

EP01_BetweenAcrossThrough_QuaysonSpace

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[music]

00:03 Iane Romero: You're listening to Between, Across and Through. As you run into the subway car, do you ever look around, left and right, before deciding where to sit? Do you ever read the street signs as you walk home and wonder who named them and why? Or are you on autopilot, head down, oblivious to the trees, the birds, the concrete that shape the world around you? Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill from the Center for Diaspora and Transnational Studies sits down with Professor Ato Quayson from Stanford University in a conversation about how the physical layout of our world shapes culture, history, and social relations to create a narrative of who we are and where we are going. Please join us as we travel Between, Across and Through.

01:02 Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill: Ato, why do you teach the question of space?

01:06 Professor Ato Quayson: Well, it evolved gradually. It became most prominent when I did my book on Accra, which was in a way I was trying to translate the history of the city, but to do it differently than the standard crisis management discourse, which is very common. And for that, I settled upon the idea of what the spatial history of a city like Accra look like. So the more I thought about the space, the more it proliferated different aspects and dimensions. And then after I finished publishing the book and so on, I returned to literature because that's my main area, and suddenly space became more prominent in the literature that I was reading, because literary critics don't actually talk about space, space is just background for the characters' choices. And I decided to devise a course that would get me thinking about it more systematically and sharing it with my students.

02:17 KO: And you've grounded this interest in space in the city of Accra. Why this city?

02:22 AQ: Well, that reason is biographical.

02:24 KO: Okay.

02:24 AQ: I grew up in this city, and I mean the start of the project was completely accidental and it was a conversation that I had with a really, really good friend of mine. And I went to visit him one time and out of a surge of excitement, I commented that Oxford Street, which is the title of the book, Oxford Street in Accra, was very globalized, and he laughed and said very teasingly that my problem was that I mistook Oxford Street for a street in Romeo and Juliet. That's what he said.

03:05 KO: What did he mean? He meant that?

03:07 AQ: I never asked him, we never spoke about that again, but the thing worried me, I thought about it for a long time. And there are two ways in which I understood it then, first is that I knew more about Shakespeare than I knew about the city in which I grew up, which was actually true at the time.

03:21 KO: Did you feel that...

03:22 AQ: Oh, at the time it was completely true 'cause I knew, I knew much more about Shakespeare than I knew about Accra, so that was straightforward. But the second thing is that I had misapprehended what was globalization. And so purely out of curiosity, I began to investigate whether I was wrong and he was right. And of course, once you begin to dig, it's like the rabbit hole of Alice in Wonderland rabbit hole.

03:45 KO: Sure.

03:46 AQ: It began to proliferate, so it was biographical, it was also to learn about the city in which I grew up, which I knew but actually didn't know. I was ignorant about many things and then it's expanded.

04:00 KO: In your work on Accra, you speak about the trotro, a form of public transportation. What kind of social commentary happens in this bus, van?

04:11 AQ: Well, the trotro is very popular, and it's cheap, it's the cheapest means of transport. Everyone has boarded a trotro before. Now growing up, typically when you boarded a trotro, anyone with a newspaper would separate the newspaper into its various pages and would circulate the different parts of the newspaper on the trotro bus. So the person who had happened to get the international news would after reading have to comment on the news for the rest of the bus to know what was going on, and the person who got the sports would also maybe read out the scores. Now, this was so standard, I never thought about it, but as I began to investigate or think about it a bit more, I realized the trotro is not merely a means of locomotion, it is also the capsule of an entire sociocultural form. So that's point one.

05:13 AQ: Now because of the cell phone, people are less likely to run the commentary on the newspaper since people don't actually read the newspaper, newspapers are not as popular, but they get their information on their phones. And it would not be unusual for someone to spontaneously make a comment about some politician who have been accused...

05:35 KO: Oh, is that right?

05:36 AQ: Oh yeah.

05:36 KO: So there's... Because I do some research on small buses, pirated buses in Guatemala City, and I find that the phone has turned everyone inwards. But there seems like this is a longer tradition of giving reports.

