Podcast Transcript

Valuable Conversations with UCL IIPP

Nai Kalema

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SPEAKERS

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Justin 00:02

Hello and welcome to valuable conversations student produce podcasts from UCL Institute for Innovation and public purpose. I'm Justin Beirold. On this episode I sit down with PhD candidate Nai Kalema. If you've been following this podcast you heard night as a co host on several episodes, including our conversations with George the poet and Daymond Silver's. But today is all about Nai. Nai is a brilliant scholar and practitioner who has been working for years on topics including global development, innovation and strategic design. Her PhD thesis is about digital transformation and determinants of health and their relationship with digital identity systems in Kenya and Uganda. The recording of this episode was unusual. Typically, we book a guest record the episode and then I lightly edited it before release, but with night, it went a little differently. I first interviewed her when we just started working together on the podcast in November 2021. And in that conversation, we talked about her life growing up in Minnesota, attending George Washington University studying Africana Studies, and more recently, watching the Black Lives Matter movement emerge in her home state after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. We discussed her work at MIT and Harvard on global development and innovation policy, and how she got interested in design. And she told me why she chose to attend IPP for her PhD research. And in that conversation, we also talked about her research, but this is where we change things up a little bit. By the time I was ready to release the episode quite a lot of time had passed. And most importantly, I had made enormous progress in her research, including narrowing down her topic to health and digital ID systems in Kenya and Uganda. So what you're about to hear is actually two interviews, one on her life journey and background and the second one recorded nearly a year later in October 2022, where we dig deep on the research digital ID the amazing fact that both biometrics and eugenics were invented at UCL, our very own university by the same person, Sir Francis Galton. And we also talked about some of the bigger picture concepts that underlie the research like data colonialism. This is a long episode. So I've included some timestamps if you want to skip around, but I highly recommend hearing about knives journey. I'll just say one final thing. Nye is so awesome that I've tried to work with her as much as possible. And it's worth noting that along with George the poet Knight is the first black PhD student at IIPP. And as we discussed in our conversation, I think she's the perfect person to assume that mantle. I've learned so much from her and I'm so grateful for her hard work. I hope you

enjoy my conversation with Nika Lima. Wants To Be natural. Be here. Oh, yeah, no. Welcome. How are you doing today?

Nai 03:07

I'm doing well. I'm a little sleepy. Happy. It's Friday. Yeah. But life is good. The sun's come out. So life is getting better.

Justin 03:15

Yeah, enjoy. Well, last hour, it's officially autumn in London. So that's not gonna last long. Yeah. So I guess I wanted to just start out by asking you a little bit about kind of your journey and and where you where you came from. So you're you're from Minnesota?

Nai 03:33

Yeah. So originally, I'm from Minnesota, the Midwest, land of Prince in the Vikings. And I came from a suburb that was a bit smaller. And so it was always a dream of mine to go to a big city and you know, do what I can. And so I started in Minnesota. When I decided on college, I ended up in DC. And love DC Chocolate. Chocolate City, Chocolate City is what they call it. And you went to G dub, right? Yeah, I went to GW and it was a great experience. I think he was really, really different than how I grew up. And I really liked the pace of the city, very political city and for me completely different from everything I grew up with, for sure. And so it was it took a while to get used to but it was a joy. And I enjoyed my time there a lot. Did you study public policy? No, actually, I have like the most circuitous route to where I am now. I studied English Literature and Language and I was always really interested in books and critical theory and how do we interpret things and make meaning of literature and, and also films and so that was what I ended up majoring in and they also did concentration in Africana Studies. And so it was looking at kind of the experiences of the African diaspora in the, in the US outside of the US in Africa, like just basically all over the world, which was really awesome.

Justin 05:16

Right. That's what Africana Studies means. It's like, it's not just studying Africa, it's all the people that have left Africa and gone to different places to

Nai 05:25

do things. Yeah. And created like new cultures. And so it's focused a lot on, you know, not only the US, but also the other Americas. So in South America, in the Caribbean, and it was really, really, really cool, because I think that it showed me all these connections between African cultures globally. Wow. And and helped me to understand some of the dynamics of power around what it means to be a part of the African diaspora in different parts of the world and how it's negotiated differently. And I just loved cultures and learning about them.

Justin 06:07

That's really cool. That sounds kind of like a really interesting, like, it's a bit broader than like, if there was an African American Studies Department. Right. Sounds a little bit more open ended in that sense. So yeah, that's so is that like, kind of an interdisciplinary type of program to like, where you, you ended up starting to touch on all the politics and

Nai 06:27

Exactly, exactly. So politics, culture, history, and I feel like, I don't know if my parents would like it, but I'll frame it like this. I'm like the little Pan African baby, because my mom is African American, but my dad is Ugandan. And growing up, they have, you know, two very different cultural experiences. And so I was always really fascinated about, you know, the experiences around Afro identities and different places, the similarities but dissimilarities, and so

Justin 06:59

I'm curious, is it your mom, which of the parents wouldn't like you saying you were the Pan African?

Nai 07:05

They probably bofi. Like, that's the cheesiest thing we ever heard. And it'd be

Justin 07:10

just American baby or what?

Nai 07:12

I don't know what they would prefer to be like. Yeah, you're just our baby or kid? No, baby. I was the dream. So yeah,

Justin 07:28

that's really, that's really interesting. And I think definitely something that I've, I've tried to learn more about, especially in the past few years, like, it's weird, like, I went to Berkeley where I thought that was gonna be like the most like, woke critical race theory stuff I would encounter. But then, since I left there, like so many things have happened in America, especially that have kind of reverberated around the world. And, you know, black lives matter, obviously, which started in Minneapolis, where you grew up, basically, or in Minnesota, right? I mean, more or less like the, obviously, George Floyd and the hole started there, essentially, right. Yeah,

Nai 08:06

I think Black Lives Matter have been around. But a lot of things really started to kick off and culminated around the killing of George Floyd. And I had always been really interested and active in a lot of the activism around civil rights. And and not only civil rights, civil rights, human rights in Minnesota. So it's something that had been a part of Yeah, never did I expect Minnesota to be like the one the powderkeg. Right, kicked this kind of think about a lot of global attention to what was already going on. And I think that for me, because it was close to where I grew up and communities that I part of two things, one really proud of my community for, you know, people getting out there are people saying, No, we're not going to accept this, this needs to change, but also a part of me that and I think that this is not just unique to me, but fear, I guess, about, you know, this is where I live, I have friends here, my dad's here, my cousins are here. My mom, everybody's here, my family is here. And so thinking about, you know, not only what happened with George Floyd, but falando Castile, right? Just the idea that you know, these harms, and these, you know, experiences are not remote. It could it could happen. It's very close to home. Right. But um, that's,

Justin 09:33

that's Yeah, and I know, this is getting a little bit off topic, but I'm just curious to hear your perspective on it. Because you're a scholar of of, yeah, race related things, too. And, you know, I think it's really interesting what you were saying about how I don't know, I think I think there's a lot of things that Americans have had to like, come to terms with but one of the interesting ones is something you just brought up which is like trying to You assume that, you know, the black experience in America is like a monolithic thing is like a very well, obviously wrong on its face. But you know, it's just kind of something that we take for granted, right?

Nai 10:11

Yeah, I think so in Minnesota. I know people are like, oh, there's black people in Minnesota, but like, let's look at it. Our Attorney Generals, Keith Ellison, he is a he was also a congressman in Minnesota and the first Muslim Congress, first Muslim congressman in the United States. So it's huge. And now we have what's her name? Omar Ilhan Omar. Exactly Ilhan you'll also from Minnesota and Minnesota I think has probably one of the largest die like communities of Somalia and people right outside of Somalia. Also a lot of people from Sudan actually also came to Minnesota. It's probably more southern Minnesota, and so that you have these pockets and communities have so many different black identities and experiences coming together in this really cold place. And it's just interesting how that happened. But I think that now maybe people are like, oh, yeah, there are black people in Minnesota, like a surprise. And it's quite diverse and different experiences.

