

## 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, where she earned an MFA from the School of Cinematic Arts.

Thomas Glave is the author of four books and the editor of the Anthology Our Caribbean Gathering of Lesbian and Gay writing from the Caribbean. He's been the Martin Luther King junior visiting professor at MIT, liver human visiting professor at the University of Warwick, and a visiting fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge. He serves on the editorial boards of transition and Wasafi Ori and is a trustee of writing, West Midland and People Tree Press. His most recent work appears in the White Review and Latin American literary.

00:01:42 Sam Thompson

I'm really excited to get to talk to both of you. I know that we have got some great questions planned and I'm really excited to get into this topic. So Thomas, you were based in Nottingham for your Fulbright Award in Creative Writing in 2021-2022, and I know you've just returned from the states from your own Fulbright Emerson College in Boston.

Can you tell us more about your projects, and how has your time across the Atlantic influenced your creative work and outlook?

00:02:04 Thomas Glave

Sure. Yes, indeed. I was based, as you said at the University of Nottingham for a full year, 12 months.

And my focus there was on Black cultural identity and cultural development and history of Black people in the East Midlands, but particularly in Nottingham. And I was really interested in this project because as I approached to Fulbright in my proposal for the year, I've been thinking for a long time about what I call the Diasporic Triangle. Partly in my own experience, but most people in the African diaspora will know as such. And the ways in which this triangle I thought had four corners, being West Africa or the African continent. In my experience, the Caribbean and Jamaica, where I partly grew up, New York, the Bronx in the US, where I also partly grew up.

00:02:45 Thomas Glave

And then the United Kingdom, and specifically in this case, Nottingham, but also Birmingham, where I've been doing a lot of work and had lived for a good bit of time. So Birmingham and the West Midlands and Nottingham in the East Midlands.

00:02:55 Thomas Glave

I was really intrigued by—number one—Nottingham as a city for lots of different reasons.

00:03:00 Thomas Glave

But also because there seems to be so much focus by so many people on London, on the capital.

00:03:05 Thomas Glave

Not so much on the regional cities.

00:03:07 Thomas Glave

And I was also interested in how this seemed not necessarily to be a great deal of interaction culturally, politically, and otherwise, between people of African descent in the East Midlands, and specifically Nottingham, and people in the West Midlands, and specifically Birmingham.

00:03:24 Thomas Glave

I was curious to follow all of that through the Fulbright project and more.

00:03:27 Sam Thompson

Ade, how about you tell us a little bit about your experience in Boston and Emerson and how that's similarly reflected on your work and experience since.

00:03:35 Ade Solanke

Sure, it's been a really extraordinary experience having been privileged and you know, fortunate enough to have had a Fulbright on the West Coast at USC, I kind of thought, well, I know the states, but actually being in Boston has been another America.

00:03:52 Ade Solanke

The East Coast is very, very different. So I was at Emerson, as you said, developing Phillis Wheatley 250, which is a commemoration and celebration of the life, the work, the legacy of Phillis Wheatley, the first African to publish a book of poetry. And actually also the third American woman to do so. And she came to London in 1773, so this year is the anniversary—250th anniversary—of that landmark, kind of seismic invention that she had. She was a celebrity at the same time, she was an enslaved woman. That contradiction first of all intrigued me. But more than anything, I was inspired to embark on this journey because she was as soon as I discovered about her maybe 9-10 years ago now. She was kind of a version of me as an African woman writer abroad.

00:04:32 Ade Solanke

When I was in LA, I was very conscious of my diaspora experience and coming into another, let's call it another branch of the family. You know, America has so many links with England, and the African diaspora has so many connections to my experience having been born here, and my parents' generation, born and raised in Africa.

So like Thomas, it was very much, about, let me try to square this circle. Look at these different parts if you like of the African diaspora or the Black Atlantic as we sometimes call it.

00:04:57 Ade Solanke

I was at Emerson in Boston. Emerson is an institution which is known for communications and arts and marketing, so it worked in terms of my looking at a woman who was in the literary world. And but also physically, Emerson is based literally at Boston Common, which you may know was established in 1634. So it was already a very important location in the sphere of Boston when Phillis was kidnapped and brought to Boston in the 1750s.

00:05:21 Ade Solanke

My project was about is about...is about...it's still ongoing. This is a year of celebration, you know, exploring her, as I say, life and legacy.

