

Humans of Learning Sciences

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A conversation about hip hop culture and oral traditions of knowledge transmission

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Mon-Lin Monica Ko, Dr. Kalonji Nzinga

Monica Ko 00:07

Welcome to the Humans of Learning Sciences. I'm your host, Dr. Mon-Lin Monica Ko. The Learning Sciences is an interdisciplinary field that studies and supports learning in classrooms, after school clubs, museums and the outdoors. And while the learning scientists are united in their central commitment to trying to understand learning, there is a great diversity in how we do that work. And even in how we define learning. This podcast tries to take stock of and amplify these diverse perspectives. Our conversations will go beyond what you see on a website profile, CV or scholarly publications. We want to dig deeper, and understand the person who was behind the work. We'll ask questions like, What experience is formed your view of learning? How do you conceive of the learning sciences? And where do you think the field needs to go next? As your host, I'll be learning right along with you through these conversations and hope that they inspire even more dialogue about what it means to study and support learning. Join me on the Humans of Learning sciences podcast.

Why are so many people around the globe enamored with hip hop culture? How do people develop morality and ethics through their engagement with rap music? These are the questions that Dr. Kalonji Nzinga, an assistant professor of Learning Sciences and Human Development at the University of Colorado Boulder, tries to answer through his work. In today's episode, we'll talk about hip hop as an art form that comes from African traditions of storytelling. The differences between oral versus written traditions and transmitting knowledge within a community and the etymology of the word woke. What is fascinating to me about Kalonji is his ability to push boundaries in ways that allow him to fully live into his multi hyphenated identity as a hip hop artist, cultural psychologist, educator, and learning scientist. I'm so excited to bring this conversation to you today. As always, the source materials will be linked in the episode description. And we'd love for you to email us with your comments and questions are emailed as humanslspod@gmail.com. Here's my conversation with Kalonji.

Alright, welcome to today's episode, I'm really excited to be talking to Dr. Kalonji Nzinga, a learning scientist who thinks about the ways in which moral concepts like authenticity and loyalty and justice, are formed by young people as they engage with multiple forms of media. His dissertation research was really analysis of how hip hop heads or listeners of rap music, develop morality and ethics, through their engagement with hip hop culture. So welcome to the show.

Kalonji Nzinga 03:00

Thank you so much, Monica. I'm really, really happy to be here.

Monica Ko 03:04

Kalonji, I was wondering if we could start out with just a quick story about your pathway into the learning sciences and the role of narratives and oral traditions in your own upbringing.

Kalonji Nzinga 03:20

Sure, sure. Yeah. I'd love to talk a little bit about that. I mean, um, you know, I actually just just found out that both of us had Biological Sciences backgrounds. Yes, that's right. Yeah. So yeah, so my undergrad was also in biological sciences. But I was I've always been really interested in, you know, questions, both sort of, I guess, bio psycho cultural sort of questions

about how, how learning happens, but then also, how that is related to how social change happens. So I think like, a lot of the questions that I'm really interested in is how, how is conceptual change a pathway to social change? If we think about, you know, many of the aspects of culture as socially constructed, how can we reconstruct, you know, our knowledge structures in a way that deconstruct and reconstruct some of those social constructs, so that, I think, kind of, has been a large part of, you know, the way that I've sort of approached the field. I mean, my story of coming to Learning Sciences is absolutely a sort of meandering path. Like, I had no idea that that, that learning sciences was actually even a field of study. When I was going back to graduate school, I was applying to psychology departments, and was actually applying to Northwestern, which is, you know, where, you know, we certainly share some lineage. And the, the faculty member who eventually became my advisor, Douglas Medine, actually counseled me as I was, you know, submitting that application and talking with him. He said, Well, there's this program here called learning sciences that, you know, definitely has is focused on, you know, psychological approaches to learning. And that was something that, you know, was a part of my application. And, but, but he said, it has this strand that's very much focused on socio cultural approaches, and how, you know, our learning is, in many ways, structured by the society, the culture, the sort of social arrangements that were any colleges that were a part of. And so that, to me, was like, Oh, wow, that that exists. I want to, I want to learn more and eventually applied. And I guess that's history.

Monica Ko 05:58

It's so interesting to think about how people find their way into the field, because it's, in some ways, kind of amorphous, it's young. It's interdisciplinary. And so thinking about what constitutes the learning sciences, is something that I think that we've been grappling with throughout our young history of 30 years. So I'm curious that when, when you were in the learning sciences program, did you always set out to consider the role of hip hop as sort of a mechanism for the formation of moral and ethical views? Or was that something that came along further down the line as you were trying to find the focus of your dissertation?

Kalonji Nzinga 06:37

You know, hip hop is has always been a part of my life and upbringing. I'm a hip hop artist, I am a lyricist, and songwriter, and work in that medium, and have done it for a long time. And so I've always I've been a learner of hip hop to a certain extent and as a big part of, you know, who I am in my identity. And so I had, you know, I always had an intellectual curiosity around hip hop. I wasn't necessarily I don't think I was always sure that that was a valid course of study academically. I don't think I was always a confident about that. But I think the more that I did learn about this sort of cultural aspects of learning, and started taking on questions as also about, I guess you could say the value, how hip hop is valued as a academic space or as an intellectual activity that became more and more of, of something that felt like important to study. I think hip hop is, at this point, one of the largest poetic art forms globally. And so not understanding the the impact of it, but also understanding some of the perception of hip hop is different, there's a big difference there.

Monica Ko 08:04

I'm curious about this idea of sort of the oral transmission of knowledge. And I know that your work draws on these, the history of the rich history of oral traditions and African culture. And in

particular, the scholar the Malian writer, and historian, Amadou Hampâté Bâ. And I think that he argues that oral traditions and the knowledge that's imparted through verbal language cannot be separated from the person who's spoken into being, I'm kind of curious about your take on that. And what you see as the value of verbal language that what makes it so different and unique and important, as a form of knowledge transmission and communication.

