Catherine Cole on “Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice in South Africa” (2022 Katz Distinguished Lecture)\*

Caitlin Palo:

Welcome to Going Public, a podcast from the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington. I’m Caitlin Palo, Program and Events Manager at the Simpson Center.

This episode is part of a special series for 2023-2024 featuring some of our popular talks from the center’s annual Katz Distinguished Lecture series. This month’s episode features Catherine Cole.

While most of our episodes from the archive are the original lecture itself, this month’s special edition is an interview conducted by Danny Hoffman, director of the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. Danny is joined by Nikki Yeboah, playwright and assistant professor in University of Washington’s School of Drama. Their conversation with Catherine Cole expands on topics related to Professor Cole’s 2022 talk on “Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice in South Africa,” which you can view on the Simpson Center’s YouTube Channel—youtube.com/simpsoncenter.

Catherine Cole is Professor of Dance and English at the University of Washington where she served as Divisional Dean of the Arts from 2016-2022. She is an internationally renowned scholar of African performance studies. As a scholar, teacher, and artist, she brings together themes of independence and interdependence, performance in Africa and in the diaspora, disability and movement, post-apartheid art, and postcolonial history. She is the author of *Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice* published in 2020, and choreographer and performer of dance theatre pieces, including *Just Duet*, *Still Point*, and *Five Foot Feat*.

We invite you to listen to this interview from our archive, share it in your classrooms, and subscribe to the full series. To learn more about the Simpson Center and our commitment to publicly engaged scholarship, visit simpsoncenter.org.

DANNY HOFFMAN: Hello, everyone. My name is Danny Hoffman. I am a faculty member in the Jackson School of International Studies and the Comparative History of Ideas Department here at the University of Washington. It is June 7, 2022. And we are recording this podcast at the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, hence the occasional sound of buses going by in the window outside.

Before introducing our distinguished guest today, I'm very excited to welcome my co-host and newish colleague here at the University of Washington, Nikki Yeboah. Nikki is a faculty member in the School of Drama, where she teaches playwriting, does research on the ways oral histories and performances create alternative narratives of Black life, and writes and produces original performance pieces. And I really cannot think of a better person to tag team with for this conversation today. So Nikki welcome.

NIKKI YEBOAH: Thank you, Danny. Happy to be here.

DANNY HOFFMAN: Now, this is the third in our series of podcasts inspired by the '21-'22 season of Katz distinguished lectures in the humanities. The Katz lectures are intended to showcase for a University of Washington audience field-defining work in the humanities. And this year, the Simpson Center very generously partnered with the African Studies program in inviting three speakers whose work challenges us to think about new directions for African Studies in the humanities and new directions for that humanities might play within African Studies.

So although this is the third in our series of podcasts on this topic, our interlocutor today was actually the first speaker in the series, the University of Washington's own Dr. Catherine Cole. Catherine is, at least for a couple more days, the divisional dean of the arts as well as being a professor of dance and English here at the UDub, hopefully for much longer.

She is a renowned scholar of performance in Africa and in the African diaspora. She is the author of multiple books based on research in Ghana, South Africa, and elsewhere around the continent, and around the globe. Now, in the interest of time, I'm just going to mention the title of the most recent Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice, since that work gave the name to Catherine's fall Katz lecture.

So Catherine has been awarded some of the most prestigious grants and fellowships in the humanities in this country and internationally. She is an award-winning teacher, not only here at the UDub but at her previous institutions, which will go unnamed for today, and is not only a scholar and a teacher of performance, but is herself a noted choreographer and performer. So, Catherine, welcome. And thank you very much for taking the time to be here and for the discussion today.

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, thank you so much for the invitation.

DANNY HOFFMAN: OK, so since I already have the microphone here, I'm going to start, if that's OK, where we started with our two previous guests, Ato Quayson and Abderrahmane Sissako. So as I said in the introduction, the Katz lecture this year was really inspired by a desire to foreground the intersection of humanities scholarship and practice and African studies today and tomorrow.

So it made sense, I think, to all of us that you would be a central part of that conversation. And I would say with the benefit of hindsight and thinking about how these three events, the Katz events this year fit together, it makes even more sense to me that you were one of the three people to speak to this.

