photo was causing a kind of persistent issue with this. And Twitter was coming on and saying, "We've tested this, but we can see that there's still a problem. So we need to go back and revisit this question around what the biased outcomes are."

Mutale Nkonde:

And that really warmed my heart because the whole idea of AI for the People, this organization I founded, is that we are democratizing knowledge in such a way that you can go on to your social media feed, and you can for yourself have at least a basic understanding of how these technological processes work. And know that just because you're not using facial recognition as the technology, you may be using those protocols to develop the technology. And if you're using the same protocols, then you're still using things like zip code. You're still using a training set that is highly homogenous, most likely to be white, most likely to be white male. And quite frankly, why are you even using that? Because the issue, and I was saying this to CNBC, which is a business channel here in the States. And I was explaining that

nobody... I think we would all agree that we don't care about a dog filter or a face filter, but the fact is these same technological processes are being used in law enforcement.

Mutale Nkonde:

And in a summer of protest, at least here in the States, we're now seeing peaceful protesters using technologies that mimic these types of impact being tracked down. And so we need to really question, is recognizing of faces whether it's for a quiz on social media, or whether it's to track down peaceful protesters, is this part of a democratic vision for the future? Or are we saying that we don't want to do that? So I think one of the things that we try to do is always put this in the widest implication. How is it going to impact the most vulnerable? And then empower general audiences to involve in actions like, "Actually, Twitter, we don't want this."

Caitlin McDonald:

So Mutale, one of the things I wanted to ask you about was the idea of racial literacy. And also, what kinds of mechanisms currently exist to produce some of the harms that we've been talking about on this call?

Mutale Nkonde:

So racial literacy is a theoretical framework that was developed by Professor Howard Stevenson at the University of Pennsylvania. And for listeners from the States, that is Bryan Stevenson's brother. So the same family, the guy that is Oprah's friend, and they developed the Lynching Museum and it's very famous. And my very first question was what's Oprah like when I met him, even though I liked his scholarship as well. And it was this kind of three-part strategy around how we can embed better racial practices often called anti-racist practices into our homes, into our workplaces. And it's really simple. So the first part of the framework is that we have to have a cognitive awareness that race matters. And not only does race matter, but there is a history of race and racism if we're living in the Western world. So I have been keenly following both the BBC saying the N-word and then justifying it, as well as the Let's Dance controversy in the UK where a dance troupe do something. They dedicate it to Black Lives Matter and then off come these 20,000 complaints as if the UK doesn't have other problems, right?

Mutale Nkonde:

But in both those instances, of the people that are complaining, there is this idea that racism doesn't exist in the UK. It's disappeared. We don't have it. And what they're not really thinking about is how Lloyd's of London were the underwriters for the TransAtlantic Slave Trade. So not only is the UK implicated in the movement of black bodies from the continent to the Americas, but New York City, the city that I live, in which I live, in which I call my home, I recently became a citizen. So as much as I'm a citizen to the UK, I definitely am a citizen to the Republic of Brooklyn and New York City specifically, but our city, New York, was named for the Duke of York because it was given to him as a slaving post. So to say that there is no racism is a fallacy. But when you say there's no racism, you also get into what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva who's a sociologist at Duke University calls colorblind racism, right?

Mutale Nkonde:

And if there's no racism, then there's nothing to fight against. There's no conversation. So the first thing you have to know that there's racism, you have to know that it matters, and you have to know that it is typically going to disadvantage people who are the darkest wherever you are in the world. The second part is the emotion. So the reason that people deny racism isn't because it is generally, is because we'd

have no language. We don't know how to talk about this. We don't know how white audiences often report feeling guilty and feeling attacked when racism is brought up. And people from black communities just don't want to talk to white people about racism because there's a lot of denial in what Robin DiAngelo would call the white fragility, which most black people are not interested in, don't want to handle, would rather just talk about the weather and go home. But that also means that you're not growing.

Caitlin McDonald:

It's an extra burden, isn't it?