Kalonji Nzinga 08:51

Sure, I'm a big student of Amadou Hampâté Bâ in his work. And I actually, you know, kind of found my way to that work through hip hop and, and thinking about questions. Of, of hip hop as an art form as a, you know, as a language art that is a part of black storytelling traditions, right. And black music and storytelling in the tradition of hip hop has been studied by scholars for years. But and one thing that they note, is this idea of the chain of transmission between hip hop and the forms of music, and storytelling that came before it. So, you have r&b, you have soul, you have jazz, you have the blues. And before that you have spirituals which were sung by enslaved Africans, right. And so part of the question that scholars were trying to wrangle with was these enslaved Africans that created these songs like follow the drinking gourd, all of these, you know, very complex storytelling traditions, was there something that preceded that even that occurred, and was transmitted from Africa from a middle across the Middle Passage, right. And so scholars began to study storytelling traditions, within, within West Africa, within Central Africa. And one of the most he's written in, in French, he's written in Fulfulde, he's written in a number of languages about the the oral tradition. So he's traveled to the, you know, various regions of West Africa and studied tradition, traditions of storytellers, storytellers that sometimes are called grioux. Sometimes in Bambara, the word is jolly, or JAYLEE. You know, that word also has a double entendre, which means blood, right. And one of the the ideas behind that is that the storyteller travels around the community, in the same way that blood travels around the body. And they, they basically transmit wellness or illness based on their pedigree, right. And so this is the role of the Grioux was to be able to record the history of the communities we record, you know, various family, family lineages, stories about ancestors, as well as proverbs and various different forms of wisdom, and then to transmit that around the community to be guides for politicians that were making decisions and to these essentially community historians. And so, and what was very interesting about that tradition is that it was also a musical tradition, right? So you have these reels and jollies are adding musician percussion that sometimes they were drummers sometimes they play the core string, a stringed instrument, but they were essentially both these musicians and historians and so Amadou Hampâté Bâ did a lot of the research I would consider him in many ways, you know, a learning scientist, because of the way in which he was thinking about the like oral language And that chain of transmission, how does a culture keep certain ideas alive through the transmission of of language specifically through these? These the role of this historian storyteller, the jolly.

Monica Ko 12:39

Yeah, yeah, I love that. And I think about, you know, the the idea of passing down oral traditions, or engaging in them as sort of a cultural activity, right? They're actors, and there is a flow of communication. And, you know, you know, maybe some other people would also argue that written text also affords certain types of communication. So I'm just curious about how, what is it that's so unique about these oral traditions of storytelling? What aspect of knowledge

or personhood do you think it for grounds that maybe written text backgrounds, I'm just curious about that, you know, some of the different trade-offs were the affordances of these different modes, because it feels like from a Western lens, that there's been a huge valuing of written language, right? And even in academic traditions, as well, that, you know, these publications, the work, you are, in part, the thing that you produce, and that feels very different than having the stories be connected to a person who's passing them on in these shared settings. So just kind of curious about your perspective about that.

Kalonji Nzinga 13:54

Yeah, no, I think that's really, that's really compelling. What are the what are the affordances and constraints of sort of the oral transmission or the that that sort of style of knowledge transmission? I, you know, I think Amadou Hampâté Bâ talks a lot about this, the idea that, you know, whether or not you're thinking about sort of an oral account, or whether you're not you thinking about a written account, the criteria by which to judge that account, has to do with the authenticity, the validity, the the truth of that account. Right. And so, you know, I think one of the critiques that from, you know, I guess a lot of sort of Western sources to, that they have of sort of oral tradition and oral societies, is this idea that written text to a certain extent, allows you allow something to sort of be preserved in in sort of a more stable, stable way. But I think, I'm like, again, Amadou Hampâté Bâ pushes back on that and says, yes, there are some absolutely, absolutely some affordances of the idea of being able to have a have a text that lives outside of the person that can, you know, be being now an artifact, right? But at the same time, there are, do we trust that text, right, and that text, that text also requires some level of wrangling with the the validity of what's there. And so we don't get rid of that the problem of validity by saying that we now have a text and then so that was actually one of the aspects that he was studying was hot. Well, first of all, how close of a reproduction is happening in some of these traditions? Like how, like when a when I knew storyteller is learning the stories of the person that trains them in that tradition? How is it a duplication of that idea? Or is it this is that person riffing off of that idea? And so, you know, I think he, you know, he sees some variation in that in that some, in some traditions, it was very important for, you know, every single letter of so for example, the there's a myth, the lianja myths, from the Congo, and it's basically like an epic poem that is almost, you know, verbatim, you know, rehearse and learned through generations. But then there's also you know, storyteller storytellers that add their own flair to the stories in different traditions as well. And so, you know, he's, he's, he's really wrangling with that question, in a way that I think that we could continue to sort of pick up some of the, the streams of those questions in the way that we're, we're thinking about that. I think that was something that I was, and I'm still interested in trying to think about. What are like what are the affordances of creating a learning sciences podcast as opposed to just a, you know, a, an article like what are what are the affordances of you know, having a conversation that's dialogical and where the conversations of what are the what are the affordances of being able to hear the tone of my voice? Like there's a certain tonality that that sort of oral tradition has, right that we can, we can kind of hear emotion in the way that our voice resonates. And the tone and the pitch and the those aspects of of voice are also important.

Monica Ko 17:41

Yeah, yeah. I like that I think about, you know, journal articles, which is the way that we move through the academy, and really a huge part of our evaluation process, right?

Kalonji Nzinga 17:53

Absolutely.