But I'm wondering if it made sense to you. Are you comfortable with the mandate that we asked you to fill with this, being part of this series, especially now that it's completed?

CATHERINE COLE: I thought it was absolutely wonderful to have the focus of the Katz series be on Africa. I'm not recalling now if the Katz always has a thematic coherence or were we the first ones?

DANNY HOFFMAN: I think we were unique, yeah.

CATHERINE COLE: Actually, I mean, in some ways to me that's the more notable thing is just the idea of having a whole series that's linked in a way. And I liked that quite a bit and was very, very honored to share the bill with Sissako and Ato Quayson.

NIKKI YEBOAH: Awesome. So I love the fact that you mentioned the fact that this year's Katz lectures were themed around Africa. And you expressed-- maybe I'm reading into it-- maybe a little bit of surprise or just like, oh, it's nice that it was focused on Africa. And I'm wondering what's behind that a little bit. Because as a performance studies scholar myself, I've always found African studies within performance studies and largely within the humanities to be a little under-studied maybe or under-acknowledged.

And I'm wondering if that's something you've experienced, or what are your feelings around that?

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, I mean, I would say for in my own field, in theater and performance studies, whenever I go to a conference, and I always look for material on Africa, and it's often way off in the margins. Maybe there's a panel, or there's erratic appearances of the field.

And then likewise, when I go to African studies, performance is really marginalized. So yes, that has been my experience. But I will also say that-- I mean, one of the things that drew me to African studies was I just found some of the most vibrant conversations there when I was a graduate student at Northwestern.

The Center for African Studies was under the directorship of David William Cohen, an amazing historian. And it was just like a who's who in the field. And very often theoretically where the conversations were at was absolutely in the forefront of where the humanities and social science conversations were. So it was just the most intellectually exciting place to be, and that felt like the center of the world.

NIKKI YEBOAH: I agree. Can I ask a follow up question? Just because you opened up the door. Just thinking about origin stories, how did you come to African studies as a scholar?

CATHERINE COLE: OK. There is many different versions in length that I can offer for this. But I would say that some of this was about a transformational experience I had traveling abroad when I was in college, not to Africa but to Japan, and having an epiphany of just realizing how rarefied and provincial my education was.

Even though I thought it was a good education, I was just like, oh, my gosh, there's this whole part of the world where things I care about in performance are central, and I know nothing about this. How could this be? So I feel like I've spent a lot of the rest of my life just taking on the insight of that.

And the connection to Africa really came through a personal connection. So after I graduated, I was living in New York. And I met the man who's now my husband. And he's a filmmaker trained at NYU. His name is Kwame Brown.

He's a white Kwame, though. He was born on a Saturday in Ghana, which he has a day name of Kwame. And he lived there for 18 years. His parents ran a hospital. And so that was before I was ever going to graduate school.

We did a trip to Ghana, which again was a transformative experience for me. So, so exciting. And then as I ended up at Northwestern University to do my PhD, I did find the most exciting conversations in African studies and encountered people like Tejumola Olaniyan, who's now passed away, but he was there as a postdoc, and just I just wanted to be in seminars with him and do guided readings with him. And yeah, so that was what set me on that path.

NIKKI YEBOAH: That's awesome. I also have some knowledge of the Center for African Studies there. And it's still such an amazing place for minds across different disciplines to come together and just like-- yeah, it was just such a lovely-- I want to say even safe haven within Northwestern. Just really beautiful work being done there by really beautiful people, and we're still in contact with many of the people from that time.

DANNY HOFFMAN: Actually, I'm just I'm curious, maybe thinking about the institute, since we're talking about Northwestern and the kind of place that has a very storied African studies program. And I think the University of Washington is probably more representative of a lot of American institutions, where there is an African studies program, or there's something, a unit on campus that touches on African studies. But it's a small program.

And I guess I'm curious if you could say a little bit about what you sort of see the role of an African studies program at a big institution like this, where the program itself is quite small. What does a program like this do? What does it contribute that's different than being again a storied center of African studies but nevertheless is a vibrant part of the intellectual community here?

Especially given your concentrations, where does African studies fit into the kinds of fields of scholarship and teaching you do on this campus?