Justin 11:17

Yeah. And you know, did you have the weird experience of like, seeing all the Minneapolis protests on TV, when like, you actually know it intimately? Because I've had that experience before where like, you know, I observed something in real life. And then when you see it on CNN, or Fox News, or whatever, it's like, what it's almost like a completely different history of what happened. And was that, that you experienced that?

Nai 11:43

Yeah, I did experience that, like, places that were familiar, but so unfamiliar because you know, just like a fire going on, right? And everything like that. And I think that it was kind of painful, because you see, your relationship to this place is not it's not just an abstract one. So it's like places you recognize places you've seen walk past been in, and to see, you know, what's going on the violence that was going on. There was something surreal. And I remember, at the time, when, you know, a lot of stuff was happening, I was in Boston. And I remember feeling like I really, really want to be home right now. I want to be close to the people. And everything that's going on. And I ended up going home a few days later. And yeah, tried to get involved as much as I could, and visit these places afterwards. But I think that, seeing it on the news and seeing what was happening, it felt surreal, it felt painful, it felt scary, cuz at the time, you don't know what's happening. But um, I was really, really proud of my community, I was really glad to go home and do whatever I could to help. And just to try, and I guess, knowing that, hey, when it was time to go out, and like, you know, rock and roll in the streets, I came a little late, but I showed up. I showed up for a place that I care about. So yeah, right.

Justin 13:14

Right. And you know, not exactly was exactly the easiest time to travel across the country. So that's another level of anxiety. So you said you started to kind of really get deep into this stuff at at G dub and and then afterwards, when did you start getting interested in like, the Public Policy and Innovation and, and like, what was your way into that stuff? And was it? Yeah, it was that in undergrad or after?

Nai 13:49

Yeah. So I think that in terms of the interest in activism, I had been doing stuff with activism since I was little. I like, I like it. I like going to the marches. I like seeing people talk, I like trying to get people to vote, like it's something that I feel is a way I don't know, it's gonna sound cheesy, but like, I get to express my love and care for the communities that I'm a part of this type of work. And so it's meaningful to me. But I think in terms of innovation, we're back to this this windy path. I started out really interested in development. And so I'm for people out there in radioland. I'm using air quotes. It's complicated, but

Justin 14:38

that's a slippery word if there ever was one.

Nai 14:40

It really is it really is this idea of who's developed who is not. But at the time, I wasn't that nuanced. I just remember really feeling like I want to do work to try and impact the communities today. You know, I heard stories about you know, my dad growing up and the experiences in his country, and that always wants to to get involved in work that can engage with with issues like this. So what's going on in African continent? What what is what are these things? And so I started working in development after graduating and even interning while I was in undergrad.

Justin 15:19

Because in DC, there's a lot going on there with there is, yeah,

Nai 15:23

there's like tunnel organizations, and at the time I'm on I'm on the podcast, so

Justin 15:33

I try to make you forget that you're on the podcast. Yeah, I

Nai 15:35

know. But I started working with different types of organizations that were, you know, pretty big in this work. And the thinking was that, okay, this can be a great way to learn more, and get an insight into how they're trying to impact change and reduce global poverty. But I think that, you know, I did that it was pretty cool. But it felt really, really far removed from what was actually happening on the level of people's experiences and people's day to day lives because I was in DC. And I was, I was not really engaging with it personally. And so I ended up eventually, I would have an opportunity to work in global development, and innovation at a lab that would actually go to communities and villages and work with people around creating different types of innovations aimed at global development challenges. And so these were things like water purifiers or cleaner burning, cookstoves and things like that. And that's how I kind of, I guess, wound up doing that. But it was really amazing, because it was an opportunity to actually go to communities work with people talk with people about their experiences, what they're seeing, and learn from people in a way that I don't think I did enough of that before. Because you can gain a lot from books. Yeah. But in terms of understanding, you know, what is your day to day life? What's your lived experience, like around these things? That's a whole different ballgame. And I think that it taught me a lot about trying to challenge my own assumptions engaging with the work, because at first I was like, Oh, I'm gonna go do this, and I'm gonna, you know, help fix everything. And

Justin 17:23

the good news, I is about to come over and fix, I'm coming

Nai 17:27

back, I'm coming back, I'm gonna make everything a whole lot better. And I really had to humble myself, because what I realized is a lot of what's going on is structural nature. And a lot of what I was trying to engage with through that work, where there's more the symptoms of structural global inequality. And so I think when I started to wonder, like, why is it that I'm hearing the same kind of problems in Uganda that I heard about in Zambia that I heard about in El Salvador, and I realized, oh, it's connected. And so it was really to these experiences, talking to people learning with people being there, and spending time in these places that it made me want to go back to school and learn more about, okay, how do these systems work together? You know, what are the global systems in place, that are affecting these types of outcomes and these parallels in very different places? And I think that, so I went back to school, say, Okay, let's get a Master's, let's learn what's going on. And I think, because I did that, it got me to a place of where I was became interested in. I don't want to just address the symptoms of global inequality, I want to begin to look at what are the systems themselves, and what kind of policies and what kind of mechanisms can be created to begin to deal with these systems to try and reduce global inequality. And so I think that's what drove me to start to look at policy, right and innovation policy in particular, as a way to kind of engage with this work in a different way.

Justin 19:10

Right. Yeah, that that makes a lot of sense. And, you know, one of my, one of my favorite professors from undergrad, shout out to Khalid Kadir he was a an engineer, and was really interested in like designing water systems and things like that for developing countries. You know, the story he would always tell about it is that he learned all the technical stuff pretty quickly. And then it wasn't until he started to look at in real life. It's like, okay, it's one thing to build like a well for water, but it's another thing of like, who gets to decide where that wealth is built and who gets to decide who has access to the water and is well even the right solution for that community. And you know, there's all of these like, things and then it kind of hits you in the face that that's like politics, right? Yeah, that's exactly its power. And it's all these things. And I think that that I relate a lot to like the way you're describing it, although I never had the experience of traveling to do development work. That's, that's really interesting. So then, is that when you went to MIT or Harvard?

Nai 20:25

So I started working with global development and innovation at MIT.

Justin 20:30

Okay, so you weren't at MIT. But you went to Harvard? Right? Yeah, I

Nai 20:33

ended up going to Harvard, and changed my life. People start asking me like, Wait, so what makes you think you can come to this community and fix it? And I'm like, I don't know what, what does make me think that Oh, yeah. I'm colonial mentality. So I don't know. I appreciate people who are patient with me, you're willing to try and educate me past my own? My own problematic assumptions at the time, because it really helped me grow. Sure. Yeah.

Justin 21:05

So I guess one way to kind of segue here is like, in that time, how did your view of UN you mentioned the problematic ways of thinking we all have those, of course. But how did your view of innovation change? Like during that period, I guess, like, how did you think about it before you started to do this work? And then how did it kind of evolve as you got more critical?

Nai 21:30

Yeah, I think that my thinking about innovation changed when I partnered with a really wonderful NGO, today, so that the women empowerment group and the Tehsil region of Uganda, and I learned a lot from Betty who ran this NGO and a business and we kind of partnered up and said, Hey, let's do this innovation workshop with children. And I was like, that's so cool. Let's do it. So we did it together. And what I began to do is we would have like these workshops over probably a month in Uganda and working with young people. And starting off the workshop, I was like, Okay, who's an innovator? What isn't innovation, and I started hearing things like Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs. Bill Gates,

Justin 22:22

really don't get enough credit. You know, they really don't. Yeah.