Mutale Nkonde:

Right, but it also means that you're not in relationship. It also means that you can go through your whole life and really not have white friends. I lived in the United Kingdom until I was 29. I left the UK with no white friends. I knew them. I liked them, but there was no real intimacy there, right? Because we couldn't get past that barrier. And then the third part is action plans. So once you know that racism exists and it's bad, once you know that this is an emotionally fraught topic, what do you do? And one of the things that my coauthors and I did was saying, "Well, would we have technologies like facial recognition that does not recognize dog faces?" So I call it Chad recognition, right? Or Bob recognition. Or Scott or James recognition. That's not facial recognition. Would we really have algorithmic systems that deny Black and other women typically benefits payments? Would we have these financial products that don't give to people from a certain zip code or postcode if we had racial literacy?

Mutale Nkonde:

And we did an ethnographic study. It was 30 respondents. Half were engineers at top Silicon Valley firms. The other half were DEI people working in the same companies. The engineers thought that there was no racism, were very uncomfortable, refused to discuss it. And therefore, were not even open to a conversation around use of zip code or training sets. They were so emotionally dug in that we couldn't even talk about architecture. And therefore, their action plan was, "Don't say a word." The DEI people, on the other hand, who were typically women and typically women of color, and our set knew everything about racism, but they did not have a direct report at the C-suite level. And they were being charged with recruitment often. And the first week people join a company, they often have to go through some type of training, but then you never really saw this group again. And they reported not feeling empowered.

Mutale Nkonde:

And so in our recommendations for the report, what we recommended was that there needed to be some type of reckoning around the idea that race existed and the hiring of people that had an imaginary of developing technologies that are anti-racist, that are feminist, that are queer affirming because we also found that non-binary people were not being recognized and facial recognition sets, for example, and trans people were being misgendered. That were accessible to everybody and we really put down the gauntlet when we said, "What we have could be so much better if it could empower more people."

Mutale Nkonde:

And we left it, and then George Floyd happened here in the United States. And after the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, people then start to become much more interested in the framework as a way to move forward that I had also done legislative work at the federal level, and within every

statute, had made sure that this idea that racism is something that we can make sure it doesn't seep into our technologies was implanted. So in the No Biometric Barriers Act that I was involved in, that became the basic... That statute became a base for what became Justice and Policing Act. And that was looking at facial recognition use and body cameras. So it's funny. I mean, people were like, "Yay, good for you. We're ignoring you." And then weren't. So it's been quite a journey.

Caitlin McDonald:

Yeah. I think it's really been an interesting year for issues that were not getting the kind of attention that they needed and deserved, especially around justice and particularly racial justice coming to the forefront. And I think others have said it better than I, but there's been a lot of questioning about wanting to return to the status quo, and then a recognition that perhaps the status quo that was so great for so many of us wasn't great for everybody. And now, some of these issues are really coming out in ways that are getting acknowledgment that previously they weren't getting.

Mutale Nkonde:

Yeah. I just think that previously, we had what Shoshana Zuboff... I always say her name wrong and it's so embarrassing because my name is Mutale Nkonde. So I'm actually very strict about people's names. But the thing I love about this idea of surveillance capitalism is the idea that the market is more important than the user. And I would go a step further and say that this is racial capitalism because if we even look at how our technologies are developed, and that's using raw materials typically from West Africa and we're extracting the raw material to create the phone that is next to me or the computer by which I'm speaking to you, there is this extractive tradition, and it's certainly part of the British tradition if we look at the economics of colonialism.

Mutale Nkonde:

But then even beyond that, who is most harmed and who are the markets? And I'm doing a disinformation project right now that has taken me on to social media. All my work sits at the racial justice and anti-blackness specifically. So I'm looking at black users of social media over indexing on those algorithms, but having no ownership stake. And my recommendation is the same as the report. Get people in these companies that have better imaginations. If we look at the development of AI, so much of it lies in science fiction. If we look at the cell phone, that was something that was in a science fiction story. If we look at the idea of a talking computer or robots, these are things that we've seen in media and arts that have become real through research.