00:05:29 Ade Solanke

Location where I was was 5 minutes from State Street, which was at the time she was there, known as King Street. Obvious reasons, it changed. My office overlooked the Common and was 10 minutes' walk from the various wharfs including Griffiths Wharf, where many enslaved people were trafficked to and disembarked, and also from places like Long Wharf and Fenway Hall, which were central to the first moment in the American Revolution, the Boston Tea Party.

00:05:57 Ade Solanke

And it turns out, I actually wasn't fully aware this, was that Phillis's books were on board one of the ships, the Dartmouth, which were involved in the Tea Party East India Company tea ships that were the focus of the ferocity of that 16th of December uprising. So in exploring the Phillis story, I found myself kind of inadvertently but very interested in exploring the idea of liberty. The idea of revolution.

00:06:20 Ade Solanke

The project overall deepened my understanding of America, having now experienced another part of America. But I also was able to explore Phillis's geographic, cultural, and intellectual context.

00:06:30 Ade Solanke

Abolition and revolution were both going on hand in hand, and these are both ongoing struggles, seismic struggles. Jim Jordan, another African American writer, called her a miracle, and Tony Morrison famously said a literate slave was supposed to be a contradiction in terms. But her achievement really blew high the racist assumptions about literacy, about intellectual capacity of Africans.

00:06:51 Ade Solanke

So she really is very much an extraordinary figure who I am happy and proud to be remembering.

00:06:57 Sam Thompson

Excellent. Thank you both. It's really interesting. I think that the key part that we've talked about both in that introductory question and that you've both identified is this experience of transatlantic narratives and how your work addresses these intersections between the UK, the US, either in a nascent forum for you Ade, or as it exists now with your work, Thomas, Africa and the Caribbean, and the histories of imperialism, colonialism, and post colonialism that intertwine these places. Could you talk a little bit more about your experience of writing these transnational stories?

00:07:26 Ade Solanke

Sure. I'd be happy to. So one of the things that I found extremely rewarding as ever with a Fulbright, you have an academic project, in my case academic and cultural writing, developing the play. But it's also the social and interpersonal interactions that make Fulbright so wonderful, frankly, and I was able as part of my work to meet contemporary, we might call them latter day Phillises: poets and visual artists and composers and storytellers who, you know, 250 years later, are still grappling with racism, and in spite of all of those obstacles are forging ahead, as Phillis did, to make their work. I was honoured to make friends with them. They helped enrich and deepen my understanding of this contemporary space.

00:08:03 Ade Solanke

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 Europa by descent W 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 was a very multicultural area.

00:09:27 Ade Solanke

So I've always been interested in the links if you like between Africans from the continent, Africans in the diaspora, Africans from the Caribbean, and because of my friendships, childhood friendships with people from Jamaica, my best friend was from Dominica, another best friend was from Barbados. I was very conscious of TAST. The transatlantic slave trade, and I think in a way it inspired my work. I mean, I've never really, you know, trace back the moment when I thought I'm gonna explore stories of the diaspora, but my experience was basically like it was like family reunions in the 60s.

Africans like my parents who are coming to England, meeting Caribbeans for the first time. Caribbean people who coming from the islands were meeting Africans. It was almost like a family reunion, so I'm a Londoner, very proud Londoner. London has always been to me an African City, because of its imperial history, its colonial history. Because you know the English were there. We are here.

Phillis touches on all three points of that Black Atlantic exploration born in Africa—we think Gambia or Ghana, trafficked to Americas, when she was 7 and then coming to London in 1773. So for me it's an opportunity. Her story is an opportunity to look at and dramatise, I suppose you call them the journey that we as a people, are still on.

00:10:31 Sam Thompson

Thank you. Yeah. And I feel like, Thomas, you've got a really interesting perspective on that the other way round in a way. As Ade said, England has been doing a lot of this grappling. The UK has been doing a lot of this grappling with similar legacy and you have been someone who spent a significant amount of time in America has then been in the UK whilst that work has been ongoing, you've got work that touches on all three points in that triangle. You've written about the Caribbean, time living in New York and then now being based in the UK, there's a lot of perspective that you can lend this conversation from another angle.