Nai 22:25

Not at all. And I'm like, I'm like, Okay. Anybody else? And, you know, and hear things like, oh, yeah, innovation, we need that you need to bring that here and, and things like that. And I'm like, wait, wait, wait. It's innovation seemed to her. In people's imaginations, the way people were conceiving it, not only in Uganda, but even at talks that I would go to back at, you know, MIT and places like this, was that innovation was something that occurred outside of the Global South. And that was taken to the global south. And I didn't like that. And when I heard these young people back telling me that the only innovators that they could imagine were all these white men, and no people in Uganda, I'm like, what, there's a problem here. And so I began to critically think about what is the discourse around innovation around who's an innovator who's, you know, really in a position to try and change our society and change, you know, change it through technology, and through systems and services. And the imaginary was largely that of either white and male, but certainly not Ugandan. And, and, and I was really troubled by that. Because I guess I was thinking that if the idea of who is in a position to remake this world is only, you know, only one picture is coming across. And that picture is so divorced from you and the people around you. This, this is a problem. And so on that level, I was like, oh, no, we're going to change that. We're going to learn about innovation and recognize ourselves as people who engage in innovation, produce innovation, and are innovators. So that was just like, my little activism coming out, like, yeah, the, you know, we got to do this, because guess what, can wait for people to do it, they may never come, it may not be what you want, you know, your lives, you know, what you need, and we're going to explore how we can export innovation and design around that. And then also, you know, back at some of the conferences, I was going to back in the US, I would hear people say things like, Oh, well, you know, we want to work with this organization. But you know, the people there don't really know how to handle it. And so, you know, we'll award the money to this western team who you know, kind of monitor and do that. And I was like, No, that doesn't feel right. Why is it that you know, I go to a conference with hundreds of people in the room, and this person who is As I'm providing money for different types of innovation causes around development says, Oh, well, you know, I don't really know if we can trust people. In this case, you mentioned people from Nigeria, from people from Nigeria, because there's a lot of corruption. I'm like, you live in America, there's a ton of corruption. Are you kidding me? And so it was just like, a very, wow. Yeah. And it was, it was like a really big conference. And so I just kind of, you

know, began to wonder is like, Huh, why is it easier for, you know, a student from one of these schools, who've maybe been to this country never or for like four weeks, can get, you know, grants for hundreds of 1000s of dollars. But people who are in these countries who are engaging in this work for years and years at a time, cannot get access to any of that funding to carry out the work of trying to create innovation, and engage in development in their own country. And then I was like, oh, it's the coloniality problem, again, in mindsets. And so this is where I was, like, I'm really interested in, you know, what are the critical narratives around innovation? And by, you know, looking at, not only decolonial ality, but also, I'm using words, and I'm not explaining them. Okay.

Justin 26:18

Well, I was gonna ask you about a few of them. Actually, I want to come back to the coloniality. In a second. But one question I had on that is, now, did you once you kind of switched your mindset, yeah. Did you start to like, observe, you know, ways that innovation was taking place, you know, somewhere like Nigeria, or Uganda? Or was it kind of more of a perception that these people weren't? People weren't given the opportunity? I mean, certainly, there were less fewer opportunities, right. But like, once you have this kind of perspective shifts, what were what were some of the things that you started to see as oh, we're not calling that innovation, but it is,

Nai 26:56

yeah. Everywhere. The thing is, you know, where there's people, there's usually problems and people are really, really good at trying to figure out how to solve them, how to address them, and how to create solutions. And so I think the idea that, you know, innovation is not occurring here, I think that what gets understood is innovation, that concept for me began to change. As I began to say, Oh, it doesn't only look like an app and Silicon Valley. Yeah, it can look really different. And, you know, it can be equally as valid. And so I think, once I began to kind of open my eyes around what innovation could include, I began to, like, see it all around me in new ways. And as that happened to me, I was like, Well, other people need to know about this.

Justin 27:45

My favorite definition, or the simplest definition of innovation, that I know that that seems to kind of work across contexts is like, it's to make a new, right. Like not to make something new. That would be invention, right. But But innovation implies kind of a remaking of something that's already there in a new way. That is better somehow, or more improved somehow. And is that is that a good definition? Or my my way off here?

Nai 28:15

No, I think that's a very useful one. And I think what I like that you pull out is that it makes better. And I think the idea of innovation making life better, it doesn't necessarily only have to mean, the bottom line, right, a financial benefit, but it can also mean, making things better in terms of people's daily lives, making things better in terms of how we think about, you know, our planet, and the use of resources. And so, I guess, kind of broadening the idea of, you know, innovation serving more than just the bottom line, but other types of end.

Justin 28:51

Yeah, not just not just the bottom line, and also not just technology, right? Yeah. Or like what we would normally think of is like, like you said, not just apps. Yeah, yeah. Are there any? No worries, I'm putting you on the spot. But were there any, like examples that you remember seeing in your fieldwork, where you were like, Wow, that's some innovation right there. But no one had like, kind of described it that way?

Nai 29:13

Yeah. Oh, that's a great question. Yeah. So like, I think with, with the workshop that I would do, we have kids think about what are the teens? Think about? What are the challenges going on in their communities? What are the resources around you? And how can we begin to use the design process and use our engagement with community to explore some possible ways of trying to address them, and they will come up with the coolest things like one one person, young person, I shouldn't call them kids because they would, they may not like, but um, came up with, you know, an evaporative like, a way to cool vegetables like in the market without lecture. City. So like through evaporative cooling, which was really awesome, and based off of, you know, different uses of, you know, working with clay and things like this that they had learned about because they talked to some of the brickmakers and their community. And, you know, I thought that was really, really cool. And they, you know, they began to say, Oh, this can be understood as a form of innovation as well. Innovation is not just Steve Jobs. And this is something that I can do right now that can help people in my community today at the market with the people that I talked to you to learn about what the needs were. And so I think that there's like, there's a lot of others as well. But I think this is when my idea of innovation, not only as an outcome, but also as a process that I think you alluded to earlier. Yeah, that's when it really cemented because then this became a mechanism to think about how can we address other things as well?

Justin 31:00

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. When did you start to get deep into the design stuff? Was that at MIT

Nai 31:10

to MIT? Yeah,

Justin 31:12

I think you're right today for our class and the MPA transformation by design.

Nai 31:18

awesome, you're awesome.

Justin 31:19

You're great. You know, I learned a lot from you. And in that class, and from, you know, Rowan, and Dan to of course. When did ya, like? What was your kind of introduction? And how did you start to get really into that stuff?

Nai 31:35

So I think my introduction, I think, came quite a bit from MIT. But after MIT later, I started working for a group called the National Innovation service. And yes, and then we're focused on how can we again, engage in innovation? Yeah. Primarily, they would engage in policy design and service design, right. And they would partner with cities, and try to think about how can we, you know, pursue this but also with the racial equity lens. And so I think that by initial kind of entry point into how design could be used around innovation in these types of things was definitely during my time at MIT. And I think I learned a lot more about how, you know, you don't just need to look at a technocratic approach. You can combine this with goals around equity and justice. And I think that pretty much blew my mind. And that happened at NIS. And what was really meaningful about that is, innovation can be used towards multiple ends, I think we've discussed and I think the the matter of, you know, how do we prioritize certain voices around that process, particularly those that are left out, becomes important when, you know, the outcomes of these processes will affect people's lives? Absolutely. So we, I think part of what NIS was really interested in doing was radically, you know, I guess reorienting how we thought about engaging people, not just around the outcomes, but from the, you know, trying to conceptualize what is the issue, thinking about how do we co design around that? And how can you know, different types of government institutions, co designs with impacted communities, particularly those impacted communities may be looking at some of these government entities like you're you the problem. So then,

Justin 33:38

right. We talked about this in our interview with George 80. Yeah, right. Yeah. Yes. check out that episode. listeners. Yeah, that's, that's really crazy. And that was all stuff that I had not. I didn't know really anything about

before. Yeah, this year. So what how did you end up at IIPP? It seems like with your CV, you could have could have gone a lot of different places. And what what made you choose IIPP?

