**Four ways to feminist research praxis: lessons from practice in AI ethics and policy research**

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**Introduction**

The last five years have been dizzying for anyone concerned with AI policy-making and regulation. The expansion of data collection into almost every corner of everyday life, along with consolidation of the power and influence of Big Tech companies – including as arbiters of 'ethics' - has generated frustration and despair about the paucity of alternatives.

Against this backdrop, this briefing describes four ways to enact feminist research praxis in AI ethics research, with implications for technology policy research more broadly. Inspired by Ursula Le Guin's *Four Ways to Forgiveness,* it reflects on lessons drawn from the JUST-AI research network, which I directed from 2019-2023. JUST AI (Joining Up Society and Technology for AI) was a strategic funding initiative from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC; now part of the UKRI national research body), embedded within an emerging independent research organization, the Ada Lovelace Institute (Ada). The network's specified aims to create interdisciplinary capacity for AI ethics research were profoundly transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movements. These inspired a restructuring of the project's practice. Insights from both feminist and disability studies guided the project to critique and redevelop relationships between

discourse, knowledge and institutional structures. Four ways towards feminist research praxis emerged:

- **"The back and forth between the doing and reflecting" (Harcourt, 2015)**

- **'Body politics' and intersectional politics (Harcourt, 2015; Crenshaw, 2023)**

- **Transforming institutions (Federici, 2019)**

- **Designing accessible futures (Kafer, 2013)**

Commitments to feminist praxis may not appear to influence policy within constrained time frames and hype-cycles (see Powell and Mckelvey, forthcoming). Projects like JUST AI can model care-full capacity-building in a context that often anticipates 'impact' or 'knowledge mobilization' to be transparently measurable. Identifying ways that feminist praxis inspires emancipatory praxis within technology policy may reveal directions towards more accessible futures.

In this reflection, I employ biography as a feminist method (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993), introducing the people whose relations helped to create the project. This story, however, is mine.

**The Four Ways**

The feminist research praxis of JUST-AI was shaped by my training and experience with feminist political economy – in its labour (Huws, 2019), communication (Sarikakis and Shade, 2008), and institution-building (Federici, 2019) traditions. Through the project, these

traditions interwove with other critical traditions, including crip theory (Kafer, 2013), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995) between feminist, disability, and Black studies perspectives especially the work of Sylvia Wynter (McKittrick, 2015). One of the project aspirations was to avoid producing 'alienated knowledge' (Rose, 1983) that reproduced structures of domination through the academic research process. Within the AI ethics field, such alienated knowledge can also include research strategies that benefit – directly or indirectly – the Big Tech companies and other powerful actors whose advocacy often shapes technology policy (Sætra et al, 2024). This can make feminist praxis feel more consequential, especially as it attempts to identify structural harm and vulnerability resulting from AI (Our Data Bodies, 2024) while simultaneously expanding and mobilizing networks of critical research.

Within this context, JUST AI attempted to balance **"the back and forth between the doing and reflecting"** of research and practice by creating strategies for 'networking' as both a noun and a verb. These strategies were set within a febrile policy context shaped by the COVID 19 pandemic and reactive national politics. The consequences were felt at the level of the everyday, and within our bodies – creating a **body politics** that was also **intersectional** with the dis/abilities and other characteristics of our network participants. Yet these deeply affective challenges also encouraged the project to experiment with open-ended working groups, lab methods and other models of knowledge commons to model the capacity for **transforming institutions** which include the people and perspectives that are considered legitimate within AI ethics research, and the extent to which they have the capacity to listen, hear and work together. Creating and sustaining JUST AI through world-historical and everyday crises also revealed the importance of **designing accessible futures** where research praxis can become emancipatory. This requires making space for different times, spaces, and

modes of contribution, as well as the capacity to refuse participation in structures of domination.


**Feminist Praxis in AI Ethics Research in the UK**


*Doing and Reflecting*

### 1. Plans

In early autumn 2019 as the teaching term began, I was completing a three-year collaboration focused on the ethics of Internet of Things development (Powell, et al, 2022) and reflecting on the results of an interactive gallery installation I'd made based on research with machine learning developers (Powell, 2021). As part of that show, I'd held a panel event of experts on AI and tried to convince UK civil servants to create machine learning training repositories so that they could be audited to prevent bias and discrimination. I'd also attempted to attend the nascent FaccT conference, a computing conference discussing technical aspects of algorithmic fairness.