00:11:00 Thomas Glave

Thank you, Sam. It's been really fascinating listening to Ade's recounting because I'm thinking about my childhood in Jamaica, which then became a childhood also in New York. So I was already transnational and crossing the sea when I was a very young child and going to school in Jamaica and then going to school in the United States. When we were in Jamaica as children. People who are my age, my cousins

in central England and Britain was really, actually quite irrelevant to us and we just didn't think of it, although I grew up in the in the immediately so-called post colonial era.

So I never saw the Union Jack in Jamaica. I grew up in the period of Jamaican independence, but nonetheless there was that legacy that still abides today and certainly abided in my family and they just focus on the monarchy, etcetera, etcetera. But one of the things in my experience, I think that was the most arresting, in addition to my having grown up with Jamaican language, which we call Patois or Creole, and English US English, and then later British English.

I was finding out only a few years ago and I was doing some writing about this that I had a, not surprisingly I suppose, patrilineal great, great grandfather who came from Yorkshire, from North Yorkshire, and who had emigrated to Jamaica just after emancipation in the mid 19th century in the 1840s, and who through sequence of accidents, one might say, he was a younger son to seeking out his fortune in the colonies, right? Came across my great, great grandmother who for a very long time, we and the family thought that she was a so-called brown woman, a mixed race woman. And of course, that term is subject to all kinds of debate.

Well, it turns out teams actually classified British. We found her birth certificate. Her name is Catherine and she was born in 1812 and she was classed as a Creole Negro which meant born in Jamaica and definitely black of skin. I found that that this connection and finding my great-great grandfather's gravestone in central Jamaica with my surname on it, Glave, from the 19th century, but not being able to find her gravestone, although they were, as far as we know married. Well, that speaks to the history just in and of itself, right?

But also it was a powerful moment for me, linking me unquestionably to the slave trade, to diaspora and to all of these future discoveries that I've come across here in Britain. So I think that I've been a—I suppose I could say, as a citizen of diaspora, all my life, obviously, as Ade as well.

00:13:14 Thomas Glave

But I was thinking about what might it mean. Now turning into this look at East Midlands and Black people there to see. You hear what these stories might mean and suggest.

As I thought about my own realities as well, thinking that I'm coming with the very Caribbean and US background. But there were no other US relatives in my family. So I'm speaking a language that is in some ways very much unique to my own experience. And it has been really interesting participating in Black Lives Matter protests. Ade alluded to the murder of George Floyd. So these protests took place in Birmingham, where I was living in 2020 and also in London. And I participated in those with young black British people, mostly it seemed. And what about that as well in a sequence of essays.

00:13:53 Thomas Glave

And if you can imagine the thought processes that were going on, just thinking about Black British people, Black Caribbean people and Black African people and so on as we're protesting this murder of a Black American. But that police brutality, of course, lives on in Britain as well. And I think one of the things that I've been the most struck by in the time that I've been doing this research in England is the incredible amount of denial and refusal to really, as Ade has said also, face is actually atrocious history. It's a history of atrocities, right? But also the ways in which so many people in Britain and have been exploring in Britain and before have continued to put the blame, if you will for these historical atrocities on the Americans, and have to say, oh well, that's an American thing, isn't it? You've had segregation there, you've had lynchings there. As if the British didn't, one might say, outsource these atrocities themselves.

So I've written about this too and tried to think about how this ongoing denial and refusal to really confront the past and the present is still hobbling Britain in many ways in its progress, and certainly that informs my project while working with the people in Nottingham.

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 British as well. It wasn't an American trade. It was a British-American trade.

00:15:27 Thomas Glave

No, that's exactly right, Ade. Thank you and in fact, I wrote about this as well. The connections between for example Liverpool and the US South. A Reminder Letter to England I called it. When the January 6th, 2021 insurrection occurred in the United States in Washington, DC. I was truly astonished at how many people I heard in Britain saying—and this is the helpful thing about being a creative writer and eavesdropping upon conversations—about people saying things like, oh, those Americans, they're so terribly racist and on and on, as you can imagine.

And I thought, but wait a minute, wait a minute here. I think that perhaps you yourselves, you people who are speaking here in Britain, don't know your own history. If you're saying this so blithely about those people whom in fact you helped to create, right? So the distancing that happens in the 21st century through these conversations and this kind of ignorance is clearly insidious. It's harmful. But as it continues to propel these untruths and doesn't look at the reality of what actually happened, it makes possible the kind of ignorance that will enable future harm to come to people. So we haven't come to grips with this yet so I wanted to write about that, to push through some of that denial.