Nai 34:04

I ended up choosing? Well, a few things. One, I was really excited about, you know, the opportunity to critically explore subjects around innovation, I decided to select data in particular. And I applied for a number of different programs. And as I was trying to think about, okay, where do I want to end up? Part of what happened is, I became less and less comfortable with putting myself into the development Global Development box, because I think that there are different ways that societies make progress, but I think that development discourse, to me has some linkages to coloniality that, that I'm not entirely comfortable with. And so, I was interested in thinking about okay, well, you know, what would you call it You are doing, if you didn't call it development, I was like, oh, yeah, I'm looking at innovation as well. Right, right. And so I began to kind of say, Oh, you need to broaden your horizons. And I started learning about different programs, IPP stuck out because I was really, really, really excited about some talks I had heard with Mariana mazzucato. And then also, I read some papers with Reiner and I was just like, Wow, this place is different, right. And it was really different than some of the stuff that I encountered what Harvard and I really liked these differences, meaning, I thought it was more progressive in some ways. And for me, it was really exciting to kind of join a department that I thought was trying to question the norm in ways that were constructive. And so I think that's kind of what drew me to the IPP. And,

Justin 35:55

yeah, definitely relate a lot to what you're saying. And yeah, I think for me, part of it was that there were some schools that were more on the critical side, and really progressive, but I often felt when I and I'm not a PhD student, but even for master's, master's, like a lot of times those programs, there's kind of a very hopeless vibe going on of like, the world is just so messed up in so many ways. And capitalism is just, you know, wrecking everything. Yeah. And it's like, fair enough, but like, what are we going to do? And I just felt, you know, there's always a handful of people at any good program that are on to the policy or advocacy side, but IIPP just had this quality for me of like, both of them seem to be mixed together. And you couldn't tell where one stops and the other ends? Yeah. And I'm just curious, well, what were the differences that stuck out to you, when you first like heard Mariana talk? Or or, you know, what were the things that kind of clicked with you that made you think that this was the this was your top choice?

Nai 36:58

Yeah, I think part of what stuck out for me, was this kind of idea that innovation was something that was occurring, removed from government had nothing to do with government and government was more of this passive entity that really just needed to respect the market and let it do what it do. And I'd like the fact that Mariana questioned that and said, No, actually, there has been a lot of engagement and a lot of mutualistic

benefit. And we need to acknowledge that not not tried to change that. And I really, really appreciated the way the at IPP, I think you alluded to this before as well, is their combination of trying to not only engage in research about what is happening and produce, you know, different types of theories around what is happening, but they're trying to produce tools, they're engaging in actively Marianna, is actively engaging with policymakers around trying to make the types of changes that we want to see in the world. And for me, that was really, really exciting. Because then it became a place of not just, you know, this is where I'm going to try and, you know, become an excellent researcher, so that one day I can engage around these things, but I can actually do that right now, while you're one student, and I thought that was profoundly powerful. And it really made the I mean, maybe I'm being too generous to myself here, but I feel like I have a little bit of the heart of an activist in me. Yeah. Which is probably the worst thing ever. I should I say that No, not at all. But to engage in the actual work of trying to change these systems and change policies right now. I find that really exciting. And that's summed up in the ivory tower. Exactly. Yeah, exactly.

Justin 38:51

Now, speaking of ivory towers, oh, did you know that you were going to be the first black PhD student?

Nai 39:00

Yeah, no, I didn't know until afterwards. But

Justin 39:03

what was that realization? Like? Yeah,

Nai 39:06

I realized that, you know, I got accepted, and I learned who would be coming. And when I realized that I was pretty, it was pretty, like nervous, like, Well, I'm gonna be the first one. I want to make sure that, you know, I use this experience to try and open doors for other people like me as well. But, you know, I feel really honored to to get to be hopefully, one of the first ones but not last. Yeah, no. But I think that I'm really excited to see new faces, new voices, and particularly those from people that often are not recognized. So women of color, not as much. I'm really excited that you know, to be in a place where that's changing. And I'm not the only woman of color. So what up to Javiera I'm not the only one. But I'm seeing like, going through a program that is beginning to change some of these norms around innovation, I think is really exciting. And to be, you know, maybe one of its first black PhD students, its first blank PAC. Man. I'm a first. I never thought I'd be one. But it feels really good. And I'm definitely not the last because we have other people and appropriate George the poet. Yeah. I think we have another student coming in, who was Yeah, I haven't met her yet. I haven't met her yet. But I'm really

excited that IPP can also be a place that is not only just trying to change the way that we think about innovation, but is actively bringing in the new voices and perspectives to do that, because that's not common in a lot of departments. And so it's really special.

Justin 40:51

And frankly, not common here yet. But you know, I think it kind of just goes to show it's really crazy how, even though I mean, I haven't spoken to all of them about this, but I think most of the people who make decisions at IPP are like people who do care about, you know, centering women of color, among other things, and yet, we're not quite there. Right. You know, we still have a ways to go, but I think you're the perfect person you came in at the perfect time and have the perfect mindset for it. Because it seems like you're someone who's not not too freaked out by it. And you're, you're like, let's, let's do it. Like, let's fix it. And you know, I think having your perspective on making on becoming more inclusive is gonna really make that process just go a lot better.

Nai 41:44

Oh, that's super cool. General. That's what I think that's really nice. Yeah. Yeah, I appreciate that.

Justin 41:50

Yeah, no problem. One random side note. How do you like London?

Nai 41:55

It's too gray. But

Justin 42:00

Minnesota and Boston are exactly the sunniest places in the world either. But

Nai 42:03

they're sunnier than this place. is really cool. has this really cool international

Justin 42:10

vibe that I love actually Camden Town?

Nai 42:12

Yeah, Campbell is fun. And I think that, you know, as things open up, I'm really really liking it a lot. Like, yeah, I'm really glad to be here experienced this global city, and I can walk on the street and hear you know, languages from everywhere.

Justin 42:31

Every type of person you could imagine. Yeah. And my girlfriend and I love to play that game when walking around. Yeah. And like, what language was that? You know, it's like, you know, she can generally pick out the Middle Eastern ones. I'm like, feel like that was either Romanian or Albanian. But yeah, I love that you can hear every type of every type of person I always say my flat my apartment building is like the United Nations, like, Oh, I really have every, and I really love that about it. So I'm glad that you're having a good time with it.

Nai 43:00

A good time, like really glad to be here. And I think one thing I forgot to say before that just Yeah, I remember now is part of when I knew that IIPP was right, for me, was a few things. One, I was looking on the site, and it was like, you know, want to see the site, see what's on there. And I saw the statement that they had prepared in response to the killing of George Floyd, and Black Lives Matter and how they had this, you know, department ladder and how everyone signed it, and how they were taking active steps to make a commitment to trying to create a better environment through, you know, however they could through their work. And I was like, wow, here's a place that you know, what, a lot of places didn't do that. And they did do that. And I saw that when I got here. And so it was really reaffirming to me, I think, to see a place really wanted to make their position clear. It was something that they cared about, that they held as something that was a part of how they would as an organization, try to move itself through the world. And for me, I found that very meaningful. And also, this is the right place for me. Good. And yeah, so that was that was a big part of it. And hearing Mariana talk about Black Lives Matter actively. Yeah. In a lot of her public appearances. I thought, okay, these people get it. I'm in the right place. So yeah, for

Justin 44:29

sure. Well, I'll have you know that you're you're already starting to develop a fan club because um, I had a new student from the new MPA class message today and was like, cuz we we had spoke a little bit about about doing a podcast together or something, but she messaged me and was like, hey, like, who are there any like black women scholars at IIPP Who you who you really like and I was like, not enough.