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah. So I mean, one of the things that's really notable about African studies here is that there's this core group that's just been meeting regularly for a long time, I think. And often that's more informal. We're reading a book or an article. But that's the core of anything is the intellectual community.

And I've been at other places, not to be named here, that might have more, seem to be more established and have more of a longer list of faculty and so forth, and maybe even being a title VI and things like that. But sometimes it was the intellectual community that was missing. And I felt from the point of view of a teacher, researcher, faculty member that was then missing the most important part.

So I think just never losing track of that, that that is the core is the intellectual engagement.

DANNY HOFFMAN: I guess I'd also be kind of curious, and this is sort of again I'm thinking out loud here a little bit, but one of the things that's been striking to me is that the humanities-- often here at least, the humanities are some of the most vibrant parts of the African studies program. And I'm wondering if that is a kind of byproduct simply of our size, the fact that we don't sort of stake a claim to knowledge of the continent, but it's rather a collection of individuals whose scholarship is--

I don't know if that's-- does that resonate at all?

CATHERINE COLE: That does resonate quite a bit. Yes, I think that's part of when we come together, why we have so much to talk about. And maybe I wouldn't feel that way if I was doing scientific research, or I don't know, different sorts of that weren't humanities and arts based.

I mean, one thing that is interesting to me, also thinking of Northwestern and recent reflections on the field of African studies and the role of Herskovits and its very troubled history around thinking of or not thinking of the diaspora. That's always on my mind too. And the more recent reflections that the African Studies Association has had on the legacy of that gave me a lot of insight into conversations I didn't feel like I could have at Northwestern in the early '90s.

That may have changed now, but there's ways in which-- and I was looking at a forum in Ghana that was very much influenced by African-American culture, and that trying to put together African studies and African-American studies, there was a part of it that just wasn't legible, and not all the right people were around the table to really have a robust engagement with the content itself.

And everywhere I've been, there's been that question of what is the relationship of African studies to diaspora studies or African-American studies. And I feel that's an area I would like us to look at more here, that we should grow into more.

NIKKI YEBOAH: Yeah, absolutely. That totally resonates with me. I came into my research as a part of the diaspora and was encouraged to study performance on the continent, and went into the field. And this will turn into a question, I promise.

[LAUGHTER]

Went into the field trying to kind of reconnect with traditions that I felt had been lost. And I think one of the things that I really like about your work is you're studying contemporary-- you're studying contemporary African performance right now. And I'm wondering if there is the same kind of debates or the same kind of conversations around tradition, the same kind of anxieties around tradition as it appears in African performance as there seemed to have been when I was first entering the field and thinking about studying African performance, or if that's something that has shifted with time.

CATHERINE COLE: And when you say anxieties about tradition, you're thinking specifically in Ghana and a sense of something being lost?

NIKKI YEBOAH: Exactly, so specifically in many post-colonial African nations. My field site is Ghana. And so, yeah, I'm thinking about Ghana specifically. I'm thinking about a lot of the ways that those that study African performance enter the field, often studying traditional, quote, unquote, "performance." And your shift towards looking at more contemporary questions?

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, yeah. So I mean, I would say with my current book, the most recent one, looking at someone like the choreographer Gregory Maqoma and the way in which he looks at dance cultures of South Africa and is not working in a hierarchy, and his work just ends up fusing together so many things.

So sometimes it's a deeper tradition, like a Zulu Indlamu dance that has high kicking. Other times, it's Michael Jackson. And as you watch his work, you can see a conversation happening. Like, there's a piece he created or he choreographed called Via Kanana, which is based on pantsula, which is a very contemporary form.

And it's a piece about corruption. And you see a group of half dozen performers in this fast-moving world with a lot of video projections, and a sense of the hustle, the hustle it takes to live in contemporary South Africa. And people are quite atomized, the different characters, if you will, it's theatrical, not helping each other out. And there's attempts that people make to reconstitute their sense of self.

And you see an appearance of older, quote, unquote, "traditional" or classical forms. And in fact, it's one of those forms that finally unlocks, leads to a transformation in the piece. So I don't know if there's an anxiety. I don't necessarily feel in South Africa, in the performers I'm studying, a deep anxiety about loss of tradition. I feel a hunger to know more about that tradition, and to be having that as part of the palette for making art in the now.