05:50 AQ: Yeah, commentary. Commentary. Also now, their phone has now added another dimension, which is that if your phone rings, and it's not uncommon for people to pick up their phones when it rings, wherever they are, even on the trotro and start talking. People overhear what you are saying, and they may very well comment on the quarrel you're having with your husband.

06:14 KO: Is that right?

06:14 AQ: Or the lie you are telling...

06:16 KO: For sure. Sure.

06:16 AQ: There are jokes about, "Oh, I'm heading in the direction of Montreal," when you're actually going to Vancouver. And somebody will comment on it and say, "That's easy banter."

06:29 KO: Yes.

06:29 IR: Now I then extrapolate it from this idea that the means of locomotion, especially public means of locomotion, must be looked at with a wider lens and applied to the means of transport in different cities. And so I came up with the idea that actually if you look at the New York Subway and the London Subway exactly as I look at the trotro, you see that it divulges different aspects of the social culture that I mentioned of public transport. So I have views on that.

07:06 KO: 'Cause those are two very different kind of social ecologies, the tube in London and the subway in New York. What are your thoughts?

07:13 AQ: Oh, there are several things. Okay, one of the very, very common and in fact, irritating things about the New York Subway is the fact that on the lines that have long stops, longer transitions between stops, it's not uncommon for hip hop dancers to come onboard and do a jig. So that's very, very common, no one even comments on it. Or for some buskers to come in and play their guitar, and they ask for money. So it's so commonplace that it has become a standard aspect of the New York Subway. But there's another aspect that I observed, which is for me more fascinating, and that is the aspect of people who get on the subway and begin to divulge what I call the medical biography as a means of extracting charity. So the strategy of the biography is sometimes they'll give you their name. In one instance, the guy was called Jason, he said his name was Jason. He was a veteran, retired veteran, had served in Afghanistan but the government was not looking after him well. He had meds and so he showed us his card and so on, and began to give us this very serious and detailed story about his ailments.

08:35 AQ: Now the genre of the medical biography... I've traveled widely, I haven't seen that genre replicated in say, like London, the London Subway. But I think there's a good reason for this. One is that the London Subway... The carriage on the London Subway is really small.

08:55 KO: It is.

08:55 AQ: It's much smaller than New York and even Toronto.

08:58 KO: Sure.

08:58 AQ: So first of all, the spatial structure of the London Subway will militate against this disclosure.

09:04 KO: True.

09:05 AQ: But the second thing is that the English are stiff upper-lipped.

09:10 KO: Meaning?

09:11 AQ: That is to say, they are very reserved about saying or talking about themselves, so that in fact this genre of the medical biography would likely be met with disdain on the London Subway. Different from the American...

09:27 KO: As opposed to compassion.

09:29 AQ: Exactly. So you'll be met with, "Why are you talking, telling us your medical biography?" So I think that viewed in this way, the carriage is not merely a means of locomotion, it divulges a social form, and these stories are one way of viewing or trying to come to an understanding of the subway carriage as a social form.

09:54 KO: And you also mentioned that with the trotro in Accra that people would also tell jokes, that it was also a site for humour and banter and jokes.

10:03 IR: Well, there's humour, there's banter, there's political commentary, there's sports commentary, but it was not unusual for vendors of herbal medicines. Now, to elicit the attention of the passengers, 'cause they want to sell something, they had to be very clever in getting the attention, and it was not untypical for them to start with a joke. I have countless of these jokes that I've collected over the years, and some of them had sexual innuendos so just to [10:37] .

10:38 KO: Sure. Are they good?

10:40 AQ: Funny. They are very funny. The objective is really to get the attention of the passengers. But it's not untypical also for a joke to fall flat and for the passengers to attack the vendor.

10:52 KO: Oh, it's not just a neutral side where you can...

[laughter]

10:53 AQ: No, no, no, no, no, no. "Why are you wasting our time? Get off the bus. Just get off the bus right now. You think we have time for you idiot?" And so on and so forth. But only in a banter kind of way. "You don't know how to talk and you have come to waste our time."

11:07 KO: Yes. So can you tell us one of these jokes?

