

Transcript: Fulbright Conversations Episode 2—Storytelling and Racial Justice

00:00:02 Sam Thompson

Hello and welcome to the Fulbright Conversations Podcast, the show that brings together Fulbright alumni from both sides of the Atlantic to share their unique perspectives on some of the most pressing global challenges of our time. I'm your host, Sam Thompson, senior programme manager for the US-UK Fulbright Commission and today I'm excited to be speaking with Ade Solanke and Thomas Glave as we take our transatlantic approach to discussing storytelling and racial justice.

Adeola Solanke is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter and the founder of Sporer stories, telling the stories of the African diaspora. Her plays include her acclaimed debut Pandora's Box, which won a best New Play nomination in London's off West End Theatre Awards and was shortlisted for the \$100,000 Nigeria Prize for Literature, Africa's largest literary award.

A double Fulbrighter, she has a 2022-2023 Fulbright, all disciplined scholar awardee based at Emerson College, and was formerly A Fulbright Fellow. Phi Beta Kappa International scholar and Association of American University women's scholar at the USC School of Cinematic Arts, wh

00:05:21 Ade Solanke

My project was about is about

But also their own research into Phillis's history helped me understand more widely the importance of her work and her legacy as a woman who overcame all of those not just obstacles. In her case, laws prohibiting African Americans from learning to read and write. You know, Boston has a reputation because of the Tea Party and because of its links to the revolutionary moment. As the Cradle of Liberty, I think there's a saying of it.

00:08:29 Ade Solanke

It's called often the city on the hill, and it's still at the same time grappling with its history and reputation around race, so I was fortunate that I was in the middle, plunged right into the middle of those ongoing debates, which have become even more full frontal if you like, because of George Floyd's murder. And so I'm exploring this moment of 250 years ago, while a city is, as I say, grappling as we are here in England with the legacies of slavery and the ongoing struggles for social justice, so in terms of transnational stories, the work is part of my ongoing question, which is how do we repair and heal and move forward from the devastation and the trauma that we've experienced as Africans globally.

As I say, my parents are both Africans born and raised in Nigeria. I'm European by descent West African and I grew up in Ladbroke Grove. Caribbean culture was all around me. Carnival was on my doorstep literally every year of my teens I was at the Notting Hill Carnival. It wasn't at all like the film, as I'm sure many of you know. Notting Hill.

00:14:54 Ade Solanke

Absolutely. If I may just interject, and just to say, I love the use of the metaphor hobbling. We all know the origins of that word. So it's more apt than maybe is immediately obvious. And yes, I didn't know growing up in England, it was always racism is over there. You know, the history of England. Some people call it the headquarters of global slavery.

So when people speak of American slavery, most of the people who were American enslavers were

speaking in Nottingham. I don't know anything about British cultures throughout the diaspora etcetera really. How am I going to do this?

And then I began to find that of course there were these links linguistically that led me right back to square one, you might say. So that was very helpful and really enlightening, right? But walking between these various languages all the time, they were the languages of my soul. But this is again the manifestation

I'm looking at, you know, 250 years ago with my Phillis project. It's made me think more and more about 250 years from now. If we don't remember, we don't repair, all else is tinkling in my view.

00:28:13 Thomas Glave

Yeah, I couldn't agree with you more Ade. I just feel I have to say also that I always chuckled when I was doing the Fulbright about, in some ways, biting the hand that fed me, so to speak. Being in the UK and being so critical of all of these things that I saw that was so problematic in Britain.

But one of the things that I think the most problematic and insidious that bears analysis is the ways in which the English infrastructure in particular continues to put forth and try to profit from people's romances about the British monarchy internationally, so that the British monarchy becomes this spectacle for tourism and is never called into question for what it had represented and what it has done throughout history.

So whatever one might feel about particular individuals who were involved in the Monarchy. I think that it's interesting that the largest number of tourists who come to Britain each summer are US people, and many of these people just don't question what all of this has meant in history.

So our work is very, very important. I think Fulbright has really shown me I think I would speak to your remark, Ade, that yes, it was entirely appropriate for you to make those remarks.

Fulbright shows us, I think, that it is important to be truthful, obviously is vital that we really do the human thing and speak truths when we can, to, if you will power, to oppression, etcetera.