Monica Ko 17:55

And I think about the idea of written text in some ways, I think with written text, it's, it's almost easier to divorce the person from the publication, right. And that you forget, sometimes at least, I feel like I do that. What's written on the page comes from a particular lens, from a person who has a particular tradition and upbringing and training. And all of those things shaped the thing that you're reading, which is only 30 pages, right. And sometimes when you meet that person, and you get to know that person, and you understand that deep history, and that knowledge, it helps you frame and better understand the single contribution that's on that publication. And that's something that you don't get, at least for me, as a graduate student, I don't think I realized until much later that, you know, each one of these pieces of work that gets produced by a scholar that is, goes through peer review, and gets approved and gets edited. It's one part of that scholars entire history and arc right of their scholarship. And I feel like that's something that's really difficult to, to really understand and build a schema for in a in a place like the academy that really prioritizes the production of that knowledge, right. But we know when we get to know one another, and we are part of this community, that it's one of the building blocks to a much bigger story. That's part of the larger story of learning sciences. Right. So yeah, I love that, you know, your work and thinking about that value of history and lineage. And communication of that knowledge. really helped me think about that a little bit differently.

Kalonji Nzinga 19:46

Wow, yeah, no, that's, that's really interesting, like, how does our personal stories affect, you know, the stories that we tell in, you know, I think about, one of the first people I think about is actually Lev Vygotsky, right, you know, who very much has affected the field of the learning sciences, especially social, socio cultural approaches to learning. But one of the things that we don't discuss enough is the context in which Lev Vygotsky was creating this work that he is, you know, producing this. And at a time, when the Soviet Union is trying to hit, you know, the cultural framework that he's in is thinking about, what does it mean to create sort of a more socialized world and so his ideas about the social nature of learning are more collectivist sort of understanding, are absolutely impacted and influenced by the context that he's in. And so I think, you know, one of the arguments that I think a lot of researchers in the learning sciences that are part of the socio cultural tradition are are trying to make now is, we benefit from folks like Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner, actually going in and translating Lev Vygotsky his work and bringing in this, this historical learning scientist that was, you know, creating in a particular moment of time uncovering that work helps us expand our understanding of what learning can be, and the more sort of diverse voices that are working in different historical contexts, different historical moments, and with different cultural identities, like that expands the ways in which we can see learning and how how it could be construed and constructed.

Monica Ko 21:46

Yeah, yeah. So I'm curious about the kinds of stories or narratives that you might find most fascinating, or ones that really you valued. As you were growing up? What sort of narratives

and stories sort of stick with you. And do you go back to when you think about sort of the value of these oral traditions? Is there anything that comes to mind?

Kalonji Nzinga 22:10

Wow, that's a great question and stories that I heard, um, the first person that comes to mind actually, is Malcolm X. Yeah, you know, Malcolm, I think is one of the best storytellers in the English language. He, I think was able to use metaphor in a way that was extremely powerful in ways that were rhetorically super interesting. I always remember like, he would not he would use like these sort of metaphors around, like animals and stuff. So he would like there was one metaphor that he talked about, which was talking about sort of our, you know, for black folks in America out the importance of Africa as a part of who we are, right. And he would use this metaphor and and said, If a kitten is delivered in an oven, does that make it a biscuit? And so what he was trying to say was, that, you know, if, you know, African people travel to America, and you know, live here, it'd become a part of the American context, does that make not make them still African, right, and so this this, like, really interesting metaphor that he's using in order to sort of make that make that happen. And, you know, a lot of learning scientists, of course, think of metaphor as such an important part of learning and how we start to represent and construct the world. And so I look at, you know, the storytellers that were a part of my upbringing, you know, folks in, you know, in the sort of, you know, black freedom tradition, and in the, the Americas, as this, like, masterful, you know, user users of metaphor.

Monica Ko 24:15

I know, you were saying earlier that you are a hip hop artist. And a huge part of your work is really arguing for the value of hip hop culture and rap music, in particular, in shaping and forming young people. And as you said, it's, it's a form of art that's been taken up all over the world, not just the United States, right. And so there's something there that is compelling. And I, you know, it's the combination of the lyrics and the, the beats and the music. And I'm curious about how the work that you do, tries to push back on maybe the dominant narrative that gets told about hip hop culture, what is it that you want to foreground about the value of engaging with this culture, and in particular, engaging with rap music.

Kalonji Nzinga 25:05

You know, much of my work has been focused on hip hop, as a sort of cultural reference point for millions of, of young people really, I, it was something that has meant a lot to me intellectually, what it was, but as a person, as a researcher, I wanted to sort of really like test the claims that felt like they were more like personal connection, and really think about a broader conversation that I had always experienced when it came to hip hop. And so coming to graduate school, and then starting to delve into the research in psychology on hip hop, which, you know, reading dozens and dozens of articles, in which the sort of underlying assumption was always trying to test harm or no harm done by hip hop, essentially, that so that was the, you know, the sort of framing, right, and this was, you know, this sort of, to be honest, moved alongside what was a, you know, sort of moral panic about hip hop in the sort of main discourse. You have the Parents Music Research Center, and Tipper Gore and various different voices within the sort of political discourse at that time, that was blaming hip hop, for violence, for drugs for all of these different things. And, you know, this is not to turn a blind eye towards problems in our communities and black communities and in American

communities when it comes to violence and drugs and those things. I'm not trying to turn a blind eye to that but I'm also I feel like, when I looked at that literature, there was a dearth and when it came to folks that had had a hypothesis that there was something sort of positive, useful for this art form for the people that were are gravitating to it. Why? Well, you know, why is hip hop being taken up by young people in the West Bank and Palestine? Like, you know, why why all over the world are young people sort of gravitating to, to this art form and creating within it. And, you know, you know, that I think I wanted the work that I did, to sort of tell a little bit of that story. And so, yeah, doing research in in sort of various methods, but all towards trying to articulate and just kind of create more rich descriptions of why young people felt like it was important to them and their their voice. Especially, you know, given the sort of moral valence of a lot of those conversations, I was started becoming interested in like, Okay, what do you think is the ethical message of this, like, what do you what do you see as what this author or this artist is trying to communicate ethically? And so that became sort of the driving questions from for, you know, my dissertation work and and the the work that is kind of come after.