00:16:28 Ade Solanke

I think Gore Vidal said years and years ago. America is also the United States of Amnesia, and I think that's true of us in England too, and one of the quotes I always remember from the 90s in LA was denial is not just a river in Egypt and it still remains true. There are things in African history—let's not ignore the fact that there was collusion and cooperation.

Some of the West African nations and chiefdoms were implicated and involved in slavery too. Which isn't to say that they aren't grappling with that history in the way that we're asking and hoping and encourage in America and other European nations, as well as England, to look at that history. But the fact of the matter is, and this is still something which I find is contested, and it amazes me. The fruits of that atrocity, to quote you quite rightly, Thomas, is the the modern, affluent, comfortable life. Many people in America—not all, fewer and fewer, but many people enjoy as a result of the wealth created from that trade.

So there's still a lot of denial because to face, you know, it's called an ugly truth and is ugly. To face that truth forces us to look at today. That's ultimately what is being resisted: how we live today and the legacies of that 300 almost...I think in America, slavery was 246 years, but that was a long time. African Americans were enslaved for longer than they've been free.

00:17:44 Thomas Glave

Yes. And you also have to count segregation, reconstruction, right? All of this violence that happened after. This is why I said earlier that I would call the term post-colonial, I would call that term into question because although because I grew up in the so-called post-colonial era and the post-colonial Jamaica...we're still very much in many ways, a colony. I see that much more clearly now as an adult than I did as a child.

00:18:05 Thomas Glave

But I think that also one of the things that I found really interesting and useful for my imagination later, although I didn't know that this would be the truth, the reality at the time, was growing up in such a place as Jamaica at that time in the 1970s, and feeling I was receiving all this dogma and doctrine and ideology. And I couldn't know, would be so useful many years later, as it would clash with my more developed and educated political opinions as an adult.

But when you don't question these things, right, when you grow up accepting them as ideology that's the everyday reality, you can easily be let down that terrible garden path of misapprehension and ignorance and bigotry.

00:18:40 Ade Solanke

This is what's so extraordinary in terms of, again, the Fulbright experience. I actually say to people, and I mean it. It was a transformative experience first time around. And again, 30 odd years later, it's really extended me as a person. The East Coast and the West Coast differences are so profound. Now, neither California nor Boston had plantation slavery. They had different forms of it.

Chattel slavery wasn't really a feature in New England, but the colourism and the ongoing present day contemporary division that still exists around people are working hard to overcome it. But you and I know it's still a feature. I'm a dark skinned West African origin woman and it's something I've been aware of. The difference in the way my fair skinned friends are treated as opposed to the way I'm treated. Now the interesting thing is, because I grew up in an African household, we really did not have colourism.

In fact, one of my earliest childhood memories is my mother received a postcard from home. And she showed me the postcard, she said. Oh, isn't this woman beautiful? And it was a Nigerian woman with lovely...you know, we used to do our hair with threads. We called it pineapple style. She had pineapple style hairstyle and beautiful black skin. And I said oh, she's not beautiful.

And my mum looked at me and laughed and said you don't know anything. So then my eyes went back to the picture through my mum's eyes. I suddenly saw this woman is stunning. And because of that for me, I would say fortunate insight that my mother gave to me, I wasn't, if you like, exposed to some of the shadism that is a feature of our lives here. From that moment onwards. Okay, beauty is this. And I think that has been an important thing I've come up against in some of my experiences in America.

Because of the legacies of slavery and, you know, the proximity to whiteness was always valued, it's still a thing that people are dealing with. Phillis was from West Africa. She's a dark skinned woman, so again, exploring her life and her contribution to world culture, not just American culture. It's rewarding that that honour is also from a woman of dark skin. It makes a big difference. And as we're casting the play, that's something we're very conscious of.

00:20:39 Thomas Glave

Another aspect of diaspora. I haven't talked about really is language and to say that in in my experience writing fiction and creative nonfiction as well, I've grappled a lot as a writer with trying to represent Jamaican language—the Jamaican languages—on the page, and particularly from the social class that I know so well. But also from social classes of which I wasn't a member and which I'm not a member still, right? And trying to represent also the ways in which those languages are so closely linked to people's skin colour, the assumptions that people make. If somebody speaks a particular way in Patois that they're going to have a skin colour of a particular hue. And this then gets gendered as well between women and men.