Carly Kind, who was then the first director of the Ada Lovelace Institute (she's now the first female Privacy Commissioner of Australia) took me out to lunch and asked if I would consider applying to join Ada as part of project on data and AI ethics – a pilot, that would last one year. In my cover letter, I suggested that I could "bring my extensive network of collaborators and trusted fellow-travelers into a creative conversation about how, why, and under what circumstances AI and related technologies do – and should - influence our lives". In the interview I described the difficulties I found in engaging technical colleagues about

ethics, and suggested using events, conferences and art shows as mechanisms for creating conversation.

I was offered the position and an official appointment at Ada. I secured a term away from teaching and posted advertisements for postdoctoral researchers. The university grind had been exhausting and I was ready to see things from a differently-situated perspective. I also wanted to employ the reflective practices I had developed in my other work (Powell, 2018) to invite researchers to decentre their own knowledge, listen to others, and draw on divergent (or convergent) interpretations of technology, governance and research relationships. This, I thought, could create new ways of engaging with AI and data ethics research. Carly and Edward Harcourt, then the Director of Research, Strategy and Innovation at AHRC both thought this could generate creative ways to influence the development of policy and practice as well as provide thought leadership on AI ethics. We proposed not just to create a JUST AI Network (as a noun) but to experiment with networking practice (as a verb) (JUST AI, 2023). In this way, we could weave together different forms of knowledge and experience, modelling and experimenting with different ways to think and work together by 'weaving' (Diaz-Diaz, 2024). In February 2020 the postdoctoral appointment paperwork came through. Imre Bàrd, a specialist in science communication with a background in bioethics and Louise Hickman, a critical disability scholar and artist, both agreed to relocate to London within the following weeks from Budapest and San Diego, respectively.

## 2. Events

On March 21, 2020 the UK introduced stringent stay-at-home orders in what was later referred to as 'the first lockdown': two others followed. Initially optimistic, within a week I

realized that the designs I had already commissioned for 'interdisciplinary weaving' workshops set to bring artists and philosophers into computing and law conferences, would not be tested. Meanwhile, co-parenting arrangements for my daughter had fallen apart and the two of us were at home together in our small inner-city London apartment contending with home-school, grocery shortages - and AI and data ethics. No commercial flights from Budapest or San Diego were expected for months. My teaching moved online.

Imre, Louise and I did our best to create ways for our project to create space for learning, support and mentorship over Zoom, alongside my care of my daughter, Imre's responsibilities for his wife and housebound toddler, and Louise's experiences as a disabled person. With one year of project funding, we felt pressure to quickly create mechanisms to achieve the project aims. Against the plans that hoped to create specific, embodied moments of collaborative reflection, we encountered a reality of separated individuals whose labours, vulnerabilities and inequalities were exacerbated by the pandemic.

## 3. Practices

We became attentive to how the processes of getting our project done - generating ideas, putting together proposals, speaking at meetings - influenced our relationships with each other. Our academic training spanned quantitative methods, political economy and social theory, and we each inhabited different places in relation to dis/ability, queerness and gendered identity. Separated geographically and struggling to connect, we articulated a process to understand, interpret and transform what data and AI ethics research meant in the UK context, by combining bibliometric analysis and social network mapping (Imre's specialty) with critical reflections on how this kind of mapping marginalized certain forms of

knowledge and particular groups of researchers (Louise's expertise). I hoped to complement this with a map of research funding for UK projects focused on data and AI ethics to assess the potential constraints or distortions resulting from industry funding.

Meanwhile, the COVID 19 pandemic was producing many calls for thought leadership at an institutional and national level. I was invited to join expert panels on bioethics, to advise the NHS on its contact tracing app, to participate in commercial conferences focused on 'future technology' in order to make Ada visible and our research legitimate. I'd pull back my hair, put on lipstick, shoo my daughter out of the background and try my best to ensure I'd nailed down the lines about "developing AI for the benefit of people and society" (Ada's framing narrative). These participations were, I was certain, significant for 'thought leadership' and the development of policy and practice in data and AI ethics. Yet I felt disconnected from the creation of reflexive research relations.

*Intersectional relations*

By late June 2020, a dark mood had settled over London. I could hear COVID coughs from the apartment towers around me, and Black Lives Matter marches around my neighbourhood (and the surveillance helicopter flights that followed) brought an urgency to the findings that were emerging as we began to map connections between the people, institutions and language used in research papers in the areas of 'data ethics' or 'AI ethics' (see https://www.just-ai.net/project-1). Not only was research on these topics concentrated in particular institutions and disciplines, not many people from global majority backgrounds or employing conceptual frameworks like Black Studies or decolonial justice perspectives were visible within the

networks of citations and co-authorships. We considered these research findings as an invitation to employ our project structure to make an intervention.