Monica Ko 28:34

Your work makes me think a lot about scholars who have also taken a lens on valuing these other sorts of the cultural influences that actually shape young people's worldviews and trying to make bridges, right, trying to blur the boundaries of like, what you do when you're at home for multiple hours versus what you do in school. And, you know, Goldie Muhammad's work comes to mind on historically responsive literacy. So it's Carol Lee's work on cultural modeling. And I'm curious about how you see your scholarship as being connected to or building on some of that work?

Kalonji Nzinga 29:15

Absolutely, yes. I'm a fan of both, you know, I really enjoy the idea of cultivating genius, and some of the work that's, that's come out of that project, as well, as you know, so Dr. Lee is an advisor to me, she was to, you know, in many ways, I could go down a lot of different lanes and thinking about the impact that her work has had on my I guess most most formally, she was on my, my dissertation committee, and, you know, I took her classes at Northwestern. And, you know, a lot of a lot of my work is patterned on what she does with with cultural modeling and how she applied that to language arts in an African American Vernacular, English, black literature. You know, I like to say like, the what she did with Toni Morrison is what I'm trying to do with Jay Electronica, like there's to be able to sort of value those cultural stories, but there's like a, you know, a crazy, crazy other sort of angle to that. Which is, you know, I grew up in schools, that were, in many ways, patterned off of the sort of Afrocentric school model that Carol Lee created at, you know, as part of the Council of independent black institutions, movement during, you know, the sort of 70s and 80s that, essentially tried to, to think about this question of culturally relevant education. Culturally sustaining pedagogy is the difference that we have so many different frameworks and phrasings of that now, but that movement, inspired, you know, folks like my mother, Kim Benzinga, who was an educator in Columbus, and part of, you know, creating efforts to create Afrocentric schools there. So as a like, even as a child, as I kind of grew up under, you know, the, the legacy of kind of the work that that that Dr. Lee did, and so, weirdly enough, when I was when I told you that, that it was Doug Medina, who convinced me to go to learning sciences in at Northwestern, he very quickly

after that introduced me to Dr. Lee, who I told I remember telling my mother as I'm going to speak to, to a woman at Northwestern by the name of Dr. Carol Lee, she said, Do you know who that is? Like, do you know like, the and I was like, oh, okay, so like, I guess I wanted to say that it was that her connection to the this work has made an impact on me even just in the types of environments that I I grew up in and even before graduate school, I can say, but, ya know, it's the sort of work that her and others that are thinking about, you know, Gloria Ladson Billings, or, you know, folks that are thinking about sort of the intersection between the way the types of texts that we that we include in the classroom, or the way in which we think about language practices that are important in black communities. You know, that's all Dr. Lee in my work and so, absolutely. See, I'm glad you see those connections.

Monica Ko 33:06

That's great. Yeah. It's, it's amazing to hear that someone has influenced your life even even before you know it, right like that.

Kalonji Nzinga 33:10

Yeah. No, weird. Yeah.

Monica Ko 33:14

it is so strange. But that's amazing, that we're also getting interconnected. I want to talk a little bit about your own creative process. When you think about your own methods of creating oral communication and traditions, there's a time that you gave at CU. In the talk was called Keeping Language Arts on the low end, we'll link it in the episode description. But can you tell us a little bit about the context for developing that talk? And some of the major takeaways that came out for you, as you were putting it together? What were you hoping to communicate? And what was your creative process? Like?

Kalonji Nzinga 34:03

Yeah, um, that was, you know, that talk. I think what I was really trying to get across was the importance of being inclusive about how we're thinking about language, and classrooms as a way of connecting with the language traditions of different types of students, and seeing that through the lens of African American Vernacular, English, hip hop, etc. And so it was all thinking about, you know, oral tradition in black communities as a as an important touchstone for how classrooms can be created. Also, I was trying to sort of think about oral tradition and oral delivery, as a sort of creative space to start thinking about how we transmit knowledge, right? And so like, the entire idea of that is like, I want to do this lecture in a rap verse form, right? Yes, but the entire, the entire lecture was sort of delivered in hip hop verse. And so that actually was it was, it had never been done. So I didn't, so I didn't know how to do it. That was, it was definitely an experiment, in many ways, but I wanted to, I wanted to test in some ways, the validity of some of the theory that I was talking about when it comes to this is, you know, this is an intellectual medium. And so it did, as we kind of talked about earlier, have certain affordances, and certain constraints, and I was trying to push on those different constraints in order to sort of create something, when it comes to like, the creative process. It was, you know, it definitely contained, like, a lot of the research that sort of was part of that talk was research that was part of my dissertation. So, but then the problem, the sort of question

became, how do I arrange this into a narrative? How do I arrange this into some, you know, into the particular style of hip hop, which, you know, has a, it has a rhyme structure, right, and, you know, multi syllabic rhymes, and so creating, you know, in sort of transforming that into a rhyme structure is a another part of that, that experiment, right. And so, I think I learned a lot about you know, as someone that, you know, has that skill, but turning sort of didn't more dense, sort of research into that form is a little bit it's, it requires a little bit learning and playing and, you know, trying to make it work, I would say probably the, the, the next sort of aspect of that, like, I guess cognitively or from a learning standpoint was like the memorization right? The sort of internalization of those rhymes in a way that it became a part of me right like that, that I could, so you know, reproduce it live. You know, I did a lot of my memory realization in the shower in the morning. Behind the scenes.

Monica Ko 37:29

Kalonji it was it was like a 10 plus minute How many minutes? Was it?