Nai 44:53

But you should be like, oh, man, that's amazing. Then of

Justin 44:57

course, Erica Kramer and Bula was the other one. Yeah, I was aware of that. I don't know her personally, but I really liked her lecture that she did for us. And so I think that that was a good sign for me that like day two of the new MPa, I'm already getting DMS. Like, that's amazing. We need Yeah. So anyway, I want to dig into a few of these big concepts that you're really into right now. But, you know, I asked you earlier how your perspective on innovation changed when you were doing all the development work. And now I'm curious like, in in the past, I guess it's been like nine months since you've been here. Yeah. Has your perspective on innovation changed? Or have you started to think about the economy or the state or anything in a different way? Since you've been here?

Nai 45:43

Yeah, I think then, since joining the IPP, that's definitely happened. I think in terms of my purview around what is innovation, and how's innovation is structured through policies and how to different types of government actors and the economy. economists think about that. That has definitely changed. It's broadened it. Part of what I believe my time at the IPP has helped me to realize is that innovation doesn't occur in a vacuum. There are a lot of policies and a lot of different mechanisms at play, around how it happens, where it happens, and when it happens. And even the stories that get told about about it. So I think that again, this has definitely broadened my, my, my awareness around kind of the interdependencies around innovation. And I think in terms of this idea of the directionality of innovation, being able to influence that, through this concept of the missions, blew my mind, like this was completely new to me. I learned about that through Marianas work. And I think that it's really, really timely because I think that this question of rethinking value and directionality, I think it can be very informative to how we think about different goals around equity and justice in relationship to these issues. And so yeah, it's, it's kind of like, everything is kind of, I don't know, it's, I don't know if an onion would be right, or a flower, but basically, going from like, a really technical approach to maybe, you know, broader questions of discourse now to looking at policy and the environment around which these things emerge. It's continued to grow in ways that I think are helpful.

Justin 47:36

That's really cool. Yeah, I really liked that idea to that, like, innovation has both rate and a direction. And it seems obvious once you kind of figure that once you kind of realize it, but I had never thought of that before

either. But now it's kind of like, yeah, like it, just saying you want innovation, you know, out of context really doesn't mean anything to be honest. Right? Exactly.

Nai 48:00

And there's a lot of things that are innovation, like, what is it? A drone is an innovation. Now, in terms of benefits to humanity? I don't know. But I mean, there's different types of ways of thinking about innovation. And so definitely, this place has been informative and make me think, oh, maybe we should interrogate that a bit more.

Justin 48:25

Well, I wanted to kind of, to finish out a few concepts that I know you're really interested in. So one is so like I said, You were my TA and transformation by design. And one of the concepts you introduced me to was designed justice. Yeah. Which I think comes from Sasha Costanza chock right. Yeah, exactly. Can you can you talk a little bit about that, and how you got into that? And, like, I guess what it means and how you kind of applied it to our course.

Nai 48:57

Yeah. So design justice, I think deals with thinking about how, you know, as, as people engage in design, and design processes, thinking about what are the, you know, the different dimensions around justice that can inform that and what happens when, you know, design is uncritically performed, you can oftentimes come up with outcomes that can enact different types of harm, or violence, not because anybody intends that to be the case, but simply because of the absence of having a justice lens to think through the these processes. And so I think this work was really informative, in a way in terms of broadening my idea beyond just this, you know, seeing design as a technical value neutral objective exercise and begin to think about, you know, even the choices that we make around what gets prioritized in the design, what are the constraints, these are political choices. And so, you know, thinking about, you know, okay, so how can justice maybe inform how we pursue different parts of the design process? And critically interrogate it. And I think that design justice is really useful, particularly in thinking about not only, you know, designs outputs, or you know, the different outcomes from these processes, but even in how they're performed, and who's engaged and who may not be engaged. How do we think about, you know, what, what gets prioritize what doesn't get prioritized, and I think design justice is a set of principles that can help people engaging in design, begin to think about that. And so I love the work oh, so happy that we explored it in our in our course. Yeah, and particularly as we talk about policy design and speculative design and these types of things, I think is really important for policy makers who make decisions about policies that impact people's lives, to see how they can use these principles. And so that was kind of my thinking around how we might be able to use these principles. Yeah, particularly as you guys engaged in your work, which was amazing. Oh, yeah.

Justin 51:18

So yeah, I was in a group project in that class, where we leaned on this concept heavily. It was kind of an interesting way that we went about it, because you gave us this thing. I think it was called the design justice scorecard. Yeah. Something like that. Yeah. And it was kind of like, you know, obviously, it's a very simplistic if you want to put it like that, like model of how design justice works. But it's basically a checklist, you know, of are you doing this, this this? And, you know, what we did was we basically did most of our project. And then, I don't know which one of us for one of us had the idea of like, hey, we wanted to incorporate this, let's just like great ourselves on this. Yeah, scorecard. And it became so obvious so quickly, how like, you know, there were, there were definitely some weaknesses in terms of, you know, we were interested in participatory design, but like, what does that actually mean? Like, how do you get people to participate? And, you know, is it really participatory, if you have like a couple of paid consultants running the design project, and then you're saying, like, hey, people in Bulgaria, who have no idea what we're doing, come to our session, you know, twice a week, for the next month, and devote your time to us. And at the end of it, you'll get something, you know, it's kind of like a weird, you know, there's a lot of things that become obvious once you take it out of the abstract of that of the design process. And you start to think, what would this looked like in the real world? And, you know, to me, it was really, I think the reason I had the confidence to do that is because you and Rowan and Dan and other people from the class, like had done things like this before. Yeah. And so it wasn't as Yeah, it wasn't as distant from kind of reality, we were able to say, actually, like, I've done a project like this before, and this is kind of that this was what happened with it and, and why participation was hard and things like that. But yeah, I really, that, to me is stuck in my brain, I think that's going to be one of those concepts, design justice that sticks with me, and I will have a political economist. So I was constantly trying to figure out how do we take these design techniques and think about economic policy in a different way? Or things like that? Yeah. And and yeah, I think that the design justice is such a good corrective to, like you said, the very, like presumed neutral, typical design method, right. Again, something that we talked at length with George about George J. But yeah, so thank you for bringing that in. Oh, no. Sharing that

Nai 53:50

Yeah. I'm so glad that it was useful to you, like I remember with your project, yeah. I was so impressed around how you emphasize whose voices are will be heard, which voices matter and, and kind of, you know, bringing humility I guess, to the work because I think that this is how you work with communities. This is how you begin to co create better types of tools and, and ways of approaching these things and I'm just so happy that I could serve as a TA and the you know, help in this way as you all explore this to your own work and so I'm really happy to hear that thanks

Justin 54:29

for the shout out to Nicole. So I can let my teammates because I certainly cannot be taking all that. But ya know, it was it was such a pleasure and and I think we got a lot more out of it because of you. Just keep it rolling. I'm so

Nai 55:03

Oh, no. Hi, how are you?

Justin 55:05

Doing? Well, thanks. So it's been almost a year since we last recorded a conversation with just you and I, although we've now recorded many podcasts. So as I was listening back to the interview from last year, the first part of it where we talked about your life and, and why you chose IPP, that was all good, but I just realized that it just made a lot more sense to, to follow up now, because you've made a lot of progress in your research and come a long way. So first of all, you just got upgraded,

Nai 55:43

I just got upgraded. Officially a PhD candidate, can you say just what does that mean? So basically, what it means is, I prepare a report and give a presentation. And basically, I'm trying to prove to my examiner's, and in the department that one I can carry out this research. And two, I've researched what is out there well enough that they believe that I can proceed to complete my research in a in a good manner. And so basically, it's like a huge hurdle. And to be over it. Yeah. Well, congratulations.