11:10 AQ: Yes, of course. So this herbal medicine vendor boards the bus and stands up. He slaps the side of his stomach, the right side, very loudly and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, your spinal cord is right here." Slapping the side of his belly, fat belly. And of course, we all burst into laughter. Now, there are two ways of taking this, either that he doesn't know where the spinal cord is or he

knows where the spinal cord is but wants to get our attention. Whichever way it was, we all laughed loudly, hilariously. And another instance that I well remember, herbal medicine seller and he'd to give a testimonial of the power of what he's selling. This was medicine for erectile dysfunction.

11:57 KO: Okay.

11:57 AQ: So he tells the story of, "Oh, you guys, you don't even know. I sold this medicine in another town and the following morning after the man had taken the medicine and had gone to bed with his wife, his wife was clearing the foreground of the house and singing a song. And he began to sing a song that he said the woman was singing, and it was a song about well-being and happiness, and so on. Of course we all burst into laughter. The idea is that this medicine is to fortify your marriage.

12:29 KO: Sure.

12:29 AQ: I've countless of these.

12:31 KO: So it sounds like the trotro is a space of humour and banter, but it also must be a space of just of conversation?

12:39 AQ: The thing though is that it's not systematic, because you could have a trotro ride where people are silent also. But when conversation does happen, it tends to be conversation about things of public interest. For example, in the lead-up to elections, that's a very good test if you wanted to do an ethnography of the trotro, in the lead-up to elections, there's almost no trotro ride that you don't have a huge, perhaps even argument or debate about different political positions, and so on.

13:08 KO: Yes.

13:09 AQ: So it's also a means for people to get an assessment, a judgment about the public sphere.

13:16 KO: So you heard news in the form of kind of polite eavesdropping?

13:20 AQ: Yes. Definitely.

13:22 KO: 'Cause I'm thinking about the difference between when someone writes a letter or someone writes a postcard or when someone is talking to you on the street or in an elevator. One is assumed that there, it is a one-on-one conversation, the postcard and the elevator, but then when you're walking on the street or if you are... There's the assumption that it is just between two people or when you're writing a letter it's between two people. But within the elevator and in the trotro, you're assuming that other people can have access to this.

13:49 AQ: Other, yeah. You are assuming that... You may actually want other people to have access or not, we don't know. But other people have access. They may or may not comment. There will be banter about what the conversation has taken place. And there'll be also... The key thing is that the conversation that circulates on the trotro are assumed to be public. So if you're answering

your phone and it's a private conversation, it's assumed that it's public because everyone is hearing it. And anyone can decide if they're nosey enough or indiscreet enough to comment.

14:26 KO: And this kind of social interaction I guess predictably would be different in a place like New York.

14:31 AQ: Well, in New York... The thing is not just in New York, in most western metropolises, the idea of privacy entails a social bubble. A social bubble. There's a beautiful scene in the first chapter of Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*. This is the very opening of the novel, and the four young friends are on the Toronto subway. And one of them has a djembe drum and they're chatting very heartily, they're friends, but the rest of the people on the subway are doing everything not to acknowledge the presence of this rambunctious four kids. This illustrates a really interesting principle. And it's not just in Toronto, in New York, and so on, where a transit on public transport we all take our private spheres with us, so we want to protect the bubble. So typically in London for example, I've seen this on a London Subway. In the London Subway, people sit down and they open their book or they open a newspaper, and the objective is partly to read and partly to cordon themselves off from the people around.

15:44 KO: It is a clear signal.

15:45 AQ: It's a clear signal that you don't want to be disturbed.

15:48 KO: Absolutely.

15:48 AQ: In Accra it's different. People will just ignore it because there's no tacit guarantee that your privacy entails you to that bubble and they cannot talk to you simply because you're reading a newspaper. Quite the opposite. Because you're reading the newspaper, I want to talk to you 'cause I want to know what is on page three.

16:06 KO: Right, right, it's quite the opposite.

16:08 AQ: I want to know what's on page three.

16:09 KO: It's an invitation.

16:10 AQ: Can you tell me what's on page three?

16:12 KO: Because who else knows on page three except...

16:14 AQ: Absolutely, you have page three. That's right.

