

## **The Henceforward Episode 28**

### **“I don't know if a city ...can be liveable” – Interview with Nasma Ahmed**

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here, we come to the table to discuss settler colonialism and anti-blackness, but more to imagine shared features and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Eve: This episode was recorded at the Toronto Circle Lab at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. We hope that this will be a place where recordings are made in order to forward Indigenous sovereignty and Black freedom for many years to come.

Nasma: Technology replicates systematics inequalities, always replicates systematic inequalities based off of for example the people that build the technology, the data that feeds into the technology. It is built off of that. That is why I really try my best to engage the people who are on the ground, because they know what's up.

Sefanit: Welcome back to The Henceforward. My name is Sefanit. In today's episode, I interview Nasma Ahmed, founder of the Digital Justice Lab. The Digital Justice Lab works alongside technologist, community activists, and policymakers to share a better understanding of technology and its impacts.

Nasma talks about how the Digital Justice Lab came to be, the work that she is doing, and also share some important critical considerations about how cities are being built in changing at this present moment.

Enjoy the episode.

Sefanit: You ready?

**[Vocal Exercise]**

Nasma: Okay. Let's go for it.

Sefanit: Welcome back to The Henceforward. I have Nasma Ahmed here with me, director of the Digital Justice Lab, and doer of all things, really. Hi, Nasma.

Nasma: Hi, everybody. I'm so happy to be there.

Sefanit: Yeah. We're happy to have you here. We can start by jumping right into the work that you do. Can you tell our listeners a little bit more about the Digital Justice Lab?

Nasma: Yeah. The Digital Justice Lab is focused on building a more just and equitable digital future. It sounds super broad and vague, but part of that is because the issues that we're dealing with in regards to the impact of technology really knows no borders.

The lab focuses on three key areas. One is public education so how we talk about the impacts of technology, and really trying to push away from this individualistic idea that it's like all your fault why you are just contacting people online, and only communicating online or you know, that you don't care about your privacy.

We're really trying to create like accessible materials for people to kind of make meaningful decisions around the just continuous impact. The second piece is capacity building, so working with community orgs, with governments, to figure out what our best strategies moving forward, as we're thinking about city building, as we're thinking about gendered cyber violence, really a broad stroke.

The third piece, thinking about the legal and policy round, so how can we get more diverse communities engaged in the technology policy conversation, and really thinking about communication as a human right, and the ideas around Digital Justice Lab really came through from the work happening in Detroit where a coalition came together and created a set of principles.

We are using those set of principles and building upon it and using it as our foundation of how we think about technology or interactions, how we think about community ownership, how we think about cities and really trying to create a space where people can have the uncomfortable conversations around technology, share their fears, share their worries, share the happiness that it brings them. It's a really wide variety, but at the end of the day, our focus is on justice and equity.

Sefanit: It's seven months old now. It launched in Toronto in May, May of 2018.

Nasma: Yup.

Sefanit: What types of things have Digital Justice Lab been up to since its beginning?

Nasma: It's kind of wild that it's been seven months, because I've actually been doing this work in the intersections of social justice and technology for the past couple of years. The last seven months have really been an opportunity to really talk about what does digital justice mean in the context of this country we know as Canada, and the city we know as Toronto, really trying to figure out what does rights look like in the context of the digital age.

Lately, what we did, one of the bigger campaigns we ran was called the Digital Rights Community Grant Program. It was \$1,000 to \$3,000 micro grants that were spread out across the country to really support people in having those local conversations around consent, around privacy, around digital safety for queer folks, queer children. There's a children's book that someone's working on.

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For example, the Intersect TO work which is bringing like BIPOC folks, Black, Indigenous People of Color, technologists, designers in Toronto and really creating space for them to talk about justice, to talk about equity, to talk about their role in technology.