NIKKI YEBOAH: Absolutely. I'm also wondering, the anxieties might not exist for the artists. I'm wondering in the field as a researcher, where contemporary African performance fits within the larger field of ethnographies studying African performance, if that makes sense.

CATHERINE COLE: Say a little bit more.

NIKKI YEBOAH: Yeah, so I think that there's a way in which there's a burgeoning field or subfield of studying avant garde African artists and performance makers that feels different to the ways that ethnographers studied African performances in the past, like who I learned to study African performance from versus what's happening now. And I'm not exactly sure where the question is in that, but just like a musing of that.

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, and maybe I can answer this a little bit just with my own. So my first book was on a popular theater form in Ghana called the concert party, which is definitely a cultural mixture. Like it seemed like a totally new thing in terms of being modeled on actually concert parties from Britain and movies from the US. And yet, it had this trickster figure of Anansi the spider that goes very deep.

And my approach to that book was to really look at a specific period of time, like the mid-'20s through the early to mid-'60s, so as Ghana-- as it went from the Gold Coast to being independent Ghana, and to look at this theater form almost as though it was a living newspaper.

Because the form went all over the country, and they adapted the language in different settings. They adapted the scripts to tie in to local issues and characters and so forth. And so for many people who didn't have access to newspapers or reading this was how they saw how the society was changing.

So I was looking at the form as a lens onto social change and political change in Ghana, which is a more ethnographic, I suppose, approach. So at that time, I would get invited to conferences of anthropologists, even though I didn't position myself as being one. But I suppose the way I was approaching the form was a window onto its times in which it existed.

With this current project, or the most recent project, I had a very different approach. I'm really looking at performances. My work as a writer is to be in dialogue with the artists. That they have created these works, they've put them out in the world. Sometimes they tour to Europe or the US. Sometimes they only stay in South Africa. But just really feeling my role is to just give words to my experience as someone watching that.

So I'm not looking-- I mean, I do make-- I do see how those artists are processing the now. So there is a way in which the art is a window onto the contemporary. But I'm more directly engaged with them as artists, and not necessarily trying to make larger claims. So it's a shift in my approach.

DANNY HOFFMAN: I'm wondering if your own intellectual shift from the earlier work in Ghana to the work you're doing now, is that-- does it impact the way that you teach performance, African performance? And how does it intersect with what students, again, especially at a place like the University of Washington, what do they bring to your classes?

So does a student who is going to take one of your courses on performance that's heavily Africa-centric or advertise that way, are they prepared to go with you into avant garde contemporary performance? Or do they have an expectation of what African performance is going to be? And if that's the case, what do you have to do with them? What's the work that has to be done?

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, so there's a course I've taught the longest in my career. I mean, I first offered-- I think I offered the first version of it as like a summer session at Northwestern. So I've offered this for over 25 years at about four or five different institutions. And it's more of a survey of African performance.

It's very anglophone-centric, but I do-- I've always said to students, you can enroll in this class knowing nothing about Africa, and that's fine. And I do have some big picture takeaways about the continent that I want them to have, like that a third of the world's living languages are spoken in Africa, that its geographic size is three times the size of the continental United States and different things like that.

Because also what I say is, OK, you may think you're walking into this class knowing nothing about Africa, but actually you know a ton about "Africa--" I'm going to put in quotes-- because popular culture and the media have inculcated. You've inculcated so much from that. So we're going to undo a lot of that.

Also in teaching that class, I really teach a lot of plays. And I love teaching literature because I feel the students learn about Africa from Africans. So it's mediated by me. And I'm a white American professor, but we're really engaging with those thinkers and writers and creators. And that is, I think, really generative for the students. It just, in a way, it's the thing I just said about my personal relationship with watching performers, I feel like a similar thing happens to them just in encountering these texts.

It's very rare when I teach that class that someone comes in knowing a lot more about Africa. But sometimes I will have someone who's been a Fulbright or someone who this is a heritage for them. So I would say a consistent thing about all my teaching is just not being able to assume much about what my students know. And my quest is to demonstrate a relevance for them and engage them.