And then at the same time being exposed to the African American languages that I grew up with in the Bronx, NY, with another register altogether, right? And so in some ways, when I came to Britain and began to think about this project of Nottingham, I thought how can I...I don't know anything about how people

speak 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 of culture and cultures, simultaneously within a person or person, as we straddle these different places geographically and culturally.

00:22:05 Ade Solanke

Well, speaking of straddling, one of the things that I was very interested to do was to take the story and the play to different parts of the Black Atlantic Triangle. So we've done readings in West Africa, in Ghana, in Gambia, we did readings in the Caribbean. I wanted to just take the temperature of how this story landed in these different locations. Obviously I've done readings in England. And it's been really fascinating. So in Ghana, Accra, the capital, had a real connection to slavery. If anyone's been to Ghana, you'll know of Elmina's Castle and the Cape Coast castles along the Atlantic Coast. Slavers left physical reminders of that, that moment, that historical moment.

I was surprised when my cast listened to the story. And their response was, I would say a little bit shocking because they were very 'this isn't over.' Slavery is still going on, not the transatlantic kind. But why are African migrants risking their lives on the ocean? In the past, they were captured and trafficked. But the desperation, the legacy of poverty, is so intense.

People are desperate enough from the Sahel down to Sub-Saharan Africa that they will put themselves into these rickety little vessels in order to reap what they think is a better life, so that was...obviously I'm not based in Africa, so I hadn't thought of it from that angle. It gave me lots of insights.

And in the Caribbean in Barbados, there was another response which equally surprised me, which was almost—do we have to look at this? And I'm not saying everyone's like that, but there was there was one area of thinking which is, this is a history we don't need to keep going back to. So that surprised me. I didn't get that in Africa, in Ghana or Gambia. In England, it was as we were discussing, more of the denial. Oh, isn't that more American? She's an American. What has this got to do with us? So it's been interesting, as you say, straddling the different points of the triangle with this particular story.

00:23:57 Thomas Glave

Yeah, I think that there is a reality to national boundaries for many people, obviously, and national identity, but again, diasporic fluidity moves through all of that, right? We see that very clearly.

00:24:08 Ade Solanke

Absolutely. And I think it really has been so much more of the shaping element of my life than I've really looked at until now. My experience growing up in London means I was at the centre. You know, the High Street. It used to be called the High Street of the British Empire. So I always had a sense of us being from these different parts of a diaspora.

I think the idea of race wasn't anything that we ever studied in school.

And today again, it's another issue that people are grappling with. How do schools prepare young people for this, let's call it multicultural life? It's, you know, I agree with you, Thomas. The term post-colonial. If we're being really accurate. Shouldn't we perhaps call it post slavery? The world that we're living in today?

00:24:46 Thomas Glave



One of the things I think is just important to remember when we think about reparations and also about truth and reconciliation, all of these various terms, I have to say that I think Britain just has a great deal to really account for in these regards because as much as we may point the finger at Germany, I think well, your own house, right? I'm sorry.

And I think that with the Germans, I mean, part of the what they couldn't get away from was that there were physical concentration camps in Europe which could not be denied, no matter how much you tried. So you actually had the places where the viciousness occurred, right? The Germans couldn't after a while with all the pressure on them as well, after World War 2.

00:25:25 Ade Solanke

It's interesting there's a similar discussion in America, because there weren't physical plantations New Englanders often say, we weren't as bad as you know the Virginians or the other southern plantations in southern states.

Well, to an extent there is the fact that, as I said earlier, chattel slavery wasn't a feature on the whole of New England. The slavery was definitely there, and they were often quite rightly remind everyone that they were the first in 1784, to abolish—the Massachusetts senate abolishes slavery in 1784, eleven years after Phillis's book is published, and that says the result of many, many petitions by people like Prince Hall, who's one of the first abolitionists in Boston. Mumbet. Elizabeth freeman, she changed her name to after. This is actually connected to your discussion of what people are called by. She was an enslaved woman and she changed her name as soon as she was able to secure her freedom.