Justin 56:21

Thank you for that it was a it was a quite a hectic couple of months.

Nai 56:27

You're very kind to put it like that.

Justin 56:30

You know, I've learned that, you know, I didn't know much about academia to be honest with you before joining IPP for my masters. And I've learned that one of the worst questions you can ask a PhD student is how's your PhD going? Because there's a chance that it's a normal question.

Nai 56:48

If you want to see tears and gnashing teeth, just ask

Justin 56:52

that it just causes a total meltdown. So I'm trying to be careful. But yeah, you know, there's a lot to dig into. Could you just give me maybe a brief summary of of your research at IPP kind of the the big picture, and then we could do more into the, to the actual thesis work you've been doing?

Nai 57:11

Yeah, that sounds great. So basically, with my work, I'm looking at digital transformations that are occurring in the public sector. And specifically, I try to look at that with relationship to digital identity systems. So you can think of that as things like maybe digital IDs that might be tied to different types of biometric technology, and things like that, but how do we identify ourselves how their identity verified, these are the kinds of things that I'm really interested in learning more about with relationship to the state, because this is really determining people's ability to access their full civil and human rights within many territories in the world. And I look at that, in relationship to trying to understand digital transformations as determinants of health. And so how do they influence the non medical factors that shape different types of health outcomes, or people or communities risks, with relationship to health issues? And so this is what I'm looking at. To put it more simply, I'm trying to understand how do digital identity systems impact people's lives? And particularly, I look at that in Uganda, in Kenya,

Justin 58:29

right? So yeah, that's your your PhD upgrade is the global coded gaze on digital transformations as determinants of health case studies on digital identity ecosystems, and Kenya and Uganda, I don't know if that will be ended up being the title of your actual thesis. But there is a lot of information in there. And I feel like we could probably spend a good amount of time literally just talking about each of the each of the terms in that title. You know, we can talk a little bit more about digital identity and digital transformation in the public sector. Why did you choose to look at Kenya and Uganda?

Nai 59:07

So the reason I picked it pick Uganda and Kenya is a few reasons. One, as a person who is of Ugandan heritage, on my dad's side, I've always, you know, really, really enjoyed different types of opportunities to perform

research in that country, which I have for several years. And when I began looking into digital identity and looking at, you know, how different types of global initiatives are influencing how that's unfolding in different parts of the world, Uganda and Kenya came up as two really interesting case studies because while they both are implementing these systems quite differently, and they have different different types of trajectories that are shaping how that's happening now. They are some interesting parallels and differences and so in Kenya, they have a history of an analog biometric system that was used in the country by the British colonial administration. For fingerprints. It was like a little metal tag that people would have to wear called the kapondi with their fingerprints. And they'd have to get these passes signed off to move throughout the country, everyone had one, only, it was put in there. And it was only used for people who were black African people in Kenya, and who were male. And the idea with this system was they wanted to try and control how labor was dispersed throughout the country. And so the kapondi was something that became a tool that was used as a way of one extracting more value out of the country, but also a very oppressive thing that would lead to different types of rebellions later on. What's interesting is Kenya and Uganda, while they touch each other and shared the same type of colonial rule under Britain, that system was not put in place in Uganda. So these two places, while they had some similarities in terms of histories, particularly their colonial history is in terms of there were some divergences that key points that I think are influencing how digital identity systems today are kind of unfolding in each country. And so I thought it would be a really interesting way of looking at and comparing what's happening.

Justin 1:01:29

Yeah, no, that is really interesting. Why didn't before I get to the digital identity stuff, why didn't they implement the the biometric system in Uganda? The same? Yeah, didn't Kenya?

Nai 1:01:42

So? That's a great question. There are a few answers. I think one answer is, in terms of the or the different types of colonial administration were happening in each country. And so this is something that I kind of get into in my report based off of the work of us amigable, Daron Acemoglu from I believe MIT. And in terms of Uganda versus Kenya, Uganda was a place where there was more of a place of colonial extraction rather than settler colonialism. And so it wasn't a case of where they were trying to build up governance institutions, for populations of white people at European primarily people who are moving into Uganda, whereas with Kenya, there was quite a bit of settler colonialism because

Justin 1:02:34

Kenya was less of a less seen as just a resource hotspot, because Uganda has lots of natural resources, right? Whereas Kenya was more probably desirable for its like, geographic position of like as a ports and more of a problem agriculture. Yeah, as far as I know. And so one was a more extractive kind of colonial system, and the other was more of a thought of as a place for settlement. Exactly more similar South Africa, maybe,

Nai 1:03:07

exactly. That's exactly it. And also in terms of like disease and things like that, oh, Uganda, there was a lot more different types of diseases that made it really hard for European settlers to really establish themselves in their country. So there was this interesting divergence, right? But there would be lots of talks and debates around trying to bring that system to Uganda. And a lot of people ganda said, No, we don't need it. So it actually it didn't actually, it wasn't politically, I think, as it probably wasn't, as politically necessary to the British Empire. And also, when they would try to bring this up over and over again, with political leaders in Uganda. Each time it was rejected. And so yeah, and a lot of the Ugandan leadership looked at what was happening in Kenya, around the different types of rebellions and protests. And he said, Now, we don't want that. So actually, it never really happened in Uganda. Right. But it's interesting because, well, because of that today, where there's a really high level of civil registrations in Kenya, it's a really, really low level in Uganda, which means that in terms of how digital identity systems are working, because you have to be registered with the government and have your birth registration, right, um, Uganda, is having a lot more problems around just getting people recognized in these systems, versus Kenya until different divergences, because they have different histories around that.

Justin 1:04:32

Right? I haven't read through all of your PhD yet, but I read through some parts of it's very long. Yeah. Well, no, that's just that's, that's, it is what it is. You say how digital identity, you know, is basically a extension of legal identity, right? So even before there was digital identity systems, like you said, there were these analog identity systems, but those themselves are tied to concepts like citizenship and in general, just being recognized, having a recognized legal identity with the government is kind of the big thing that predates any kind of digital. Right? Even, even in countries like, you know, like the United States where there's no formal national ID system, there's still a legal identity, in a sense, right, that that could, you know, in pretty much every country, I think there's some kind of legal identity system.

Nai 1:05:31

Yeah. So yeah, I think that there. I think here, there are definitely legal identities a part of many countries, I think that what's interesting is, if we kind of look at, there's different types of identity. And so there might be more of the functional identity that you use in your everyday life. Yeah, but that's not. And so that might be something like maybe a driver's license, that can be an example of that, or a passport, that could be another example. And we can use those to make sure that we can meet a lot of our different needs in everyday life. But foundational identity, so that might extend from like your birth, registration of your birth and stuff like that. They establish that you as a human being exist. That's another type of identity, that's really important. And then in terms of legal identity, legal identity is really interesting, because it's trying to one establish people's foundational identity, right. And there's probably a functional element, but it's kind of not very likely that I'm going to walk

around with my birth certificate to move around in life, I'm going to use other types of functional identity to establish and verify my identity. So what why this is important, I think, to distinguish is because now when we look at digital identity, digital identity should operate primarily as maybe a functional identity, but it's being used a functional form of legal identity, but it's also now being used as to establish people's foundational identity. And what that means is, in many countries, I don't have to be a citizen of that country to have a digital identity. I can be maybe I'm a non permanent resident, maybe I am a permanent resident, but maybe I'm not necessarily a citizen, but you can still get a digital ID, right. What's happening in some places now is legal identity is becoming conflated with citizenship. And the problem with that is you can be born in the country, you can have maybe a birth registration, but it doesn't necessarily translate into people's ability to get digital identity, which is really problematic and could

Justin 1:07:57

potentially cut your cut off your rights and your access to government services. Yeah, and things like that, right?