So I just taught a brand new class. The title was given to me by the Department of Dance, "Dance, Globalization, and Power." And that's now a required class for them, but no one else has taught it before. So I'm really-- it's tabula rasa.

And I thought, oh, there's a danger in this topic that I could be like this smorgasbord of, OK, now we're going to have K-pop, and we're going to have Bollywood, and a little this, a little that. And I don't know a lot about all those other things. And really what are they going to know at the end of it if I approach it that way?

So I went from my place of strength, and really started and ended in Africa. Also, a lot of it was the African diaspora. It wasn't all that, but it was interesting. What I took as the spine are theories, so Arjun Appadurai, and Homi Bhabha, and Paul Gilroy. So I took those as the theories and pointed out to them that the underlying theoretical constructs here about how cultures relate, what happens with an immigrant situation, with second generation, and so forth, those are generalizable to other places.

But it felt a little bit like a stealth African studies class, because that wasn't in the title at all. But they didn't seem to mind that. And instead, I didn't have plays. But what I organized the class around is when I could find really well shot dance productions, where we could either see together or they could see on their own the whole thing.

And again, it's that critical engagement directly with the art I think breaks down a sort of othering of Africa or an unknowability. It's like actually, we can unpack this. What happens at the beginning? What happens at the end? What were the turning points?

So these skills of analysis that are applicable anywhere, and yeah, so that's been my way in.

NIKKI YEBOAH: I'm just kind of curious. When you mentioned that you've been teaching this course for over 20 years, I'm just curious to know how have the students that have been in your classroom changed over time, their relationship or knowledge of the continent or even what they look like? I'm just wondering if you've noticed a change in the students that are interested in African studies.

CATHERINE COLE: Well, they always get younger. I know I'm not getting older. And there's things like-- I mean, so the way I structure the class is we begin with the Sundiata epic in Mali Because that takes us back to the 13th century, and it's just this historical view. And the griot is an oral performance, and then move through different parts of West Africa, briefly touch on Kenya and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and then spend the second half of the class in South Africa.

And the main epiphany that consistently they've had over all that time is, oh, my gosh, these places are so different from each other. And it's like, yeah, yeah. So 10 years from now, if that's the only thing you remember about this class, that's actually a pretty important thing. And they experience it.

I've had other times when I thought I could organize the class more thematically and move between regions. But being more deliberate about moving regionally leads to that aha. They always connect with South Africa. American students can resonate with that because of its seeming parallels with the US.

But I have to do a lot more. They don't necessarily know the word apartheid now, and everybody did in 1996. So it's that work that I need to do about what is it that they know or don't know. On the other hand, globalization, and social media has meant that they're encountering a lot more culture from Africa in that sphere than they would have in the past.

NIKKI YEBOAH: You mentioned briefly about your positionality as a white American studying and teaching about Africa. And I wanted to know if you could speak a little bit more to how it informs your approach to research or how it informs your approach to teaching.

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, yeah. So I mean, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Decolonizing the Mind was very, very important text for me coming into African studies. And I would also say that when I was at Northwestern, and I was just attending everything at the Center for African Studies, and we had pre-circulated papers. The seminars were serious, and just people like Achille Mbembe were coming through before Achille was really known the way he is now.

But as I learned more, I just had this moment of, well, I think the last thing Africa needs is another white person saying what Africa is about. And I brought that to one of my advisors, Professor Sandra Richards, and sort of just said, I'm engaged by this subject, but I really don't know where I stand within it. And she gave me just such good advice.

She said if you follow this path, most of your teaching will be in the US, not in Africa. So you're going to be engaging US audiences or US students. And that inherently means you're going to be dealing with issues of race and difference both here and elsewhere in the world. And we talked about how for her students, senior African-American scholar, she's going to mean one thing particularly for Black students as a role model that I will never be.

I will never be that. But she said this work of engaging these topics, it's an equal opportunity employer, and it's really important that people who look like me are also doing this work. And that's why students will listen to me in a way that they wouldn't listen to her, and vice versa.

And so that became like, OK, I understand my work in the academy as grounded in that, the unique work that I can do as a white person. And the idea of decolonizing the mind, of course, Ngugi is writing to an African audience about Africans decolonizing their own minds, but I see the underlying construct as being my own journey as a white person of constantly working to decolonize my mind. And that's the underlying principle that I bring into the classroom.