Kalonji Nzinga 37:33

Yeah, I think it, I think ended up to be about 10,11 minutes. Yeah. Yeah. And so, you know, part of like, taking, you know, chunking, you know, like, I'm using all of my learning sciences, you know, memory skills in order to figure out okay, well, how do I just let let me learn this part first, and then you know, so so there was definitely, you know, taking in chunks and memorizing it. And then yeah, then I think then there's another, once once it becomes a part of you, once it becomes sort of, like at least the words once you can kind of recall all of the words, then it becomes like trying to, like, convey it in a way that is emotional, and really lives up to the, the, the emotions of of what I'm what I was trying to talk about, you know, how do we, the topics that we we take on how do we actually communicate them rhetorically in a way that feels right to us? And I would say like that this was, you know, I think because it was so novel, I think, you know, it might have made an impact, but I feel like, it could get so much better if, like, it was literally my first attempt at trying to do something like this, but I do think like, it wasn't, it was no Jay Cole or Lauryn Hill, let me just put it like that.

Monica Ko 38:56

I love that as you talk, I think about the the process of internalizing the thing that you say, right. And, you know, when you when you're describing identity formation, or, you know, formation of ideology, words that you listen to over and over again, that you then, you know, regurgitate and say back out to yourself in rhyme and verse, that process is so important to actually, you know, you actually then believe those words, right? Or you question if you believe those, yeah, and it seems very connected to your, your scholarship. So I've loved the the view that we get from when we think about your own creative process as someone who is a producer of lyrics and music, but also as someone who studies that we get to see. And you get to experience yourself, what those processes are like that you then help us sort of describe and you know, make public so that we understand the ways in which young people might do that. I think is part of the episode I want to I want to play the chunk of the talk, where you talk about the word woke, and the ways in which it came into public mainstream, what was the the starting point who put it in put who put it out there as as a word that we could riff and play on and disseminate and, you know, basically make as part of the public discourse. So, you know, maybe I'll pull a clip of that. First. I have to ask you if that's okay,

Kalonji Nzinga 40:32

That's great. I would love I would be absolutely okay with that.

Think about the poet, Erykah Badu, and her collaborator, Georgia Anne Muldrow. One month after Obama's inauguration, they released a ballad by the name of master teacher, which featured a word that would become eventually extensively cemented in cultural memory. But before this adjective was in a million Twitter tweets, it was chanted in a hypnotic ascending melody. I stay WOKE 44 times I stay woke, a pledge for black folk. I stay woke. I know Obama's president, but I stay woke. I hear colorblind rhetoric, but I stay woke.

Monica Ko 41:22

Tell us a little bit about that particular piece of of the talk about look. Yeah,

Kalonji Nzinga 41:29

Sure. Yeah. So I mean, in the talk, one of the things I'm talking about is the origin of that word right in there, you know, I'm drawing on you know, various different jet both journalists and and sort of social scientists have like studied its evolution through Twitter. But then also, even prior to that is sort of origin in the work of Erykah Badu, who is one of my favorite artists. She was one of the first artists in a song with Georgia Anne Muldrow. She had this refrain that went over and over again that when I stay woke, right, I stay well, over and over again and that like 44 times I can't counted going through and seeing all the times that she said it in these different different articulations. But, you know, part of her framing, and she's been interviewed about this, but she always talks about the idea of, of consciousness of like being, you know, having, being conscious of the social constructs, and societal and political issues that affect us. And specifically, she was coming about this as a black woman in, in the 2000s, when this came out, right, and so, so, so thinking about how this word woke started as this sort of pride for sort of authentic way of saying, we need to be aware of, you know, what's going on, in our communities. And for for it to move, then, you know, you see it now, in many ways being used almost as a sort of ironic, or, you know, almost criticism of like progressive politics or sort of progressive racial progressive politics. From the right, like you see, like more conservatives talking about ways in which they're anti a world to the point where that word almost has become stigmatized. And so it just thinking about, like, the sort of transformation of that word, through our discourse. You know, one of the things I'm just arguing is like, Okay, we need to be aware of the etymology of that particular word and give credit, you know, this is another another thing that I think is important giving credit to these hip hop innovators, who are in many ways, developing new language in various different different spaces. And how do we, as students of learning as students of literacy and language, how do we dissenter whiteness? How do we dissenter, the forms of language production that do not necessarily include young people that are making up words in urban communities, Urban Dictionary, is a sort of online resource for cataloging a lot of these words or millions of entries, that where people are negotiating in defining those different types of words, just thinking about all of those as part of the sort of learning and knowledge construction of, of young people of marginalized communities and then of the world woke is, you know, we could see work being used, you know, all across the world.

Monica Ko 45:08

It's so interesting, I think one of the things that I also want to talk to you about is the role of music and oral traditions and in our current political landscape, right, a lot has happened in these last couple of years. And so I want to talk to you about this idea of prefigurative activism, right? It's a mouthful, right? prefigurative activism, one of the talks that you gave on Coursera, which we'll also link in the episode is about the response to the global pandemic, to the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, which is often times taken, taken place publicly, the response has been very much a visceral, public displays of our reaction to some of these things. And this idea of prefigurative art of ism is trying to account for or maybe explain some of the things that we don't expect to show up in the streets, right? If we think about activism, you know, art of ism activism, as being something that is just done to raise awareness or induce policy change. So, so tell me a little bit about that. Like, what do we see in the streets that can't be explained? By just trying to think about showing up as a way to push back on this system? What do we see happening in the streets?