So, yeah, it's interesting Again, the stories that we tell ourselves as Londoners, you know, the Royal Navy was the force that outlawed slavery and intercepted all the ships that were continuing attempting to continue the trade, yes. The Royal Navy did do that, but for centuries.

Before that, it had a different role to play in terms of protecting the seas for slavery, so it's half remembrances and less, I call it full frontal looks at this ugly history. And we were, you know, we're thinking about how we deal with these unpleasant legacies and histories.

I did the July 4th oration for the City of Boston a few weeks ago, which was an enormous experience. When they first invited me, the first thing I said was, this is your annual celebration of independence. You do know I'm a Brit? Do you want me to speak at this event?

And they were like, yeah, we think your project really speaks to where we're at today in Boston. I thought, okay, from that point of view...

00:27:05 Ade Solanke

But you know, I'm a foreigner, I'm a visitor. And was it appropriate for me to talk about these issues? In the end, I just decided to think of it as I do when it comes to being a Londoner. I'm proud to be a Londoner. That doesn't mean I'm proud of everything that London has been and done. You know, we were one of the major slaving ports along with Liverpool and Bristol.

So I wanted to be sensitive to the meaning of the event. You know, July 4th, celebration of independence. But I also wanted to be honest. And I decided, well, I can't brush the Phillis story under the carpet. I'll just speak her truth in the most sensitive way I can. And you know, if as I do, we genuinely want social justice, I don't know that we cannot look at the roots, not just the leaves, but the roots of the systems we're living in.

The way things are today is as a result of the way things were. And if we don't identify and look at what we have to dismantle in terms of the structural racism, we will never get to the point of repair, which I actually believe we will and can get to.

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. And I'm really curious to hear you both talk a little bit more about the way that art can be used to educate to empower to collaborate to tackle the global challenges that that are facing our world right now.

00:31:32 Thomas Glave

I don't want to get too grand about it. The contributions that I can make through what I do with writing, they may help someone now; they have, I know that for a fact. Or they may someone in 50 years. That's all very important to me. But to me, what's also really important is having a sense of social engagement politically as well in any way that I can. I feel that art is what I do. Obviously writing and trying to get words out to people, or tell my own stories—the stories that come to me.

But I also want to feel that I'm actively engaging in something that can help people in an immediate way, whether it's contributing to getting people to register to vote, or doing something somewhere that can help people actually to see change in their communities at large.

There are so many writers today, and there's so many people saying so many things, and we live in an era of so many distractions and seductions that I don't know how much my work will matter or not matter to people. But I think that obviously just creating art itself, making art itself, is an act of hope, an act of faith, because otherwise, why do it right? But we do it because we're still alive. We're still breathing. Yeah, but I don't really see any other way to live, actually. Like I couldn't imagine not writing, so I do it as kind of an inevitability.

I don't know if I necessarily do it as something I say, oh yes, this is definitely going to give people hope and change someone's life. Not when I'm making it, although I think it was different when I did the anthology, *Queer Caribbean Anthology*, because that was something that was a book that I knew didn't exist.

And there was a great deal of noise asserting that it shouldn't exist and I was working very much against the current, the very hostile volatile current at that time, which hasn't necessarily gone away. So that was different because I was bringing people together in the book to assert that we were there and present and have something to say in Caribbean history and Caribbean reality.

00:33:13 Ade Solanke

I think of the work I do...first of all, it's my pleasure. I love thinking. Writing and thinking are, you know, indivisible. I like thinking about things and people and the world I live in. I've always been told 'stop daydreaming' in class.

So I do it for the pleasure of the thing itself. It's also a means to...more and more, as a result of this Phillis story I'm becoming more and more interested in history. And so I'm interested in bringing up those hidden histories and connecting them again to how we live today.

Characters are always what first strike me as I say, Phillis, I thought, wow, interesting. 200 years ago, she was doing what I was doing as a Fulbrighter. She was travelling abroad and experiencing a new reality as a writer.

I was at a birthday celebration. One of her guests was someone I'd met briefly. And he said, oh a friend and I were talking about your play. And this was Pandora's box, which was on twelve years ago this year. And I was gobsmacked. He said, oh yeah, we were talking about identity and we both said we'd seen it.