DANNY HOFFMAN: That's great, and it does touch on a question that I was curious about. And in fact, I asked you a very ham-handed version of this in the Q&A of the lecture. So I'm glad to have a chance to unpack this a little bit more.

But when you mentioned your current work is in South Africa with South African artists, and there is-- I think, I mean historically there's been within African studies a kind of sense of South African exceptionalism. And in a way, I think you touched on something really important, talking about the way American students right now look to South Africa as a kind of a place on the continent where there is a history of race that they can rightly or wrongly feel like they identify with and can understand as legible to them.

And it does become a powerful space of narrative for thinking about globally how does Blackness work in multiple contexts around the globe. But I'm wondering if you would say a little bit more about something that you had said too, which is the rest of the continent, there are many differences, there are many similarities to the South African experience throughout history. But how do you think about the ways in which kind of African worlds framing, which is what we're trying to-- what we've talked about a lot with the African Studies program both uses but doesn't get trapped in the sense that South African history is somehow African history.

If you could just say a little bit more about what you do with the work that you've done in Ghana, for example, or the literature from other parts of the continent, in terms of where the conversation is with students now here, and also your own scholarship.

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, I mean it's interesting. So since I've been dean, I only teach one class a year. So I feel like the last five years, my teaching portfolio is thin. And it'll be interesting to have a conversation about this when I go back to teaching full time. I mean, in that class that I've taught for so long on African theater and performance, again there are the underlying theories of oppression, of colonization, of decolonization, of the post-colonial.

And when we follow that pathway from West Africa to Kenya to South Africa, I think on one hand, they have that aha of, oh, these places are so different, and yet there are continuities. There are continuities to be pointed out within that.

So I don't know. I mean, I think that ends up showing South Africa's exceptionalism, but also showing its deep synergies and continuities that white supremacy has been operative in all these places. It just has operated somewhat differently.

DANNY HOFFMAN: And actually, if I could follow that up too, I'm curious with the artists that you work with, a lot of the talk quite rightly was, as the title says, dealing with the injustices of the apartheid system in South Africa, do you have a sense that the artists, because so many of them do have a global profile now, I mean, do you talk with them about the notions of Africanness in a more global sense that they deal with? Or I mean, to what extent are they either resisting or adopting Africa in its totality as being a part of their identity?

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, I think-- so in my most recent book, all of the artists are South African, save one. Faustin Linyekula is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. And I would say actually he of all the artists is the one who's, I think, most broadly engaged in conceptions of Africa in African studies and European extraction of artifacts and so forth. I think that's really central to his work.

With the other artists, I think maybe it reflects the incubation of the work within South Africa, where there is such a vibrant-- historically, there's been just such a vibrant art scene. And so there is an extent to which a lot of what they're talking about is a disillusionment of the post-apartheid era, that it's not-- too much of apartheid is still present in the disappointments since 1994.

The more interesting thing to me is the diasporic conversation within the work. Yeah, like with a number of the artists, like the influence of Michael Jackson on them. As formative artists, like Gregory Maqoma says that when he was growing up, Michael Jackson was the first Black performer he ever saw on TV with a positive image, first anybody Black on South African TV with a positive image.

And likewise, I don't write about him in the book, or I only do tangentially, but he's part of this global conversation. Akram Khan is a Bangladeshi by heritage choreographer, but was born and raised in the UK. Michael Jackson, he wouldn't be doing contemporary dance, he says, without the influence of Michael Jackson.

So I think, for me, that diasporic conversation and the way in which it's informing people's work is super interesting, and I think, underappreciated and understudied in the literature.

NIKKI YEBOAH: And yet, I found that the more I studied and created work, the more undeniable those connections were. It's like you can't study many of the art work that happens on the continent without considering that. So I do think you're definitely on to something. Because even in my own work, even in the work of many of my contemporaries, there's just this way in which the diaspora, and the especially the Black diaspora, and Black Africans on the continent were in conversation from very early on.

I mean, the colonial movement itself was so informed by the Civil Rights Movement here. And it's just been a continued kind of conversation that, you're right, is very much under-explored.