That was one of the kind of larger public education campaigns that we ran, and so we'll kind of see the results of that work in the next couple of months. We've also been hosting a lot of events in the Toronto area because we're physically located here, and so that has been from thinking about futures to creating space for designers and technologists to really engage in critical practice around their work and their role in technology. It's been a wide variety in that case.

Then also, because the space is not necessarily super new in Canada, but the lens that we're taking on digital technologies is a little bit different here, so really trying to create capacity, so working with community organizations to build strategies and really playing the role of a translator.

That's my job a lot of time is translating the things that are going on and how it impacts the communities that I care about the communities that are most impacted from low income workers to folks thinking about housing, so really trying to make those connections because technology plays a role in every aspect of our life now.

Sefanit: Yeah, for sure. One of the events that you just gestured towards, and that happened more recently in December of 2018 was the Alternative Urban Futures event in Toronto, and that event had multiple pieces to it. Part of it was a panel of Black and Indigenous peoples thinking about Alternative Urban Futures, and then there was various small, short talks and resources provided from people talking about things from tech justice to surveillance.

The different issues that are relevant, and then there was also the gallery portion of it. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit more to that event, the different pieces, but also how it went, what came out of it, the conversations that were held there.

Nasma: Yeah. The gallery was really trying to highlight people of color, Indigenous folk in regards to how they think about the future, so that was one piece of it. We have photography installation, we had poetry, we had video installations.

It was a really good opportunity to really highlight young people's voices and how we are thinking about futures, but really the concept about the alternative urban features conversation was really coming out of my frustration around "smart city" dialogue like the idea of technology being implemented in larger scale in cities, so that was one thing that I've been thinking about, and also, future city conversations that were happening.

There's so much conversation about the future, and one thing that made me feel so uncomfortable is in those conversations around the future, whether it be the events that I was going to or the spaces that I was in, BIPOC folks weren't really there, they weren't present, because they were not people who are paid to think about the future. That's something that we have to consider.

In many ways, it's hard to see ourselves in a future that doesn't really want us, and have to be honest about that. How do you see yourself in something that you don't inherently believe in? For example, people with continuing capitalistic practices in the future. That's not the future that I want, so how am I supposed to participate in that conversation around future cities, for example?

The reason why we had such a diversity of conversation, it was like from surveillance what you know, David Murakami Wood who's out of Queen's talked about planetary surveillance, which often when I get into those conversations, it's terrifying, then also talking about Indigenous data, and Indigenous data justice with Michelle Murphy talking about sex work and its role in placemaking.

All the conversations were so broad but the way I see cities, in the way I see the future, it includes all of those components. It includes how we talk about being seen and being watched. It includes how we talk about sex workers and how we create space. It concludes how we think about community and how we think about our relationship with Indigenous folks and also our future is also thinking about our allyship and our connection, and so that's why it was such a diverse conversation.

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I think a lot of people that were there were kind of shocked that we were having all these bajillion conversations or like, wait, what's going on? But that's what cities are. Cities are a combination of all of these pieces, from labor to housing; everything. It's all part of cities.

When I'm thinking about alternative urban features, it has to include all those conversations especially given the current landscape where in Toronto for example, we have the sidewalk project, right? The Sidewalk Toronto Project, which poses a really good example of what we don't want to see in the city.

Sefanit: I think it's interesting too because -- so part of the platform of Digital Justice Lab is public education capacity building. I think you name those as really important

work that needs to be happening because part of the issue is that you have these projects coming in, and I think that people who maybe not be organizers or actively engage in that capacity are still going to see the ways that this is going to impact them, or they still sense and feel and know the realities of like this isn't really for us, or isn't in our best interest.

But I feel like sometimes, the issue is language or understanding exactly what parts of these are dangerous to us or invasive or unethical. Part of what the event opened up, part of what the work that you're doing is opening up is allowing people to kind of figure out the ways like this -- kind of understanding how to explain what about this doesn't account for us, and what things that we need in our communities to actually sustain our communities.