Nai 1:08:04

That's happening for many people. And so like, I believe, in Uganda, about up to a third of the population of people, they don't have digital identity, they might have other forms of identity. But as more and more things behind closed behind this digital identity card, which is in that country called the Indigo Moon till then these other forms of functional identity become they're not useful for people to access the services. And so this came up around COVID, where there were at first a lot of people who couldn't get vaccinated, because they said, we're only going to make it available for people who have their digital identity, which meant that a lot of people were not able to get help. That later changed after it was brought to the court. But I think this is an example of how legal identity doesn't only have to be digital identity, right? And there needs to be something in between, particularly as they transition towards digital identities. So people are not left out.

Justin 1:09:08

Right? It seems like if you wanted it to be functional, in all cases, you would want something that could be used digitally, or, you know, if the computers go down, you know, what happens if you know, we're just relying on the computer systems and digital systems only in all cases, and then a natural disaster hits or something like that. Right. This is a great question. I'm sure it's happened. Yeah. So there's a bunch of real world examples of it. Also, there's the other approach, which, you know, like in the US, there's no natural national identity system. So they basically just said, just show up at your local Walgreens and we'll give you a vaccine because there was no way to possibly verify Yeah, everybody so they were just giving them out in the UK it was like slightly, it was slightly more formalized where anyone that had an NHS number could go in and get it. But then I believe they would, you could get it if you didn't have the NHS. Number two, I don't know exactly how they manage that. But obviously, in Uganda, they didn't have unlimited vaccines in the way that Western countries did. So they had to

have some, they were just more scarce. So they just couldn't give them to anyone that walked into a place. So then they, you know, they ended up in the process of trying to narrow it down to people who are eligible, quote, unquote, excluded a lot of people who should have been eligible by any standard, right,

Nai 1:10:41

yeah, and a lot of the people that get excluded under you know, this is kind of implementation problems. But most of the people who may not have their digital identity items, they tend to mostly be women then tend to also predominantly be older people. And it tends to predominantly be people who live in more rural areas. So rural communities, which means that it's not just happening across the whole population. It's basically huge segments of the population particular blocks and groups

Justin 1:11:13

searches completed, right? Can I ask about that? Okay, old people, that makes sense. They never logged on to the website to get an ID, people in rural areas. Why Women though,

Nai 1:11:24

they had problems with getting the but so with the digital identity system, right now in Uganda, they wanted to be biometrics authenticated, yes. And so what that means is, they might scan your iris, or they might have you use your fingerprint, to verify your identity with this card. And for a lot of people who are older, maybe, you know, the technology doesn't always work as well, with people who are older. Sometimes people who work in agriculturalists, or in farming, it can rub off the fingerprints. And so it's really hard for the machines to pick their fingerprints, sometimes they can't. For iris scans, they were having problems with using the technology on on older people as well. And so in terms of like the technology, the technical issues itself, there's a lot of Miss reads, or just inability to really serve that population, which is quite negative, particularly when this is a population of people that might rely on different types of public benefits that they can't get access to. Otherwise,

Justin 1:12:25

why are women disproportionately affected by this?

Nai 1:12:28

Yeah, so for women, I'd have to look more at it. What I was reading about it is women are excluded, they tend to be excluded, because one, it costs maybe money to get to different areas to prove the identity get everything

together. And so in terms of different types of marginalization for people who are women, I think it extends over into this area as well. And so yeah.

Justin 1:13:00

You know, can I just say, I do want to talk a little bit more about the, just the digital identity thing, one little nugget that I came across in your thesis that just I feel like I have to bring it up, because it blew my mind. Yeah, was that the concept of biometric verification was created at our very own university, but not necessarily in a good way. So So I have a little quote, Sir Francis Galton of Victorian era scientists and British Regenesis, coined the term eugenics, promoted scientific racism and established his laboratory at UCL in 1904, making UCL the institutional birthplace of both biometrics and eugenics. And I read online that, you know, from 1904, the Galton laboratory operated and that it was eventually I think, absorbed by the biology department. And I think it switched, you know, eventually it switched away from eugenics to like genetics more, but even so, how did you come across that piece of data? And what are your what do you think about it?

Nai 1:14:12

Yeah, I was, I was reading one day, and I came across it. And I was surprised. I was like, let me just go check this out. And so I visited the UCL archives, and I learned that yeah, they do have golden papers here. And you can go look at the little cards of how he categorized different groups of people and to racial categories and all kinds of stuff, but it's, it's true, and I was like, wow, what are the odds? I'm here?

Justin 1:14:40

And, you know, I know that eugenics was a huge thing on the day and I know that Keynes, you know, John Maynard Keynes was famously I think, the president of the Eugenics society and things like that. So it wasn't like a, you know, it was a very mainstream kind of way of way of looking at the world in which you describe a scientific racism, I think, in our current frame that's accurate. Was this like, you know, skull measuring? Or was this like a little bit more technical,

Nai 1:15:14

like cranial metri. So they believe there's certain types have physiological features that they could use to determine who might be more degenerate, or who might be more prone to crime, like, these were the types of things that were being investigated. And I think that it's really important to highlight that, you know, this is why part of why I love IPP innovation is political science is political, it's not neutral. And part of you know, what was happening around this period is, you know, these, these types of the scientific racism was used to justify different types of imperial expansion, and treatment of populations, sometimes violent treatment, this idea of

White Man's Burden, because you know, these groups of people, they're gonna be able to do anything otherwise. But I think it's kind of like, the idea of what was taught to be objective, yes. And how science can sometimes be be said to, you know, have this veneer of objectivity was very ideologically driven, and connected to other types of political ambitions that were going on in the country. And even with Francis Galton, in terms of, you know, coming back with the idea of biometrics and how they can be put to use that happened after he spent some time in South Africa. And if you read much connected to the material, exactly, exactly how colonial administrations could better manage the populations, and it was really, really quite jarring to kind of read some of his letters. Did you get a sense of time there?

Justin 1:16:48

Did you get a sense of what that biometrics looked like in 1904? You know, yeah, are probably a little bit later than that, that the Africa stuff was happening right? Around that time.

Nai 1:16:59

So in terms of biometrics to areas where it became quite common to use was around Kenya. So they had the Conde system, which I mentioned, and also in South Africa. And it was kind of areas where they featured more colonial forms of settler colonial

Justin 1:17:19

to segregate population, exactly,

Nai 1:17:21

so great populations and monitor how populations could move and restrict primarily black populations from different types of movements. It was interesting, Gandhi would be there in South Africa during some of the campaigns against the biometric system in South Africa. Because he came there, and he was there. And against the use of that in South Asian communities, though, in South Africa. And so there are different types of protests against it being dehumanizing, criminalizing populations. And it being seen as a technology of power that was very much used to restrict, and further marginalize

Justin 1:18:03

is kind of a, it's kind of a difficult, or I don't really exactly know how to ask this question. But I'm curious how you see, like, do so. So on one level? If you're if your goal is to segregate all the black people, from the white people,

which it was in apartheid, and in Kenya, why did they need all this biometric technology? I mean, I understand the complexity of like, you know, someone's half black or something, but like, Was this just kind of a way of justifying what they were doing in a technical kind of scientific way? Or do you see it as like, you know, was it more complicated than that? I just don't understand why they even needed this technology in the first place. Or what, you know what I mean, it needed it in the sense of needed it to control the population in the way that they wanted to and that imperialist way. Why did they need biometrics?