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, and some of the sessions at the ACA about the history of Herskovits gave me aha moments of like, oh. I mean, it was actually central to the concert party, but that aspect of it, I just had trouble making it legible. It was like it was extracted from the intellectual formation of African studies.

And it's been great to see newer work come out, from Saidiya Hartman and others. I think Ghana has been a very important site for that diasporic engagement for obvious reasons, because of the castles, and its history, and legacy with the transatlantic slave trade. But I also have this experience reading Black performance theory, which is very American and US-based.

I have a cognitive dissonance sometimes with a number of the assumptions in there, that for instance, the Middle Passage is the central trauma. But that's not going to be true in South Africa. It's going to be the dispossession of land. And that wasn't a major source.

So even the notion of diaspora assumes this moving from. So it's like we need a different framing. But on the ground, people are engaging in the kind of Black Atlantic. And our scholarship just really needs to catch up.

NIKKI YEBOAH: I remember my first Diaspora studies course at Northwestern. Being a Canadian, I went in assuming something different of how they were defining diaspora. So it was all about the Middle Passage. And I was like, but I'm a diaspora.

[LAUGHTER]

I'm a member of the diaspora, and they were just looking at me, like, no, that's not what we mean. I was like, but I am.

[LAUGHTER]

It took me a long time to grasp that what we understand as the Black diaspora in the United States is very fixed in a certain time.

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah.

NIKKI YEBOAH: And so yeah, that's something that I wrestled with a lot as a young scholar. Just like, oh, OK, this means something different here. OK, let me pivot.

CATHERINE COLE: So that jogs in my memory. I mentioned before that I had the privilege of studying with Professor Tejumola Olaniyan, who was a postdoc at Northwestern when I was there. And he was working on his first book, which in 1991, '92, was unusual in terms of who he brought together.

So it was on Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Amiri Baraka, and Nzotake Shange. So it was exactly framing that Africa-Caribbean-US conversation. It was in a literary world. And then he since went on to write his book on Fela, which very much shows the influence of James Brown and really opening up popular culture as the sphere-- cartoons, music, all these areas in addition to the literary.

And I think he was really quite an amazing pioneer at carving out exactly this space, the large parameters of it, and really has set up a space where-- though sadly he passed away right before the pandemic, I think the legacy of his work is to give us a really large arena to see the possibilities and exactly what you're identifying.

We have this amazing endeavor here at UW, a Black embodiment studio led by Professor Kemi Adeyemi, where it's such a cool project. I mean, I could go on and on about it. But one of the things I really love is her assumption about bringing together a writer and an artist.

She often stages or sets up, curates together this dialogue that is rethinking what has historically been a more hierarchical relationship, that the critic says what something means or why it's important, but rather this is equalizing that to say that artists need to be in conversation with those who write about them, that that enriches the art. And obviously the critic needs to engage with the artist.

But much of what has happened within BES is focused on-- is a US-centric. And so I wanted one of the outcomes of my Katz lecture to be to extend the boundaries and to have-- I approached Kemi and said, I'd actually like to take my honorarium and dedicate it to BES to set up something with Black artists in South Africa. And so that is going to happen in the coming months.

We've got the people, and it'll be virtual. And we figured out how can we pay people abroad and navigate the bureaucracy and everything. So I'm super, super excited about that. So stay tuned.

NIKKI YEBOAH: Awesome.

DANNY HOFFMAN: Thanks. So this will be my last question for you. And then I'll turn it back over to Nikki. But we've talked a lot about performance studies and African studies intersection, but a major part of your work and an important part of the talk that you gave for the Katz lecture was disability studies as well.

And so I guess just an open-ended question for you and also, I think, for your students who might come in with, say, a strong background in disability . Studies Where does that intersection of African studies and disability studies lie? Is it the same?

Is there different work that has to be done to think about what an African studies intersection with disability studies looks like then with performance studies? Again, for you as a scholar and also I think for the students who come to you with their own backgrounds.

CATHERINE COLE: Yeah, I mean, I feel-- so with performance studies, here we have a school of drama. So it's called School of Drama. It's not called School of Performance Studies. But there is a growing network of performance studies scholars across a lot of different departments. And there's a center for performance studies.