Kalonji Nzinga 46:39

Oh, there's a lot of places I want to go and start with that. But I think really thinking about, you know, activism, demonstration, all of these forms of protests as actual forms of healing for the people that are taking part of art in this, those those those marches those demonstrations, right. And it takes me back to actually it takes me to Bell Hooks were a black feminist. We just lost so I definitely want to say you know, rest in peace to Bell Hooks, who hasn't? spired us from thinking about teaching the transgressed teaching community. And one of the things that she left us with was this quote where she says, rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion. Right. And so, what I hear when, when, when Bell Hooks reminds us of this community of healing, is the ways in which a lot of these demonstrations, there are a lot of things going on. Like there's folks dancing at these demonstrations, hundreds of people, you know, doing the cupid shuffle, or doing the electric slide, and all of these various different forms of what we often refer to as Black joy, right? Like these, you know, there's, you know, there's rituals of mourning, there's rituals of, of coming together, and, you know, being able to just be in each other's collective presence, right. And so, you know, Hakeem Bay has this, this phrase called the temporary autonomous zone. Right. You know, what he argues is that oftentimes, although these different demonstrations are not creating permanent solutions to the pain of the communities that we're working in, they act as almost temporary uprisings, they act as ways in which where we can sort of transcend that trauma, have a memory in some ways of what it feels like to be free. And that those moments of being able to speak out and say something about, you know, what happened to George Floyd, what happened to ahmaud, arbery? That those things, that those are also moments of, you know, where what Bell Hooks would talk about as communion? Right, that that's, that's also another part of that, and I don't want that to take away from the actual sort of political and concrete material changes that that need to happen in our society. And, you know, activists are absolutely aware of that. I don't think that that's a dimension that should be just thrown out. That's a part of what why we're doing this. You know, in fact, you know, taking it to another issue, there's, you know, we know that policy is important, right, we see half of the states in the United States, considering or passing legislation to limit critical race theory as being taught in K 12. Schools. Right. So, you know, we know that policy matters. But I think, you know, for folks that work in

communities of color in marginalized communities, those moments of communion, those moments of joy, are the spaces in which, you know, those types of social connections to build, that type of political change actually happens.

Monica Ko 50:31

You know, the prefigurative aspect of it, as you were saying is like, there is a social collective imagining of the what could be right, but not yet, but what could be. And I love that, that highlighting that is a huge part of the healing process, I'd never really thought about that, that you have to embody the thing that you want to see the thing that you want to see, materialize and actualize and become concrete within your communities. And that without those images, right, we can't be dreaming, we can't set visions, if we don't know what it is that we're after. And so thinking about protests and social movements as spaces where we can actually embody that is really just, you know, challenging my own thinking about the role of protests and being in the streets.

Kalonji Nzinga 51:23

I think that's interesting. I mean, yeah, that sort of dreaming. You know, we don't think about that there has to be some conceptualization of what the after, looks like. And so, you know, I have, I have a number of colleagues that are that are, you know, here at CU Boulder, I think of José Ramón Lizárraga, and Arturo Cortez and also my advisor, Shirin Vossoughi, who are all thinking about social dreaming and the way in which learning is a space for dreaming. I think that's, I think that's, there's there's going to be a lot of good work that comes out around that and in the future for learning sciences.

Monica Ko 52:14

You know, when I think about your work and how it transcends really disciplinary boundaries, you know, multiple modes of communication Have you ever have felt like that you needed to fit into a box, you know, that's something that I struggle with all the time, right? The Academy has a discourse, mechanisms for moving through a trajectory, right. And there are sort of prototypical ways that you might do that, I find your work to be really pushing on that. And so I wonder if you felt like that you've had to navigate that the world of who you are as a creator, as someone who values traditions, that might push back on the Western ones that I think are typically favored in, in the academy. And your, it just feels like you're, you're a creator of, of content, you're also someone who wants to speak to scholarship. And think about how we conceptualize learning in spaces where we can see that learning. So tell me a little bit about whether or not you've felt that tension, how you've navigated it, or how you currently navigate it right now, as a scholar?

Kalonji Nzinga 53:30

That's such a great question. Because I think academia has a lot of norms. Social Life has a lot of norms, right? Like you've mentioned also other, you know, other traditions that, um, like, hip hop has norms, and, and, you know, the Greek tradition has norms, right, all of these things are, are there. And so, you know, I am a person that tries to question norms, you know, and in my work, I think that's just an important part of what needs to be done more. So from the standpoint of, you know, how bell hooks would kind of tell us to think about, like, you know, norms of white supremacy, patriarchy, norms of, you know, all of these different structures,

need to be challenged and shot in and challenged in ways that are productive, right. That's not easy. Like, I think what you was, you were trying to say is like, yeah, that's not always, like, we don't know, which ones are, you know, as we're, as we're sort of navigating them, which ones we can break. And we don't also, you know, we don't know, what the repercussions of our, of breaking that how is that going to affect our career within this space? And, you know, and, and I think one, one thing that's been a tool for me in, in doing that, or trying to think about how to do that is the trickster figure. So the trickster figure is like, you know, a figure that actually is, you know, conflict comes up in a lot of different folk lore around the world. But they're, you know, folks that have kind of looked at, across trickster figures, Brer, rabbit, and, you know, Hermes, and Su, and all of these different, if you look in different traditions, one of the things that they do is through their sort of, sort of jokey way of, of rebelling, they sort of remake social norms in a certain way. But they, you know, they're sort of rebellious, but they also, you know, kind of have a lightness to it. So that's, I think, for me, one of the things that I'm, I'm tried tried to channel is this idea of like, the trickster, like, like, you know, I didn't know, I couldn't do that I'm sorry. That's like this sort of vibe that I try to bring to certain things. And just test it, you know, maybe maybe, because, you know, I also think that norms are powerful. Especially when people don't test them, right. Like, like, a lot of the norms that we see are norms, because we don't see people breaking them. Right. And but we don't necessarily know that there are repercussions or what the, the sort of implications of changing those things would be until we actually try it is almost like a sort of Bronfenbrenner like idea like you don't like you can't really see you know, how a particular phenomenon works unless you try to change it or try to poke it or try to move it or, you know, I think that those that is how experimentation, and you know, science works, right?