Mutale Nkonde:

Well, why don't we research having an equitable world? And I personally have no intention of returning to my post-COVID reality because I think that this is an opportunity for things to be so much better. And in a moment, not just my work, but the work of Simone Browne, the work of Joy [Bellamy 00:23:47], the work of Rashida Richardson. I mean, there's so many amazing people doing this work who are women, who are black women, who are non-binary, who are indigenous. I was on a call yesterday where I was saying, "This is a Harlem Renaissance, and we should be all very excited about it."

Caitlin McDonald:

That's a really hopeful thing to take us on to my next question, which is, you've mentioned regulatory arms. You've mentioned essentially hiring people with greater imagination to take us into the future.

What other kinds of mechanisms exists to not only avoid the harms, but also as you've been saying, to lead us into a kind of more equitable future for everybody in terms of technology?

Mutale Nkonde:

None. And to be honest, I can't think of hiring strategies just because HireVue is getting so much attention, I know in the UK, which is a hiring algorithm that is failing to hire back black workers post-pandemic. So even how we're sourcing talent is algorithmically determined and biased. I'm watching Facebook and other large platform companies not take down harmful or misleading content. And I'm watching companies like Amazon say that they're not going to sell facial recognition to police forces, and then lobby state governments to avoid them passing regulations. So we're in a very dark spot. And we're going to have to do what the glorious movement for Black Lives protesters have done this summer and demand it. I mean, power is never going to give itself up. And the power is in the hands of the people that are designing our future.

Mutale Nkonde:

And so just seeing what happened with the Twitter story, and that it was user-led makes me really excited about that. I don't know that I have faith in industry. And at least in the US, I don't see a clear science and technology strategy. I mean, I sit on the Tik Tok Content Advisory Board, and we've just lived through a weekend where the app was effectively going to be shut down. And then it was sold, and the only thing that the White House wanted was patriotic education. I mean, that's not a strategy. That's a whim.

Caitlin McDonald:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, that's a really great point. And I think there's something to be said as well around users on particular platforms. So if you look at something like Tik Tok, I mean, I know that they have a broad user base, but I tend to associate it and perhaps this is my bias with younger users. And I wonder if that actually will cause some political pressures or some social pressures that previously weren't felt when they weren't realizing how much of this technology was potentially going to impact them, or the lack of it was going to impact them.

Mutale Nkonde:

I mean, I don't know. I have absolutely no faith in this idea that younger people are more equitable because then we wouldn't have the problems that we have. The people who were young in the 60s would have solved it, but actually, things have got worse. So I would challenge that, and I would say what we need is clear and definite policies. And then rather than charging the FTC, which is the Federal Telecommunications Commission, I believe I may have that wrong, charging Facebook \$5 million or \$5 billion for whatever some type of violation, it's like charging me 25P. It doesn't mean anything. I have it in my top drawer. So real fines like trillion dollar fines might be much more I think viable certainly for me. And then I was reading Facebook is saying that they'll pull out of the EU if they don't stop regulating. And I was like, "Oh my God, lucky EU. Yeah, keep regulating. You probably don't need them."

Caitlin McDonald:

Yeah, whether that's going to happen or not is a really interesting question. There's a definite, "You don't want to play with us, I'm going to take my ball and go home." But actually, it's a huge market for them. So whether they really would be willing to give that up is a question. But equally, if they were to give that up, what other kinds of technologies might arise from Europe which is not traditionally thought

of as being a technological innovator, which is in some ways really foolish considering the technology history of Europe?

Mutale Nkonde:

Well, I am really excited about technologies that would come out of Germany. As somebody that spends a lot of time speaking to the German tech community, this is a privacy affirming space. So the one thing that those technologies would do is probably not track you. And that's because in the German context, they really appreciate privacy. But this is a country that had a Nazi past and so knows what it is for government overreach. And I think some of those norms would be really interesting.

Mutale Nkonde:

And I've long advocated for this idea of middle-class tech companies. If we actually had antitrust laws and people didn't build companies with the hope of selling them to Amazon or Facebook or others, then we would see the type of diversity that we're looking for. So if you wanted a social network where you knew that the information was true, you would have that. And we see this with Gab and far-right groups. After Charlottesville here in the US, a bunch of people on the right decided that they want to be able to say the N-word and say terrible things about women and Jewish people. So the exciting thing about Gab for me as a researcher is that it's open sourced. And so I can see what it feels like and looks like to be on a social network that is for Nazis and the type of rhetoric that they would like to see.