16:15 KO: Absolutely. And what about a place like Times Square where it is one of the most public places in the world, supposedly? What about these kinds of rules of space?

16:28 AQ: Now, one of the features of Times Square which is fascinating to me is the presence of

these masked Marvel or DC characters like Superman. So you see Superman, you see Batman, and so on. It turns out there is an invisible demarcation of territories. So Minnie Mouse cannot cross into Batman's territory. Sometimes they have fights, and Minnie Mouse may come out the worst for it.

17:02 KO: Sure. No. Yeah, yeah, wow.

17:03 AQ: Oh, yeah, there have been arrests because Batman was giving Minnie Mouse a pounding.

17:09 KO: 'Cause there's an agreement.

17:10 AQ: Yes, there's an agreement. So the Marvel characters are on that side, DC characters are on that side, Sponge Bob is also on another side. And it's invisible for the tourists, they don't know what's happening.

17:25 KO: But there's a real struggle over territory.

17:26 AQ: There is a real struggle, and sometimes it collapses. The tacit understandings collapse and there are quarrels, and the police have to intervene. And the other thing also is that it's not unusual for tourists to... Especially when they have children. So you see Statue of Liberty. So you see the Statue of Liberty, the kid goes, and suddenly the Statue of Liberty takes a photo with the kid or the parent, and then they turn around and say that's \$5.

17:53 KO: Of course.

17:54 AQ: You're not prepared for those \$5. And there have been cases where they were rude or kind of offensive to the tourists and so on. So the New York City authorities, there was a point where they wanted to ban them entirely, to ban, to clean up Times Square, but of course, there was a lot of opposition because these costumed characters also offer a version of America to a Japanese tourist or a Chinese tourist, or an African tourist. So they're doing a service, they're performing a service. But there all kinds of dynamics that are taking place in this apparently innocent space of Times Square, and then place these costumed characters in the context of the big neon billboards, the neon signs with LeBron James on a big basketball...

18:47 KO: It's a very, very bright part of the city, yeah.

18:49 AQ: Very bright part of the city. So in fact, Times Square, it's ripe for a kind of a new form of spacial understanding. It's not just about counting the skyscrapers around Times Square, it's understanding its social form. What does Times Square mean as a social form which is traversed by illegal immigrants in costume masks by tourists who are ignorant or whom they're interacting with, and by this invisible demarcations of turf and so on. And this is prime for investigation.

19:27 KO: It is prime for investigation. I mean the idea of all this embodied labor by undocumented immigrants providing the circus of the United States for tourists is...

19:35 AQ: This has been... Actually, the New York Times carried a beautiful article, very detailed on this specific issue. So they've been writing about it.

19:43 KO: But what's so powerful about your approach is that while... As we know, journalists do the important work of putting information for the public record. It's the imperative of the scholar to think through the different layers of social commentary and analysis that's possible.

19:58 AQ: And the fact that also I think our imperative is also to see that the costumed illegal immigrant is not an isolated phenomenon. They are part of a larger network of significations. So the thing is to trace and track what they signify in relation to other things that we see are on Times Square.

20:21 KO: So the undocumented immigrant in the Batman suit is not just a rare occurrence in Times Square, but some sort of point of reference for all the different kind of costumes that migrant labor has to take on...

20:33 AQ: Yes, has to take on.

20:34 KO: Throughout the economy.

20:35 AQ: The fugitive vendor. The fugitive vendor has to take on throughout the American economy. The starting point being the Batman costume.

20:45 KO: Ah. So what happens to a place like Times Square when these undocumented immigrants are taken away?

20:50 AQ: Well, the thing about these costumed undocumented immigrants is that they're just one dimension of the undocumented immigrants on Times Square. As we all know, much of the food industry is actually serviced by illegals, so even though the costume masqueraders will be removed, it doesn't change the fact that the person who's preparing your pizza is likely an illegal immigrant. If the authorities were successful in obliterating the presence of all the illegal immigrants from the costume masquerader to the food service person, Times Square would just literally die.

21:37 KO: It strikes me that your work right now has been made possible by post-colonial thought and literary studies in your rigour within this world, and now you're quite a field in some ways with the study of space. How do you bend this back to English and literary study. Or do you?