I think about, during the installation, the documentary that Manny put together where now, which is talking about all these voices from different Black Torontonians who have a wide array of experiences, some of them being newer to the city, some of them being born and raised in the city, but experiencing the ways of the city is or isn't livable, and more often than not, is not livable for Black young people, for Black families and things of that sort.

We're thinking about a Sidewalk Project, we can say that that doesn't feel right, but I think that what takes us a step further is saying like, all the way that these breaches are going to be harmful to us and having the language around how to explain that to other people.

Nasma: Yeah. I think that's exactly what like I ended up having to do. The biggest conversation that I have often with organizers is organizers know what they're doing in their specific area. They understand that because they have to whether you're a housing activist, you know your stuff but unfortunately, what happens when for example, a project like a smart city project happens, it's not the norm.

It makes it difficult for people to engage in it in a meaningful way, to be able to navigate like they've navigated with developers for example, real estate developers, what the game is.

I think that's been the hardest part in this conversation is like I believe that there is -- people already have an idea of the future. People have requested. We all have ideas of what we want to see. People have spent time and years trying to figure out what is the best possible option. For example, ACORN talking about deep affordability.

My thing is when technology comes into the play, when tech-esque projects come into play, it's very hard to figure out what are the power politics because the ecosystem is no longer the same ecosystem you've operated in. There's a new game being played. How do you support people in recognizing that you have your expertise and this expertise is absolutely necessary in this conversation that this is

a place for you to engage because this is your city, first of all, that's one piece of the puzzle, but also you know what is necessary, you know what is needed.

You have a good instinct about what is right and what is wrong, but we make this smart city conversation, we make conversations around technology so meta and so far-fetched that you can't even engage in it.

Sefanit: Yeah. So impossibly far from what our day to day lives look like as if it has no interaction with it, as if the work that we're doing has no relevance to it or has no way of impacting or pushing out back against it, right?

Nasma: Exactly, and technology. It's always important to remember. Technology replicates systematic inequalities, always replicates systematic inequalities based off of, for example, the people that build the technology, the data that feeds into the technology, it is built off of that.

That is why I really try my best to engage the people who are on the ground, because they know, they know what's up. This is just a different realm possibly and making people comfortable with the fact that the technology sector, in many ways, benefits from the fact that they have made it feel so farfetched. They had made it seem as if you need to be an expert in artificial intelligence to engage in conversations around X, Y. That's bullshit.

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It's about making that space between the big tech sector and folks who are working on the ground smaller because those are the people who can keep folks accountable. Those are the folks who have fought for affordable housing, who have fought for social programming, who have fought for all of these pieces that exist in creating space in a city, but I think that we're in a space now that people are starting to see what's happening.

Whether it be like the RCMP surveilling Black folks, the Toronto police doing also their own shady tactics which we will see with ShotSpotter which is a surveillance technology that just decided that they're not going to use anymore even though they shouldn't have gone to begin with.

I think people are starting to feel uncomfortable, and so there's these bridges that are really coming together and people are connecting around the fact that they're seeing the connections, they're seeing this larger ecosystem, this larger power play. I think that's the only way we can move forward because we need to be the center of those conversations.

And also, we negotiate what it means when we talk about the future because not all of us want capitalism to exist. That's real. That's the uncomfortable stuff that people don't want to talk about.

I think that's part of honestly, my job is to hold space, is to hold space for the uncomfortable conversations, is to hold space to help with that translation, to kind of bring people up to speed, not disrespecting their existing knowledge and awareness because that's my role, just translating this work and being able to provide a space that people can make meaningful decisions, not shaping the solutions because I don't know what the solutions are going to be.

I'm one person of many, but it's just I don't know, and so it's just like how can I create the space for people to think through solutions and to mess up and to like you know, maybe they don't know how the internet works, fine, like you don't need to know how the internet works, how conversations about internet access, right?