Mutale Nkonde:

And while I don't necessarily want to create a bunch of Gabs, it's at least an experiment of what, on the social media side, niche platforms could look like. But imagine if we had that type of diversity across the marketplace. I think it would be a much... Part of the competitive structure would be consumer demands, and we don't have that right now.

Caitlin McDonald:

I think that's really interesting, but specifically talking about Gab for a second, I think there's a really interesting question around, do we want greater fragmentation? Do I want all those people over there so I don't have to look at them, but they are feeling themselves? And what does that do to societally? Or do we want a platform that is a broader selection of people and views so that those kinds of far-right tendencies are a smaller voice in a much larger pond? And what does that do socially? I think there's a really interesting question around when we think about social incentives towards more equitable behavior. Is Gab going to help or hinder that? And I know you're not talking about Gab and its effects in that sense, but its possibilities as being a smaller platform.

Mutale Nkonde:

I would definitely go for the latter that you suggested just because... And I don't want to spend too much time centering the right in my remarks, but it's about moving the Overton window, right? Gab happened because we had a president that said that white supremacists were fine people. And once that statement was made, that really did let that element know. It emboldened and entitled them. Not that they didn't already think this, but they could now think it out loud. Whereas if we could get to a place where we had basic understandings that women are people and deserve rights. Black people are actually human, which is always contested. I mean, here in the US, I'm reading my third story of a white woman that pretended to be a black person. And not just a black person, but one that had been put upon and they were demonstrating that we're doing all of these things.

Mutale Nkonde:

But you must not really view black people as people if you dress up as them and play them and play out their pain. That's incredibly dehumanizing and inappropriate. But clearly, that has been normalized if this is becoming a trend, right? Are we going to be a society that is homo and transphobic? And I follow a lot of British social media still. I mean, ultimately, I'm a British citizen. My family are there. When I can fly, I'll probably fly back more. My sister's in London. I have all the receipts. My degree is there, all the rest of it. But I'm following some of the tough rhetoric, particularly from J. K. Rowling, who had the imaginary to develop a billion dollar empire on a wizard, which is not a real thing, but has a real problem recognizing transwomen who are real. So what kind of madness is that? And not only what kind of madness is that, why are we not pushing it back to the extreme?

Mutale Nkonde:

And so I would definitely favor platforms that had governance rules that protected the largest amount of people. I live in the United States. So I'm not really interested in regulating anybody's speech. We have free speech here. But when we were looking at the No Biometric Barriers Act, what we did is really change the designation from user to consumer, and then protect American consumers of social media by invoking consumer rights. One of which is you have the right to accurate information through advertising. And since these are advertising platforms, and we have to make that very clear, that then would enable you to drive misleading content, drive extremist content off these platforms. And it didn't go anywhere as I'm sure you weren't surprised. But the point is that the idea has been introduced into the chamber, and we can build on that.

Caitlin McDonald:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. And I think that there is something perhaps in existing consumer rights law or other kinds of human rights law to act as protective mechanisms against some of the worst abuses of psychology. And perhaps we're underutilizing some of the regulatory mechanisms that we already have at our disposal to manage some of these technology harms that we've been talking about.

Mutale Nkonde:

Yeah, for sure. It's been a lack of bravery, I think, on our part, but also, people have decided that they don't understand technology, and that technology is neutral. And so again, going back to this imagination. Imagine understanding this. Imagine putting the work in to realize what this is. And I think that if you sit in a regulatory seat, you have to understand that the world is now driven by algorithms, not by human decision making because very often, they're making the first choice. I mean, look at the poor kids with A level results. These are teenagers.