21:56 AQ: To English. I do, yes I do, I do indeed. Now, one way I sought to do this is to apply a concept of space from some of the big theorists Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and so on, but to translate them into the literary domain. So that was one thing, because this is a kind of general idea. But the second thing is to interpret literary space in a more segmented manner. So what do I mean by this? When you look at a simple principle like spacial traversal. So, if a person is walking, their understanding of space is different from if they're riding a train, or if they're riding a motor bike.

22:46 KO: Yes.

22:47 AQ: Now, the question is, if you read a person in a novel walking, what do they see of space and how different would that be from if they were riding a bicycle? In other words, space suddenly becomes pronounced, because now you are no longer looking at the means of locomotion as merely the means of moving from point A to point Z. Now you are looking at the means of locomotion as a means of experiencing space. So the experiential dimension of the means of locomotion now alters your interpretation of space from what it used to be before. Let me give you a specific example, one of the novels that I teach in my course is Sherlock Holmes, one of his novels, The Sign of Four. Now, we know that Sherlock Holmes is a very London-centric set of investigations. And he's a city detective.

23:50 KO: Yes.

23:51 AQ: But however one of the fascinating things about Sherlock Holmes is that his detective forensic method, also involves quite detailed descriptions of these spaces that he traverses. He's always giving detailed descriptions of the places that he's walked passing through.

24:08 KO: Okay.

24:09 AQ: Now if you begin to focus on each time that he is passing through a space and describing it, you come to a sense of an inventory of London space in the 1880s. What you may then test against historical accounts of the 1880s, London. Often this inventory, which you can easily assemble by paying attention to how Sherlock Holmes describes every space he enters, he describes the space, he gives you dimension, he gives you the people, he gives you the clothes they're wearing, he gives you the things they're holding.

24:46 KO: Yes.

24:47 AQ: You see that there's also a sociography of space. There's a class coding to different spaces. So any time Sherlock Holmes crosses the River Thames South, you know that he's going to the seedier parts of London, and he describes them as such. And so suddenly, space ceases being an innate background to me, it becomes experiential, but it's experience via the perspective of this detective and the various things that you can extrapolate from the way the inventory that he produces of space and street names and so on and so forth. So this is what I mean by the looping back and the translation of spatial concepts.

25:30 KO: Then how would you contrast Sherlock Holmes' novels in the sense to something like the Easy Rawlins series?

25:37 AQ: Yes. Well, Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins set in Los Angeles in the '40s, they span from the '40s, just after the Second World War to I think the '80s. Now in one of the novels that I contrast directly with Sherlock Holmes, it's 'Devil in a Blue Dress.' Now, one of the things, thinking spatially, is that Easy Rawlins is black, this is very important. Sherlock Holmes is a white upper class man who doesn't work, he doesn't earn his keep. In fact, when he solves problems, he refuses

to take money. So it's very fascinating, he always refuses to be paid. No one knows where he gets the money from...

26:20 KO: No one knows where gets his money.

26:20 AQ: Where he gets his money. So, he's objective, but he's objective in a sense that he is not required to... He's not part of the economic nexus. One of the things that you see repeatedly in 'Devil in a Blue Dress' is that Easy is stopped at different times by different people to credentialize himself. To say who is. In other words for him, space is full of a series of impediments that he's required to negotiate or navigate. This is... We don't see that in Sherlock Holmes at all. For Sherlock Holmes, London is his domain, he's never stopped or required to credentialize himself, but the reason why Easy has to credentialize himself is because he's a black man operating in a largely white society that is scared of blackness.

27:13 AQ: Now, that's the first. The second thing is that Easy is conscious of his blackness. And so unlike Sherlock Holmes who is supremely confident and comprehensive in his knowledge, Easy is always self-conscious. And his self-consciousness also means that the way he solves problems always has to do ultimately with his own safety. He's always thinking about his safety. If I did this, what might happen there, and so on and so forth. The social fabric that is revealed to us in Easy Rawlins' traversal through Los Angeles, it's a completely different social fabric, obviously from Sherlock Holmes' London.