[Image 1 about here]

### *Building Institutions*

It became clear that to develop our project goals of networking with reflexive intention, we would need to reverse the dynamics that had thus far concentrated knowledge-power in a small number of institutions and structured projects. We would need to first create processes to bring different voices and perspectives into the data and AI ethics research space. We would also need to create institutional and work-practice dynamics that modeled feminist praxis by acknowledging that "knowledge making processes are inseparably world-making" (de la Bellacasa, 2017 p. 99). We sought to make research space that resisted the dynamic whereby ethical issues are defined top-down, in advance. We aimed instead to leave concepts open and to generate structures to support iterative, reflexive practices.

In Summer 2020, we proposed a JUST AI focused on racial justice (see https://www.adalovelaceinstitute.org/just-ai/visiting-fellowship/). Given that none of the JUST AI nor Ada team have global majority backgrounds, a significant aspect of this work centred on creating a just and emancipatory recruitment process, and resulted in the appointment of Fellows Sara Devi Chander, Yasmine Boudiaf, Irene Fubara-Manuel, and artists collective Squirrel Nation (Erinma Ochu and Caroline Ward). Building on Louise's expertise in convening research using feminist methods, we proposed the Fellowship operate on a 'lab model' featuring regular, participant-organized non-hierarchical conversation.

The lab model created the capacity to create relationships of depth and connection between the Fellows, whose experiences as well as research practices existed in a state of intersectionality. Yet this space of slow connection required patience from project members and partners, including flexibility on timing, nature, and form of research insights, as the Fellows' collaborative essay notes (JUST AI, 2023).

We consciously considered how to integrate and experiment with process and practice, challenging the way AI ethics presented in certain disciplines and with hopes for the potential to define alternative approaches Paula Crutchlow, our (virtually) visiting postdoctoral researcher created a video work reflecting on how the individual and shared experiences of our research practices at the time attempted to question some of the foundational assumptions about how AI ethics was defined and practiced (https://vimeo.com/728516488).

[Image 2 about here]

In addition to racial justice, our research had identified two other areas that we thought deserved more care and attention, and where we wanted to establish working groups to continue focused conversations. The first of these is the question of AI's sustainability - including its environmental sustainability (Hogan, 2018), and extractive dynamics of even 'critical' data and AI research (Lehuede 2024; D'ignazio and Klein 2020). The second is 'rights, access and refusal' - considering how access work traditions from critical disability studies provide new ways of thinking about who, how, and what access to AI comprises (Hickman and Serlin, 2018).

In 2020, we commissioned science fiction writers and essayists to partner with AI researchers and write about the results of their encounter, holding two online 'reading salons' where other invited researchers led a public conversation and discussion (https://ia-fictions.net/en/participants/imre-brand-louise-hickman-alison-powell). The publication of the resulting stories are due for publication soon. In spring 2021, we held a week-long series of online research presentations, talks and events convening our core collaborators as well as many other leaders in data and AI ethics research in the UK (see https://www.just-ai.net/copy-of-2021-convening-futures) We also developed and tested a design-led workshop tool for interdisciplinary collaboration. This prototype 'reflection tool' modelled strategies of connection, relationship, overlap and surprise and tested with colleagues across the UK and internationally. The prototype explored how to visualize and model relationships between people at various scales.

[Image 3 about here]

### Creating Accessible Futures

As the consequences of COVID settled, our practices became more influenced by the politics of care (Chatzidakis et al, 2020) and the question of "what would happen if we put care at the very centre of life" (p. 5). For JUST AI, care-fullness integrated considerations of time, everyday responsibility as well as dis/ability – all partial perspectives that uneasily integrate into what Alison Kafer (2013) calls 'accessible futures.' Creating these futures meant considering what to include, as well as what to refuse, in advancing our research. For example, we planned an in-person research festival for June 2022 which would allow us to showcase artwork commissioned on the project, generate conversations and deepen the

connections between our Racial Justice Fellows and other researchers from across the country. With a venue secured, physical accessibility ensured, and invitations issued, COVID infections began to spike. We decided to cancel the event rather than increase shared risk. Instead, in late summer 2022 we convened two separate research practice meetings, one focused on repair with curation by Teresa Dillon of Studio Repair Acts (see https://repairacts.ie), and the other on rights, access and refusal. We commissioned creative work out of each of these events, and the Rights, Access and Refusal workshop experimented with the VR art produced through their commission.