00:29:26 Ade Solanke

Narrative storytelling is the refashioning of not just this history we're looking at, but the messy, unstructured nature of life in general. We refashion all those elements into form and into meaning.

For me, the narrative job is to order, experience, and make sense of all those random in flotsam and jetsam of life. And if we, you know, through theatre and film and novels and poetry, find a way to make sense of all the, you know, the atrocities and not dipping into trauma porn, but raising these ghosts and sharing what happened to them and how the meaning of what happened to them speaks to where we're at today. I think it is of value.

I've never been a goat herder in Kaduna, in northern Nigeria. I've never been a lawyer in Colombia. But the stories I hear about those give me access to their realities. Across time, across space, we can do the same thing. We are able to stand in someone else's shoes.

As I said, Phillis, to me, spoke to me as an African woman writer abroad. I can feel with her I can empathise with her. I can understand her successes and her challenges because as a writer today there are still issues around what can you say. When she came to England when they said, oh sorry. Take out some of those revolutionary poems from the collection. We're not publishing those, you know.

She was writing about King George as a tyrant. That didn't go down too well. Today, can we write exactly what we think? Not really. Through fiction, we can give people insights into the lives and experiences and struggles of others. I think stories are empathy machines.

00:30:53 Sam Thompson

I think there's an importance there as well Ade, in terms of thinking about storage as empathy machines and the ability to say what one wants on the page compared to perhaps how one is able to express oneself in the political arena. And so for me, the ability of artists and creatives to be able to allow people to have a voice to put voice to these struggles themselves is really important.

I think in our conversations that we've had heading into this recording today, we talked to ideas of resistance and survival. A

have to just move on and hope it connects. But I know I've seen films and I've read poems and read novels have changed my life.

00:34:29 Ade Solanke

Suppose I do aspire to have that kind of effect and impact. And I do as I say, we're talking about repairing the damage that has been done for centuries to, in our case, African heritage people. I do believe stories are one of the main ways in which we can

and but both your works also focus somewhat on the future as well, and the potential for what the future holds. And beyond on this connection that you're making if you could perhaps put into a few short sentences what it is that makes you feel optimistic about these issues too.

00:37:29 Ade Solanke

The Angela Davis Lecture, which obviously Thomas you heard too, really did inspire me because you know this is a woman who was imprisoned in the 60s and had to flee her country and has still continued to fight the good fight. And she said it's a miracle that we're still two, three hundred years later, still fighting. And she's right, that's cause for celebration and for hope. People won't stop fighting for their rights.

00:37:51 Thomas Glave

Yes, I think. I'm optimistic and realistic. Realistic in the sense that I believe there will always be evil and wickedness on this planet. There just will be those power struggles and humanity, and our natures human beings to be cruel and vicious as well as kind and generous. But I also believe that we are able to engage in the hard work and generosity to resist, and to bring about resistance and change, and to help other people.

We do it all the time. And just rolling up the sleeves, and just getting in there and doing the work is all that

00:38:22 Ade Solanke

As one of your celebrated reggae artists, Sugar Minott, once said in one of my favourite songs, in spite of war and crime, the sun and the moon still shine. And that's a fact. You know, we talk about climate crisis and we've got a lot to do. It's a crime climate emergency, but the sun and the moon for now still shine. There's hope. I believe humans will get there.

00:38:44 Sam Thompson

Thank you both for taking the time to join me today and this fantastic conversation that I hope people have really enjoyed getting to listen to and has given them a lot of food for thought. I'd like you to have the opportunity to talk about what work you have that people ET9.96 Tf4(f)TJET9(gh)612 792 reW*nBTF3 9.96 Tf1 0 0 1 72.024

00:40:09 Sam Thompson

And Thomas, what about yourself?

00:40:11 Thomas Glave

Yes, well, my books are out there. Anybody can find them. They're all over the Internet. And please do, if you're interested, look them up. And I'm finishing my book on my year in Cambridge, and I'm also finishing up another book of essays which is my third book of essays, which I'm really excited about. And then I'll be starting a new fiction project. And I have other stuff coming up. Just Google me. You'll find things that out there that are coming up to be published. And there are lots of videos of me as well talking about different things. And thank you