And I said that is the greatest compliment you can pay me if you think my work speaks to what you're discussing even today. I'm thrilled. So you can never...Thomas is absolutely right. We don't know how our work impacts people in the world. We get it from the head onto the page and into the world. And then you

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 repair our lives through sharing our stories, sharing stories such as Phillis's, such as...we all saw...you know, people have different views on 12 Years a Slave, and I understand why some people do say we've had too many stories about slavery. I disagree with them, but I understand why they say that.

I think these stories are important, and they do change the world. In fact, the world is story-made. It is all random bits of nothingness until it's, you know, an artist, a filmmaker, a storyteller, a poet who pulls those random threads into something meaningful. And it could be sometimes just a line of dialogue or an image. It could be anything that connects with another human heart and makes a change.

Angela Davis actually gave a recent lecture to celebrate Malcolm X's birthday, and she said it's something worth celebrating that the struggle for human rights is still going on. Let's not forget this is hundreds and hundreds of years. We're still here. People are still fighting. And she said each generation has kept this fight for human rights going. And it made me think she's absolutely right. Ultimately, what that says is African people still refuse to be exploited and abused. And non-African people, seeing obvious and outright wrongs, will join that struggle for liberation.

250 years ago, Africans were being kidnapped, black children were being, I read somewhere recently, exchanged like puppies in certain parts of Boston. So yes, we have a long, long way to go. But I keep writing because I believe ultimately we will win, but you know I'm an optimist.

00:36:04 Thomas Glave

The thing that I think about probably the most is really just daily discipline and stamina and patience and just doing the work irrespective of the story that I'm telling, but just having the stamina to do it and to keep going through the long haul. Angela Davis's speech, in many ways, I think was very much about discipline and stamina.

Being able to get a good night's sleep, as it were, which I think is very important. Eating properly, if one can. To do this very, very taxing discipline of making art and having faith to stay with it, not knowing what the outcome of that will be.

But thinking about the world ahead, that is the world of today actually, and how our planet is actually changing to a very, very devastating state of affairs, right, that we're going to have to have the stamina to see through.

So, I'd like to think that when I die that I will help someone, somehow, somewhere, either through my political activism and my community engagement, or through my artistic work, I would like to think that I was on this Earth and I did something to help someone at some point.

My teaching for that matter, that's what's most important, as I think about our world increasingly on, you know, fire.

00:37:04 Sam Thompson

Excellent. Thank you both. There's connections that that we're making, and as Ade was talking about, is one of the big missions of what we're doing here at Fulbright. But I think it's a good thing to bring us back to our last point that I wanted to talk about really. We've been talking a lot about the past in this episode

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 really it takes. And that's a big 'all'. But it's possible.

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 can find and engage with right now. So where can people find you Ade?

00:38:59 Ade Solanke

Oh, thank you. I mean wonderfully to report there's so much happening to celebrate Phillis and my website sporastories.com and I will be posting information about all the things we're doing. As I said, this is going to be a year of celebration. Her book was published in September of 1873. So the whole of this year is I'm calling it the tidal year.

But the city of Boston is having its first ever Phillis week this September at Phillis's church, the Old South Meeting House. We're doing a site-specific play about how she managed to get her books off the ship before this tea cargo was thrown into the Atlantic Ocean. There's a massive, amazing conference in Mississippi this November, early November, 2nd to the 4th of November, which is actually when our play opens—early November. But the conference will have Alice Walker headlining a gathering of amazing African women writers, African American women writers, to celebrate Phillis. That's the 2nd to the 4th of November.

The play is on from the 3rd to the 4th of December. So the play in Boston is about Phillis's return to Boston from London. But the thing that started me on this was the experience of her being in London, which is another play. The Phillis in London will be on early next year. We're actually finalising all the plans, so watch this space, we're going to celebrate Phillis in style.

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!

00:40:35 Sam Thompson

Thank you both so much. Really am grateful that you gave us so much of your time and so much of your thoughts and I look forward to any time that we can talk again.

00:40:45 Sam Thompson

That brings us to the end of Episode 2 of our Fulbright Conversations series on global challenges. Don't forget to subscribe or follow us on your favourite podcast platform so you don't miss an episode.

You can also stay up to date with everything we're up to at the US-UK Fulbright Commission by following us on social media and visiting our website, [www.fulbright.org.uk](http://www.fulbright.org.uk).

I'm Sam Thompson, and join us next time when we'll be discussing pandemics.