We don't really-- I think disability studies here on this campus is much more nascent. And so I don't have students necessarily seeking me out for disability studies, per se. But some of that might be because I haven't taught a class on that.

So I've thought about bringing forward a class that maybe is called "extraordinary bodies" and frames the conjunction of disability studies and performance studies. So I think within the field of African studies, I mean, disability is just wide open. It's so much a part of the lived condition of everyday life now and throughout history. And yet, the literature is really quite thin.

So I think it's a huge opportunity within African studies. As far as the teaching goes, I mean, for me, so I am a person with a disability. And I encountered that disability after I'd done my first book. And it created questions about my ability to even be the kind of researcher I had been.

So it is organic to my own navigation of the world. And so I end up bringing this into my teaching based upon what I see. But it isn't a lead. It feels like a subterranean space, I guess. At the institution, it feels like a subterranean space. At this institution, it feels subterranean within African Studies.

And I'm excited to see. I actually had just been thinking-- well, there's a wonderful young scholar I met at University of Wisconsin, Madison when I was there a few months ago, who was a student of Professor Olaniyan's. And he is incubating a doctoral project particularly on disability studies in popular culture, and has very large ambitions to cover the whole continent.

So we are reading together Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's The Extraordinary Bodies. We're going to have a little micro-seminar on Zoom next week. So I feel confident that the next generation is going to take this up. And I'm excited to be in conversation with them.

NIKKI YEBOAH: That's great. I don't have a final question, but a question came up as you were talking. Which was how does your relationship, or does your relationship to research change given that you are a person with a disability? Did it change how you approach, the felt sense way in which you approach the research at all or not?

CATHERINE COLE: So I mean, there was the move from Ghana to South Africa. And in some ways, so I was just publishing my book on Ghana when I was diagnosed with cancer. I had two years in and out of hospitals, and at the end of that loss I lost my leg and also had a child. And well, those two things together made going back to Ghana felt really like a steep climb.

I just didn't know how I would be able to get around and manage. And it seemed that with South Africa, I was confident I could do more of the research remotely. So I mean, that's a very practical thing. But that factored into that shift for me. And then so I did have doubts. Like, can I still do African studies? Is this just going to be too hard?

Because it's not like-- I mean, South Africa is more accessible, but it's still really hard. And Louise White, who is a senior African studies historian who has a mobility impairment, she contacted me. She called me by phone, and she said-- and I explained what I was thinking about.

And she said, well, Catherine, Africa is just hard. And if you're a white American and you have a disability, it just levels the playing field a little.

[LAUGHTER]

And that's been true. That's been true. And I also am really struck but not necessarily so much in South Africa, but I have had a few chances to go to Ghana since all this happened to me. And I really appreciate with Ghanaians how forthright they are asking about your story.

Americans are so tripped up. The kids want to ask questions. The parents are like, shush. So there's this whole-- what you're teaching them is stigma when that happens. And I really appreciated just the candor, the extent to which in Ghana having things happen to your body that change it irreparably, it's a very common experience. And yeah, I just really appreciated that.

And then I think I wouldn't have written about dance. The move to dance was-- so what I learned when I was recovering from the amputation and reclaiming myself was I had to get in my body. I just stopped being in my body. You just become like a head when you're getting your PhD.

If your body is suffering, no, you just got to get things done. And I had to claim and be in my body. I had to have great balance, flexibility, stamina, coordination. It was like being a dancer.

And I have a more kinesthetic awareness, kinesthetic empathy, I guess. And that really led me to want to write about dance. So I don't think I would be writing about dance if that hadn't happened to me, if I hadn't lost my leg. Yeah.

So it's pretty profound, I guess. Yeah.

NIKKI YEBOAH: Thanks for sharing that.

DANNY HOFFMAN: Yeah. I think profundity is a good note to end on. And also, that was probably the best Louise White imitation that I've ever heard. That was phenomenal. But first of all, Nikki, thank you so much for doing this together. Can we do it again?

And, Catherine, this was fantastic. So really appreciate the time, and obviously we really appreciate the work that went into the Katz lecture, which was truly remarkable, and for all of your scholarship and teaching. So thank you very much.

CATHERINE COLE: All right.