27:58 AQ: But a different social fabric because now race is an important vector of experience. And as readers we cannot not see that race is important for this detective. In Sherlock Holmes, Sherlock Holmes is raceless. In the sense that his whiteness is of no consequence. For whatever he does, it doesn't matter that he's white, and the reason is that his whiteness becomes, it's transparent, it's not something via which he thinks through his thoughts. So whiteness, if you wanted to write a critique of Sherlock Holmes for his whiteness, you would be wasting your time, because it's not an important vector. Whereas in Easy Rawlins' case, his blackness is an important vector of his consciousness.

28:43 KO: And to add just one more kind of point of reference or contrast, you write and think a great deal about the 'Black Panther' movie. How do we think about space?

28:54 AQ: Yeah.

28:55 KO: It's a very different...

28:57 AQ: Yeah, it's a different genre, it's science fiction, it's Wakanda forever, it's all the good stuff. Now, there are many very fascinating things about the 'Black Panther'. And one of the things that I think is important to bear in mind is that 'Black Panther' is about diaspora consciousness. It's very explicitly so. Because it's the relationship between Africa's homeland and the African-American diaspora. And so Killmonger represents that voice of the rejected African-American diaspora or diasporic figure who is returning to claim their birthright. So there's... At the outset, there is the diaspora setting of Oakland and the United States and the homeland setting of Wakanda.

However, the film has to square an almost impossible circle. Because Wakanda, from the opening sequence of the movie and also from the comic books, Wakanda is situated in East Africa. And there was slavery in east Africa, but it's more Indian Ocean circuit. It's not black Atlantic. So that strictly speaking Killmonger has no birthright in the real Wakanda. Because the real Wakanda is set in East Africa, but the film needs him to have a claim in Wakanda.

30:25 AQ: So what is does is that in the early sequences of the movie, they create what I would call a West African social imaginary. And this happens in two ways, one is in the museums, there's a British museum scene where Killmonger goes to ask the curator questions about the artifacts. And each of the artifacts, she gives the biographies of the artifacts. The biographies that she gives is biographies of West African objects. So the objects are West African, until they come to the hammer which is made of vibranium. And which says, "No, it's not from the Ashanti," or whatever it is. But it is left in suspension where it comes from. So the film lodges a West African genealogy for cultural artifacts in our consciousness, it's not elaborated or commented upon, but it's left floating. And therefore the West African imaginary, off of the genealogy of the artifact, then re-orientes our perspective to West Africa. The second way in which it gives us a West African genealogy or at least social imaginary is the scene where the black panther descends to go and rescue Nakia.

31:50 KO: Yes.

31:50 AQ: That convoy is a Boko Haram convoy. Boko Haram is Northern Nigeria. So the Boko Haram where he beats them up and so on. So it firmly lodges a West African aspect. So the Boko Haram convoy is he beats them and Nakia and so on and so forth. So the movie then suspends this, it leaves this West African genealogy first of artifacts and then second of political intervention. It just leaves them there. So that when he returns as a black Atlantic returnee, he returns to West Africa. Even though Wakanda is not in West Africa. So it's a very clever re-deployment of spatial logics.

32:38 KO: Yes. Yes.

32:39 AQ: But what the movie does is that it produces a series of West African templates, therefore rationalizing a black Atlantic claimant to the throne.

32:49 KO: Ato, and what about the fact that Wakanda is seen as a very poor country by other nations, but once you go within its borders, it's the epitome of technology and wealth?

32:57 AQ: Well, Wakanda has a force shield around it. So to the outsiders, it's a landscape of forest and shepherds, so it's considered to be backward. But of course once you breach that force field, you see that it's a very sophisticated city. And of course they've deliberately thrown that force field around them because they don't want to be either colonized or recognized as a super power by the outside world. Now, this design of disguise is also a way for them to keep their resources to themselves. This idea of resource hoarding as it were, is something that Killmonger comes to attack. There's a battle for the future of Wakanda. But that battle requires that they confront what Wakanda has been for several generations until then, which is a place that has no interest in serving the

suffering black diasporas.