[Image 4 about here]


**Discussion: "Everyday Life as Permanent Crisis"**


JUST AI experimented with many kinds of interventions, building from the 'network-as-noun' invitation to connect or join a mailing list, to the 'network-as-verb' efforts to restructure the times, places and modes of collaboration on AI ethics issues. Our efforts extended in time far beyond the paid work contracts of Louise and Imre and beyond my teaching cover. This resurfaced some of the considerations raised a generation ago by Marxist feminists; that the labours of sustaining social reproduction in workplaces and home remain individualized, rather than held in common. This puts everyday life in 'permanent crisis' (Federici, 2019, p. 178). This individualization and attendant crisis extended through our project as our bodily and social capacities fractured and as COVID 19 strained already fragile social systems and exacerbated inequities associated with dis/ability and queerness. I became ill with COVID in 2020 and didn't fully recover until Spring 2021. Working and recovering while parenting and caring for my collaborators stretched the emotional fabric with which we

had hoped to weave new ways of relating about data and AI ethics. Louise, thankfully, avoided becoming ill during both her harrowing return to the UK (Hickman, 2021) and the long confinement necessitated by her status as a 'vulnerable' person.

The efforts to undertake 'doing and reflecting' while modelling alternative institutional forms generated tensions and unexpected labours. After the first year, Ada's research focus shifted towards building capacity to respond to tenders, commissions and to make contributions to policy-making processes in a range of application areas beyond those identified in our research. The funder provided several extensions to our original grant, and after some disentangling, JUST AI became a university research project, hosting conversations primarily with artists and researchers rather than industry or policy specialists.

This raises questions of the epistemic and temporal qualities of reflexive research. Foregrounding capacity-building for emerging questions sits in tension with a policy-making process focused on interventions in structured processes. Ada struggled to hold space for the open-ended, non-outcome-oriented discussions that the working groups needed to have. However, moving the project to a university setting meant balancing generative research discussions with full-time teaching, project management, supervision of staff, and all associated adminstration - a new manifestation of permanent crisis.

JUST AI's interventions included an effort to direct AI research funds to researchers and creators situated on the margins of the field. Conceptually, this acted as a kind of emancipatory political-economics in the tradition of paid reparations. Practically, this required large amounts of unsupported administrative work, as well as empathic personnel

management. Yet the amounts disbursed, even in the case of the Racial Justice Fellowship, were often not sufficient to address structural precarity.

Still, some glimmers of more accessible futures appeared, and others have emerged in time. The Racial Justice Fellowship program positioned the Fellows as important figures of expertise. Many of the concepts developed in our working groups, such as the value of access technology and the significance of different aspects of sustainability within AI production cycles have been taken up in other work: Careful Industries foregrounds critical disability studies in their policy work (https://www.careful.industries/); the UK's AI regulations also consider aspects of social sustainability such as corporate governance.

Our prototypes and institutional experiments contributed to a broader strategy within UKRI to direct strategic funds towards AI projects within an arts and humanities framing. In late 2022, UKRI launched the BRAID project, a 3-year national research program supported by the AHRC, Ada and the BBC (https://braiduk.org/). It features a commissioning fund for research and creative projects (some of which are defined by its partners) and a Fellowship program. The BRAID program also includes funding for demonstrator project that illustrate how to 'demonstrate responsible AI research or practice.'

The evolution of some of the approaches generated by JUST AI into BRAID also reveal the compromises that can manifest in larger or more established projects – BRAID project partners include Microsoft Research and Adobe. Occupying a nascent and experimental state, JUST AI was, in some ways, able to resist capture and retain an inchoate power to generate unexpected or disruptive ideas.

**Conclusion**

JUST AI's experiments in praxis suggest strategies for cooling down hot takes about AI and other technologies, including greater reflexivity, networking approaches that attempt to address centralizing tendencies by directing resources towards less-well-connected actors, and creating and maintaining radical groupings and relations to produce accessible futures. These practices hold potential to transform ways of knowing, doing and being (although not always within the time scales mandated by funders). Working against the grain can be challenging and exhausting. Institutions resist efforts to limit precarity. Creating radical relations and groundings, establishing solidarities, finding fellow travelers and attempting to disappear one's privileged self while making space for others may not return the valuable currency of the neoliberal university.

And yet… with reflexivity it is possible to see from another viewpoint. Vanessa Marchado de Olivera (2021) observes that performing decolonial gestures from a position of privilege depends on "negative capability" (the capacity to hold space without feeling irritated, defensive or overwhelmed by uncertainty, complexity, difficulty, failure and disillusionment). Over the sometimes joyful, often surprising and frequently exhausting process of exploring, establishing, and practicing JUST AI I often struggled to generate adequate negative capability amidst the conflicts over knowledge, power, and institutional legitimacy. Perhaps that's the point. "The struggle continues," the second-wave feminist ancestors used to say in greeting. The response? "And so do we".

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