Nai 1:19:06

I think the way that I've seen that explained, which is maybe not so different than some of the stuff that comes up today, is the effective management of populations. And it was creating a more efficient way of doing that. And so like in the case of South Africa, by, you know, getting everybody's biometrics giving people these unique identifiers. They would use other types of technology to help make more efficient how they manage populations, one of the companies that was really foundational in helping South Africa to do that, and then later, Kenya was IBM. And so eventually, they

Justin 1:19:47

were quite a history, right. They also worked for the Nazis. Yeah,

Nai 1:19:50

they did. And some of that technology that was developed during that really painful event in history would go on to be used in other places like South Africa, and Kenya after World War Two, or after World War Two, this happen after this

Justin 1:20:05

was like, just basically because governments need big computers to around this in the, you know, mid 20th century started needing computers to do all their

Nai 1:20:15

Yeah. But also the more efficient, I think, make more efficient some of the ways in which they were managing populations. And I think that, you know, it might be tied, identify people, but I think ultimately, it's to help make more efficient how they control different populations. And I think that with digital identity, I'm not saying digital identity is bad, or it's not useful. What I am saying is, when you have a system that can affect so many, there's

be a proportionate level of scrutiny around how these systems work, how they might affect different populations, and to try and ensure that it's not used in ways that cause harm. And so I'm like, can we work with digital identity in ways that are more beneficial? Yeah,

Justin 1:21:10

right. I guess I would just finish off what you were just saying, you know, luckily, UCLA has made some progress. Sir Francis Galton is burning in hell right now. Somewhere down there. And rightly so. How do you see the role of, of digital identity in this bigger picture of public sector? Digital transformation? I know, that's a huge question. Because it very much depends on the country, and the context. But But I guess, in the work that you're doing, how do you see that those two things being connected the identity and the digital transformation?

Nai 1:21:59

Yeah, so I think, with digital transformation, particularly in government, sometimes people refer to kind of it as, sometimes as a digital stack. And so these are like the three foundational layers that can facilitate other types of digital interactions, and so foundational, maybe the first level of that is digital identity, then the next level might be digital payments. And then the next level might be different types of data or digital exchanges. And I think that in terms of before you get to the level of payments and exchanges, really, really underlying that is digital identity, how do we make ourselves legible to these systems, and as you know, these systems kind of collect more data about us. And through interoperability standards, they can kind of combine it with other other areas, you know, that are a part of our lives. What does this mean for our relationship to the state and form how that changes the balance of power between citizens and the state people and the state government? And so I think that part of why look at digital identity exists, I see it as how do we first make ourselves legible and known to the state? And what happens if we are not? I think it's a really interesting area to look into. And I think that it will tie into so much other stuff is

Justin 1:23:28

extremely interesting. So the process you just described of like, digital identity, and then things like payments, and then you know, things like data exchange. In some countries, it didn't quite follow that pattern, right? So there's some countries where you don't have a national digital identity system. It's much more kind of decentralized, which I think some scholars have argued that that is actually the source of a lot of issues, in many countries is that they never had this foundation, and they just built up. And so if your identity gets mixed up, and I personally have had the experience of having my having a case of mistaken identity, and it's an absolute nightmare to fix, yeah. Which, you know, you you would assume that if we did have one standardized way of doing it, it would be simpler to make a correction that may not be true. So is that how it happened in in Kenya and Uganda, though, where the digital identity kind of came first in their process of digital transformation?

Nai 1:24:33

No, definitely not. I think it was primarily digital payments. And a lot of those payments actually, right? Yeah. Kenya M PESA. Was digital, like digital financial transactions. And basically it worked with the telecoms not with the banks. And so this is why people were able to do it through their phones. And actually, that one was a really interesting history because m PESA started off as a project with deferred which is the United Kingdom's? What is it called?

Justin 1:25:03

Yeah, it's the it was a UK Government initiative. And then it's through this Safari calm, which is the mobile telecoms monopoly in Kenya, which is one reason why I know a bit more about this topic is Yeah, Kenya was the first country to really have a mass movement of digital payments. And it was before smartphones, all using the phone system, and you could text each other minutes and minutes became like a type of digital currency. And there's all these interesting histories, you can read about this. Only really possible because they had a telecoms monopoly that basically everyone had the same phone company. If you were to try to interoperate that between two or three providers, it probably wouldn't have worked. But the result is like they had an incredibly efficient digital payments system in like, 2005. Yeah, way before anyone else did. I was I was meaning to ask that, yes, that have any relationship to that digital ID thing?

Nai 1:26:05

I think that it could in the future, because now with digital identity, in order to get SIM card for cell phone, there connecting that to people need to be able to share their digital identity, or their biometric details. Yeah, I think there was a case where I think this was a Nigeria, which is has the largest digital identity system, national digital identity system on the African continent, where they started shutting down people's SIM cards, who wasn't connected to like their digital identity information.

Justin 1:26:38

And what happens if I just am a foreigner that goes into a place and trust by SIM card? Yeah,

Nai 1:26:43

I think what I've had to do in the past, the last time I was there was 2018, I'd have to share my passport.

Justin 1:26:49

And you basically get a digital identity.

Nai 1:26:52

I'm not sure they gave me a digital identity. But I know that I had to provide my passport with my, which has my biometric information on it. But I'm not. It's not clear to me if they actually created a digital identity for me within the national Ugandan

Justin 1:27:08

restaurant. Right? Right. Yeah. No, that makes sense. And then what about in Uganda? Was it kind of similar? Or was payments first in Uganda to or? Um,

Nai 1:27:17

no, Kenya was really advanced with that. I think that in Uganda now people can do something like the M PESA. Payment, I think through through MTN I hear and stuff like that you can pay bills and stuff like that. MTN is also another huge telecom company, I believe, a South African one that also has like a huge service in, in Uganda. But I am less sure about some of the telecom background. Yeah, but just from my experience. I think that this thing that happened in Nigeria, that happened really recently, so probably, that's since cold, I don't know if it was 2020, or 2021, or somewhere like that. And it was a large outcry around it. But I think that it's just an example of how digital identity is being introduced on top of other types of digital systems, which have already started to emerge in the country. I think what's different is, this is one that's being led by by governments primarily, rather than just private industry.

Justin 1:28:20

Right? Yeah, that is an interesting point of, in some countries, I'm sure that the digital identity thing is like, started by companies, and then kind of eventually adopted by the government. In other cases, it's probably going to be created by the government and then privatized in various ways or contracted out. That is super interesting. One last thing I wanted to ask about this, because there's obviously so much to this topic. Yeah. But in the interest of not having a three hour lunch. Can you talk a little bit more about that link between digital identity and health outcomes? Yeah, because you've chosen to focus on health. And I know you already mentioned the case of COVID vaccines, which is obviously just such a, such a perfect example of this, this dynamic you're describing. Are there other ones though? And, you know, it just seems to me like this connection between digital identity and health is like, probably applicable, far beyond Kenya and Uganda. Right? But just

like in general, how, how have you started to think about that connection between digital transformation and identity and

Nai 1:29:30

then health? So basically, this idea of digital transformations as determinants of health came from a paper that came out from the lancet and Financial Times commission on governing health futures 2030. And the concept posits that a values based approach to the governance of digital transformations, both within and outside of healthcare can mitigate against harm and promote opportunities for human health and well being and specifically mitigate against structural harm. And so I became really interested in using this concept to begin to think about one, how can we identify how structural harm permeates through digital systems, and to what can be done to diminish that. And so looking at these systems in terms of not only what types of individual harms couldn't be affected, but what type of structural harms can be affected as well. And I thought that just broaden the scope of how we could interrogate. When I say these systems, I'm looking at digital identity, but digital identity is just one type of digital public infrastructure. And I think that this concept was really useful in beginning to help me think about how to structural harm moved through these systems. What can be done to diminish that, and really connecting it to this idea of structural structural violence? What does Structural Violence look like in digital systems? And so through this concept, I'm trying to understand how does it affect people's access to education, people's access to housing, people's access to jobs, to all of the non medical factors that can really impact somebody's well being quality of life and ultimately, their health? And so I use this concept trying to bring together the different types of challenges that people experience through through the language of health determinants. Yeah.