Just making people feel more comfortable and critically engaging because the more we're able to tag into the conversation in meaningful ways, the easier it will -- I think the better it will be in regards to our resistance because I'm not anti -- actually, I am anti big tech, honestly, let's be real. I am very anti big technology companies, but there is alternatives.

There are cooperative models to how we think about technology. There are different ways of operating that exists in the world that we can get to. I'm trying to see the future as not doom and gloom all the time.

Sefanit: I think it might be helpful to talk a little bit more about what the Sidewalk Project is and how it's being talked about, what it means for the city of Toronto, where it's at in this present -- I mean this is being recorded in February 2019.

Nasma: Yeah. Thank you for letting me provide context. That's important. The Sidewalk Project is an initiative that's partnered between Sidewalk Labs which is a sister company of Alphabet which owns Google and a lot of other companies. Waterfront Toronto was looking for essentially an innovation partner for the Quayside, so about 12 acres of land.

Sidewalk Toronto is actually the partnership between Waterfront and Sidewalk Labs to experiment and to create their Master Innovation Development Plans. It's called their MIDP. The MIDP has to get approved by the city, the province, and the Feds. It's their development plan for the area. That does not mean that the project gets approved if that goes through because there is zoning issues. It's a city, so there's a lot of other issues that come up.

It's been about 15 months since the project was announced, about 15 months. At this stage, from what we've heard where in the next two to three months, we should get the first draft of the master innovation development plan that will be sent over to the city, the province, and the Feds.

From there, the process is that they have to do public engagement on that. When I say “They,” I mean the city has to do public engagement, the province, it’s a whole lot of engagement to kind of figure out where people like it, don’t like it prior to even it being publicly published, it needs to be sent to those three partners again, and then they sieve through it. It’s a whole entire process.

When we get the public version of it, there’s going to be public discourse with the city of Toronto about what our take is on it, and then the city votes on it, the province will make their decisions, the Feds will make their decisions, because they all have representation on Waterfront board.

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We’ll find out when the Master Innovation Development Plan happens like the actual core ideas because right now, it’s been fairly vague around what they actually want to happen because they’re trying to build a full community. It includes housing, it includes services like health services, it includes building up the Canadian Google Headquarters. There’s a lot of players in this community that they want to build.

It’s just important to know that this is a for profit entity that’s tied to Alphabet, and the concerns around that is it’s Alphabet. It’s one of the biggest companies, the biggest tech companies that owns a lot of other products, a lot of other companies. There is concerns around privacy, but I think the biggest concern around this project that has been brought up by many, is who gets to have a say of like what happens in the city?

The idea of building a full community in that area where there’s no one living there right now, so there’s no one to say what they like and what they don’t like. It’s kind of up to average Torontonians to participate.

There’s a huge kind of conversation of like why wasn’t it that Torontonians actually figure out what they want to happen in that area, and then you do the RFP process, and then figure out a partner, but that didn’t happen. It’s kind of going the other way around of like Sidewalk being like what would you like? And we have these general ideas, but what do you want to happen in this area? The way I’ve been thinking about it is like actually, the city should’ve asked us that and then we should find a partner after.

But imagine if folks actually want the entire area to be affordable housing. Who gets to make a choice on that? It’s a really important critical project because the world is watching Toronto. There’s a shift in cities, and corporate powers have a lot of say lately. They’ve always had a say, but more so in the last 10-15 years.

I think people are worried that this might set an example and a precedent for someone to be like, hey, we see this property and we want to build a full



community. It's a wild proposition. There's a lot of concerns. I really think about the communities also surrounding that area. You think about St. James Town, which is not too far out. I think about those areas and how that will be impacted by such development.

A good example of that is Amazon was having -- they did an entire bid for their second headquarters, and then they decided on New York, Long Island, then when the decision was made that it was Long Island, people started to buy development, like housing in that area because it's like a good buy because good developments could happen, et cetera, et cetera. Amazon HQ2 got shut down because a lot of the organizers who were like, we don't want this to happen because of a lot of the tax credits that were given, were proposed to be given.