Mutale Nkonde:

I remember A levels days. And at that point, it's so high stakes. You feel like the rest of your life is going to be based on these three grades. Obviously, it's not, but you don't know that. You're so young. And for an algorithm to come in when you yourself have not even realized your potential. And as a mother of teenagers, your frontal lobe isn't even developed, you're not even a good decision maker, just is very sinister. I was so proud of those young people and hope that when my... My children don't live in the UK, but when my children are of age, I hope that they stand up for themselves in the same way.

Caitlin McDonald:

Yeah. And I think that there is that kind of erosion of public trust that comes along with people seeing algorithmic decision making in ways that feel deeply unfair for people that have been impacted by those decisions. And I think that that, especially when you talk about being a young age, and I don't want to get into the Pollyanna like young people are going to save us situation again. But I think that there's a definite shift in terms of understanding how algorithmic decisions can impact us among the younger age groups, which then as they grow older and they attain more power in their careers. And through whatever they might be doing in terms of legislation, or lobbying, or whatever it might be, advocacy, I think that might make a huge difference to how we in the UK are approaching things.

Mutale Nkonde:

Young people are not going to save us. Changing society is going to save us. And changing norms are going to save us. And that was something that really came out in the Black Lives Matter protests here where people that had marched in the '60s were marching in their 60s alongside young people. This was a multiracial, multi-generational movement and still is. And if you are a fair-minded, and if you believe that your time on Earth is to make other people's lives better both in your lifetime and afterwards, you will orientate yourself towards that. We are in mourning over the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg who was 87. And until her dying day, stood up for the rights of black people, for people that were discriminated against, and gender, for disabled people, for LGBT groups. This was not a young person, but as a young person, she made that commitment. And I think that that's very clear.

Mutale Nkonde:

I have no faith in young people who do not do the work of deciding how they're going to orientate their lives. And we just do not have a community. Our societies aren't built like that. Certainly not in the UK, and certainly not in the US.

Caitlin McDonald:

Yeah. We've talked about this all day, but unfortunately, we have to end this podcast at some point. So let me end with one final question and then we'll just do final thoughts. So my last question really is, what do you think is most important for technologists who are leaders to grasp when they're really considering how to set up ethical governance models within their organizations?

Mutale Nkonde:

First of all, get rid of the idea of ethical. It doesn't mean anything. It cannot be encoded into practices and policies. And then look at your existing value statements. Are you a company that wants to promote racism? If not, then look at the different ways that your company is perpetuating that and dismantle. Are you a company that wants to promote sexism? The same. Ableism, the same. Transphobia and homophobia, the same. And I think by naming specific harms, you can then take concrete steps to dismantle them. And I'm so passionate about that because I'm in the process of writing my first book, which is called Automated Anti-Blackness and actually says that we need to name race if we are going to create just technological futures. And so the social science supports naming a problem to solve a problem.

Caitlin McDonald:

Yeah, that's a really great starting point. And are there any kind of final thoughts or key takeaway messages that you have for our listeners today?

Mutale Nkonde:

I would say read science fiction, and look at the worlds that are created there. And then dedicate yourself to creating them. So I always say that I'm a child of Octavia Butler, African-American science fiction writer. And in her novel, *Parable of the Sower*, it starts by introducing a black girl and the year is 2020. And she says, "And this is the year that the world burns." And this has also been the year in which we've had unprecedented forest fires in California. But through that book, she also talks about how this black woman gets herself out of this technological hell's gate. And I definitely consider that a guide. I do not consider it fiction. I consider it absolute fact. But one of the things that she talks about is really moving towards developing technologies that help and assist us all. And if they can help the least of us, then they can help all of us and that's why I would say to read it.

Caitlin McDonald:

Thank you so much. It's been a real pleasure and delight to have you on today.

Mutale Nkonde:

Thank you.

Caitlin McDonald:

Thanks for listening to the Growing Digital Ethics in Practice Podcast. You can find out more about Mutale's work at [mutale.tech](https://mutale.tech), and about her work on racial literacy at [racialliteracy.tech](https://racialliteracy.tech). You can also find out more about the Leading Edge Forum Perspective on Digital Ethics just by googling the phrase *stemming sinister tides* where the first link should be our 2019 position paper, *Stemming Sinister Tides: Sustainable Digital Ethics Through Evolution*.