Monica Ko 56:54

I want to talk a little bit about sort of thinking about your own trajectory and thinking about how you understand the field, and where you would, where you imagine it to go next, you know, let's do some free figuration ourselves about what kind of imagination do we have for where the field goes? You know, it's a young field. Oftentimes, you know, the idea that you you need to look back back Sankofa, right. Like you need to look back in order to understand the future. So I wonder if we could do a little bit of that together and think about what is what is your hope for learning sciences, as you know it, if we think about expanding, you know, the idea of heterogeneity that we want to expand methods, we want to expand, I think the problems that we that we're trying to tackle. And I think, a lot of the recent scholarship in the last eight years or so, I think, what's something that maybe we've always ideas that we've attached to certain scholars have, I think, come front and center, as we grapple with some of the political nature of what's happening, at least in the United States and elsewhere. What do you hope to see happen in the field either methodologically, conceptually, theoretically, that would to you feel like an invitation to thinking about learning in a more expansive way?

Kalonji Nzinga 58:29

Well, this actually makes me think of, there's actually a book coming out next year. conversations in the learning sciences that's actually being edited by some folks up at the University of Calgary. Miwa A. Takeuchi is one of the editors. And, you know, the idea that they're trying to sort of think about in this book is very similar to what you just posed, like, what is the future? Like? What are the conversations that are going to push the learning sciences

forward? And so, you know, I said, you know, I submitted a chapter for that book that is actually thinking about axiology, as an important part of designing learning environments, right. And so when I say axiology, axiology, is the study of the full philosophical study of value, right, and values. And I see a lot of work, really starting to delve into how learning environments produce certain types of values, whether or not those are ethical values, like, you know, whether or not that social justice or that, but then also, aesthetic values, I think, will also start to be considered a little bit more as as worth studying about learning environments, like what is, you know, what is aesthetically going on here, we start to think a lot about more about emotion that's becoming a large part of, of how we're thinking about learning environments. But I think that this sort of axiological, which is that I think the ethical and the, the aesthetic is going to become really important. And I see it, you know, I think people are more and more starting to think about, like, norms and dispositions as part of the way that they think about outcomes of learning, right, I think, you know, traditionally, like knowledge and skills and practices are sort of the way in which we frame outcomes, but like, I think people are starting to think about that in terms of, again, like norms, dispositions, values, those those types of things, I think, will be become important, and it's all the thing is that it's always been important to, to parents and to, you know, right, there's all types of contentious fights that, you know, parents and different communities are going through about the values that are taught in school. Right. You know, and so I think that those that, that foregrounding that, in a rigorous empirical studies of learning environments, I think, is going to be a new sort of groundbreaking part of the field.

Monica Ko 1:10:29

I did read that chapter. Yeah. I love that in, in that in that piece. I think what you're what I see you highlighting is that education is value laden, and whether or not we want to acknowledge that and make that public is one thing. But it is inherently about communicating and building particular forms of knowledge, that are valued differently by different communities. Right. And, you know, you bring the Amish in as an example. But you say, you know, you the same story can be taught about Native people. Right. In, in the history of this country of trying to inculcate folks into particular forms of knowing, and in that process, devaluing some of that right. But this idea that education and learning is a values question is so important to grapple with as we think about Critical Race Theory and the role that it plays in, in public education, right? But, and even in the in light of the pandemic, the things that we value as the learning, you know, what we see as learning that kids have been away from schools formally for a while, and therefore, there is a deficit, there is a gap, there's a loss, right? Because the thing that they do at home is not a form of learning that's valued. It's just so interesting, because I think, in some ways, what's been happening over these last two years, but lays those things bare in ways that present opportunities for questioning that and examining our own values. But also, if we, if we don't look deeply at that, there is a missed opportunity, right, to think about how we do things differently. And so yeah, I, I think that axiology, as you have been describing, really is an important one, that it's it's an important thing to grapple with, especially as we think about the boundaries, where we see learning and how to really tease that apart. And not necessarily break all the walls, but at least find bridges, right, that we know that learning particular forms of learning are happening in so many different places. How do we think about leveraging that and making connections in ways that students see that more of themselves and their identity as

being something that is also being inherently valued and also formed? In spaces where they traditionally maybe wouldn't would feel like, devalue that?

Kalonji Nzinga 1:04:07

Yes, yes. Yes. I love that. I'm thinking a lot about what you were saying about. I don't know, the pandemic and like, what, how that has, you know, in some ways made us think, and question about the value of different types of learning environments, and like, what, you know, being in a school building versus being in your home, and, you know, it brings so many questions around, you know, you know, first of all, you know, where we think about students homes, do we value those as learning environments? But, you know, and how do we see those as we as learning scientists, think is an important part of our, our sphere of understanding, right? Like, like, like, I think, you know, I definitely am not one that dismisses schools, and the importance of school and schooling and community efforts to empower young people with various different types of, you know, literacies in mathematics, language, arts, the sciences, etc. But how does, how do we bridge the enter our understanding of some of these other aspects of what becoming looks like, without understanding more about what, you know, what's happening in homes, what's happening in families, what's happening in, you know, these other community spaces, like one of the things that we've noticed in the pandemic, you know, a lot of teachers notices that, wow, I'm looking into my students, surroundings, I can see what they have on their wall, it was a certain breaking of that barrier, that often doesn't necessarily always happen. And so I think, you know, at least teachers that I'm talking to, like K 12, instructors, you know, are trying to now sort through and are very averse oftentimes to saying, we need to go back to normal or what was normal before pandemic but like, what's the new normal? What's the new law where, you know, what, how do we transform schooling to sort of accommodate this new knowledge that we have of our of our of our youth? Yeah.