I think about the fact real estate agents in Long Island were saying that these houses were being bought -- they hadn't been bought for like -- the prices are not going up for a while in Long Island, and all of a sudden, people are buying everywhere because they want to make a big bank for this Amazon HQ.

I think about the residual impacts with developments like this where surrounding areas will also feel the pain of a project like this. St. James Town is literally right around the corner. It's already being gentrified. I worry about the livability of the surrounding areas and the lack of awareness of that. That has not actually been brought up a whole bunch, but we know that when there's one development that the surrounding areas get impacted by it.

It's an interesting project to watch. It's an interesting project to think about the future of cities and what we want to see in a city, and it's one of those things where I've always cared about governance, procedure around how a city does their work, but this has definitely provided a really good outlook on these grey areas that happened with governance, right? What laws does a for profit entity that's working with like three forms of government?

It's a very weird game and it's a very interesting case study of the concerns that are going to be brought up over the course of the next several years as big tech companies are, in many ways, trying to pay for infrastructure all over North America actually.

Sefanit: As a person who has grown up in Toronto, and as a person who's a young Black woman in Toronto, what are the things that you feel you would need, your family or communities would need for the city to be livable?

**[0:25:09]**

Nasma: Yeah. I was raised in Toronto. I was raised in Toronto. I was raised in Scarborough. Honestly, sometimes, I wish that I never had to leave Scarborough as in like even

working downtown core, I wish I could stay in Scarborough all the time. I think that's something that I wished as a kid and I still wish now.

What I think is important around livability of a city and people that I love, is affordability. I think that's one of the key pieces is that the city has become so unaffordable, which means that it just literally takes the joy out of trying to survive in a city like this. I think one of the biggest pieces that I've noticed and has been so unfortunate over the years is the lack of space. Access to space.

The reason why I say that is access to space for us to experience joy, access to space for us to convene, access to space for us to physically be in the presence of one another that is accessible, that is free of charge. I found that that's actually one of the biggest components around livability is being able to convene and to be able to see community and be around community because so much of our lives are now virtual. It's just fine but I think there is so much is missing around like even just being able to be like I'm going to hang out in this local spot.

I remember having, as a kid, a local spot. I don't feel that way anymore if it's not a restaurant which is something else. I feel like space is one thing, being able to create alternative forms of businesses and being able to support one another. I feel like that's the hard part is that everyone gets pushed out because of the lack of affordability which means we can't support Black businesses and also, there's no alternative cooperative models that is kind of pushing against this idea of just making money. I think that's another piece.

But honestly, I don't know. I struggle thinking about the livability of a city partially because I think as Black folks, unfortunately, I think we're often going to struggle. I think cities, especially in major North American cities don't give a shit about us. I hate sometimes thinking that way, but it's the realistic thing is that like we're constantly fighting back against a system that does not care about us,

What does it mean -- sometimes, I dream about the Wakanda. People always think it's corny but you just dream about what does it mean to just be in a place where we have alternative forms of existing, of creating, of having decent work, all of that stuff that's outside of the scope of the current Metropolitan.

That's what I dream of. I just think it's hard to think about livability. I think we're always going to struggle. The only way that we can see past that struggle, as a lot of scholars talk about is like love and community and joy, and just trying to merely exist and create space with one another is one of the only ways I see potential livability, but just the way cities are going right now, honestly, Octavia Butler, I think she's definitely right, so I kind of see a terrifying future because of climate change.

I've been thinking about -- this is a totally another side kind of conversation but please read Octavia Butler's work because I think that's an interesting way of

thinking about the way cities are going to be because I actually do believe that she's got it right, like damn right.

She talks about corporations, she talks about all, and shout out to Black people for being the best future thinkers always, always, because we have to be thinking about what's next and so I guess this is a roundabout way of saying that I don't know if a city in North America or actually, anywhere nearby could be livable.