33:57 AQ: So Killmonger's argument is that you ought to support revolution to free all blacks and be the kingdom that supports black revolution everywhere. This idea is contrasted to Nakia's idea, which is that we ought to extend charity. We have so much wealth, let us extend health, charity, education and so on, let us be like UNICEF, basically hers is a UNICEF idea.

34:28 KO: Yes.

34:29 AQ: The problem is that Killmonger is not just a kid from Oakland, he's also someone who has worked in the American military.

34:38 KO: Yes.

34:39 AQ: His scars he has attained while in Afghanistan. In other word, he's also the warped product of the logic of American militarism, that is why he thinks the solution to black problems everywhere is through military might, is through the export of sophisticated technologically advanced arms and fire power and so on. This is an American logic that is invested in Killmonger, which makes his return as a diaspora, highly problematic in the movie.

35:17 KO: The question of space for you, has opened up the possibility for different types of social commentary to move away from literature, to things like Times Square, even the tube in London or the buses in Accra. So how does studying space in literature help us examine our own lives?

35:32 AQ: Well, the thing about thinking more about space is also to be attentive. Let me give you two completely unrelated examples. You could walk through the University of Toronto and not get a single reminder the University of Toronto is built on native land.

35:50 KO: Yes.

35:50 AQ: This is not the sense that you'll get going to the University of Wales, because in the University of Wales, the department of economics would be written in English, and it will also be written in Welsh, but you can walk to the University of Toronto and not get any... The vaguest hint that it is built on native lands in any shape or form. In fact, this can be expanded for all of Toronto, the city of Toronto is an Anglo city. It's a city that has successfully obliterated the signs of it's genealogy, which is rooted in native possessions. Now, the way to see this absence is to be sensitive to spacial cues. And I became sensitive to it just by contrasting Toronto to Accra.

36:39 KO: Yes.

36:39 AQ: You cannot go to Accra and think that it's an English city, because you'll see signs of indigenous languages everywhere you turn. So there'll be an inscription in that language, in this language. There'll be a trotro, a slogan in a third language, it's impossible for you to just simply traversing the city thinking that colonialism obliterated the effervescence of the multi-lingual language space. So this is a sensitivity to absences, which a sense of space gives us.

37:11 KO: Yes.

37:12 AQ: Let me give you another example, one of the things that I'm going to incorporate into my teaching is to try and find the phenomena or objects, but of the most banal kind and then gradually to use those as it were windows or portals into larger, more complex questions, and for now I'm settling on trees.

37:33 KO: Okay.

37:33 AQ: Now typically when you step out of your house, you are likely to see trees on the pavement.

37:40 KO: Yeah, in most cities, there are trees.

37:41 AQ: In most cities, there are trees.

37:42 KO: Yeah.

37:43 AQ: The question is who planted those trees, where do those trees come from, what trees are those? Who planted them in that kind of sequence? Why is it that in another neighbourhood there are fewer trees? Why are there smaller trees in another neighborhood, but bigger trees, in yours and so on? Through a series of what I want to describe as embedded questions. So you start from the tree in front of your house...

38:06 KO: Yes.

38:07 AQ: And by posing questions to that tree, interrogating that tree, you then embed larger skill questions until you get to questions of city planning, of who makes the choices of where to plant trees, what are the political consequences? Can we derive any sense of political orientation from a tree-lined avenue versus a non-treelined avenue? And what might all this landscaping of trees have to do with the environmental disaster that is looming? But we start from the most banal object, which is the tree that stands outside your door. And this is a sensitivity to space issue, the more sensitive you are to detail, the quality of attention, the more you can unfurl things of larger significance. And this applies whether you're reading literature, whether you're looking outside your window, or whether you're paying attention to an entire city.

39:06 KO: Professor Quayson, thank you so much.

39:08 AQ: You're welcome.

39:10 IR: That was professor Kevin Lewis Neal in a conversation with Professor Ato Quayson from Stanford University. This monthly podcast is distributed directly by the Center for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. You can follow us on Twitter @CDTSutoronto, and you can listen to the next episode by subscribing on your favorite app to

Between, Across & Through. I am Iane Romero. Thank you for listening and joining the conversation.

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