Monica Ko 1:06:28

This has been a great conversation. I really love talking with you. I want to ask you, just as we think about sort of the end, sort of your favorite lyricist, poets, artists, when you think about trying to organize for prefigurative optimism, who are your go to people that you think about that have the words and the language to think about? What of what could be?

Kalonji Nzinga 1:06:58

That's a great question. Um, the the ones that come to mind, Lauryn Hill black thought, I think about you know, a lot of the work of Jay Cole have you know, there's this there's, I think that there's so many artists to name no name is one One that comes to mind as well from Chicago. And you know, her, you know, her work is so amazing. She also has, you know, created learning environments like she's created online book clubs to sort of like be as, you know, an aspect of, you know how her as an emcee sort of delivers her message lets you guys online book club she's created she's, you know, procure space within the Chicago community, like, for a library, right. And so she's like, she's thinking, both on the the sort of written and oral traditions of, of knowledge and how important those things are. But, you know, I definitely think of Lauryn Hill when she's when she says, There's a war in the mind over territory for the Dominion, who will dominate our opinion, schisms and isms keeping us in forms of religion conforming our vision to the world churches decision. She's She's theorizing about psychology and the way in which our mind is sort of the battleground for a lot of the the sort of social and

societal ills that we're actually finding that that a lot of that has to do with producing new knowledge structures, producing new ways of designing learning environments. And, you know, doing that in a way that is, that is humanizing. And that honors all of our diverse traditions from around the world.

Monica Ko 1:08:55

You bring back some memories about Lauryn Hill. So yeah, let's end with this about thinking about in the learning sciences, and in particular, in the academy. You're an assistant professor now. And as you think about your scholarship and your contribution, how do we move beyond manuscripts and publications as sort of the ultimate way for we as a field to co construct knowledge together? What would you like to see happen? And what kind of transformation do you want to see in how in the public discourse that happens around how we study learning and how we conceptualize learning?

Kalonji Nzinga 1:09:38

Yeah, well, I mean, I think the first thing I would like to do is, you know, give a shout out to you, Monica, for really going in this direction of, you know, podcasting and noticing, you know, the important knowledge production that's being done in this particular art form and pushing the learning sciences through Learning Sciences Research Institute, and, you know, various work that you're doing to sort of think about, and record and have conversations with learning scientists in this format. And so yeah, I would say that this is an extremely important manifestation of like, trying to think about multimodal like, what, you know, what, what are different types of knowledge representations, both visual, all of you know, all of the senses, and but I think, you know, from for me as someone that has, you know, more of a background and thinking about oral traditions, I think that, you know, podcasting is an amazing thing. I think we're, I think we, you know, I think the next thinking about video as well. Of course, within Learning Sciences, we have been, you know, transformed by thinking about how video ethnography works, like, like, like thinking about using video as a tool to, and as a method to study learning. But then, once we realize that, then we try to write it up in, you know, in, in prose, which has its affordances. But how do we also think about, you know, Trent, you know, using video, using video in the way that we're communicating our findings in communicating I can ideas and concepts in the learning sciences, I think that all of these different multimodal strategies are going to become more prevalent, it's only a matter of time, I think that I think we're just, we're just tied to a paradigm in which, you know, the writ that sort of, you know, journal publication was one of the most powerful tools, you know, be able to like disseminate knowledge, and now we're realizing that we now have the internet and we now have, you know, all of these other digital tools at our disposal. And I just think it's only a matter of time before, things like this and like the podcast and in various other sort of forms just take over.

Monica Ko 1:12:15

You're not too far removed from your own graduate experience. And I wonder, you know, for folks who are in the thick of that at various stages, just kind coming in and absorbing, you know, all the different methods and strands of work in the field to people who are doing their dissertation work. Can you reflect back on your own experience and think about any sort of advice that you would have for those folks who are muddling through, you know, the thing that they want to do,

Kalonji Nzinga 1:12:45

I think the thing that I would say to grad students that are, at this point, you know, thinking about what they want to do, the first thing I would just say is, try to notice the voices of doubt, that tell you what you cannot study in the learning sciences. Like, I think that's really important to try to locate and push back on in terms of, because I mean, everybody that every person that's a graduate student in the learning sciences, but has interest has different sort of fields of expertise. And you know, in the sciences, humanities, math, mathematics, all of these different areas, culture, ethics, all of these different areas are learning questions, right? There is no, there are no whole spheres of human activity, that are not valid learning questions. And I think if I could encourage anything, it would be for students to take serious the learning involved in whatever they care about, and whatever is important. And that, you know, just because no one has like, there hasn't been a study of learning in that particular domain, that doesn't mean that it's not worth looking at. Once you can kind of get past that, then it's like, okay, read widely write, read and respect. You know, anyone that's had anything to say about that, and try to, you know, try to discover, you know, connections between those ideas and what your contribution can be to studying how, you know, growth, evolution, learning, conceptual change happens in that particular area.

Monica Ko 1:14:43

I love that I think that'll be really encouraging to folks who are maybe stuck in a rut or feeling like, lost in this large, a amorphous place. So yeah, I love that. I love that nugget of wisdom. Thank you so much gone to you. I really enjoyed talking with you. And

Kalonji Nzinga 1:15:01

this was really fun.

Monica Ko 1:15:05

Your work I think really encourages me and I think it is that trixter move that you that you're doing it. It's working. And I love love for others to be able to recognize that and see that as a way that they can move through spaces that would otherwise feel constraining for them. That you know, for for others to do some poking and pushing and sort of see see where the lines move.

Monica Ko 1:15:35

I'd love to hear what you took away from this conversation and connections that you see to your own work. Send us an email at humanslspod@gmail.com and find us on Twitter at @humansLSpod. This podcast is co-produced by Andrew Krzak and Mon-Lin Monica Ko. Our work is made possible by The Learning Sciences Research Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Thank you for listening!