Sefanit: I think sometimes, this weird thing happens when we talk about the future where we're supposed to just talk about it with a hopefulness that just doesn't feel honest or realistic. Part of what I feel like you're offering is it's not so much that -- I mean you're holding an event called Alternative Urban Futures. There's hope in that. There's hope in that conversation, but what you're saying is also, with the particular ways that cities are being built, have been built, are going to continue to be built with the technologies that are being used with the powers that are at play, there isn't livability there for us.

I've heard you articulated this at other points where it's like Black and Indigenous people, I don't see the ways that they can process in the city that is being built around us.

**[0:30:00]**

It's hard to imagine livability within the confines of what is currently happening, it doesn't foreclose the fact that other people are thinking of ways that can happen outside, beyond, but those conversations feel far away and abstract and are immensely difficult.

Nasma: They're immensely difficult but part of my job is having to talk about futures, which I feel actually very uncomfortable by sometimes. I'm like why am I talking about futures? But I think that's my way of coping with the current existence, my current existence. It's like me thinking about hey, even if it's not now, if it's a hundred years from now, it will get better.

I think that's why future thinking helps me with that. It helps with coping with what currently happens. One of the things that I've been listening to is -- my favorite person to ready is Adrienne Maree Brown, which I absolutely stan Adrienne Maree Brown, but Adrienne Maree Brown and her sister have a podcast about the apocalypse, how to survive the apocalypse with grace.

It's like they just talk about the apocalypse, what you can learn from the apocalypse. I'm like, but I feel the apocalypse is so near. They're like, yeah, but that's how you learn -- you're going to learn through it. A lot of their work is driven from Octavia Butler's work.

It's just like this weird thing that's like, we could actually learn a lot from the end of the world, so what does it mean for us to exist in this weird space where we know climate change is happening and our roles is like physically being destroyed, but then we also want to talk about like fair economy. It's like we're all in -- I think we're in a point right now where maybe we're saying so much information that it's hard to compute.

Sefanit: I also heard -- so Eve Tuck has posed a question before around what can we learn from Black and Indigenous people who have already lived through apocalypses, who have already lived -- have already had world endings happen.

The ways that we have had very, very real things obstruct our lives previously. That is both difficult question to bear but also a very -- there's hope in that too. Do you know what I mean? There's hope in that too in like their survival, in our presence being that survival.

Nasma: It's actually Eve Tuck posing that question. I'm going to think about it for a really long time because it's true. It's like why do we think the apocalypse is actually the end of the Earth? It's not necessarily -- yeah, people have experienced truly the end of -- have experienced the worst of it, the end of the world. Yeah, what do we learn from that survival?

#### **[Outro Music]**

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

#### **[Overlaying Outro Music]**

Sefanit: Thank you so much. I am so grateful that you're here with us, so grateful that you came. Anybody who knows you, knows you're a very busy person. The fact that you made time for this, it means a lot to me. I learned so much from you. Thank you for your teaching, for your translating, for your dreaming, all the things that you do. You're a lovely person.

Nasma: Thank you. Sorry. I awkwardly yelled. Thank you so much for having me, for having these conversations. I think I'm obsessed with the idea of the future just because it just helps me cope with the now.

Honestly, one thing I'm also thinking about, which I knew enough of this is I was in New York and I went to this thing called Black Power Naps, and I was just talking about how god damn tired we were, and I was like this is so real. I think it's because we have to think about our current existence, our future, our past, there's so many things that guide us in our work that we try to find meaning in and we try to just figure out what the hell is going on in our everyday lives, and the entire thing.

Sefanit: Did you nap together?

Nasma: It's not that we -- you can nap. There's an area to nap, but we went to a Black powernap opera. The entire thing was about how goddamn tired and sometimes we just want to sleep, and we need to sleep, and we can take care of ourselves and sleep. That's what we need because sometimes, you're just so tired. You're just like, you don't want to deal with any of it. I think about that often it's like, you just got to nap it out.

**[0:34:51] End of Audio**