

***IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING***

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“HOW DO WE KNOW
WHAT WE KNOW?”:
SUSAN ELIZABETH GAGLIARDI
ON FIELDWORK AND EVIDENCE**

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Transcript

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Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

Susan Gagliardi

How do we know what know? What do we build our knowledge on, and how can we question that?

Alice Matthews

Thank you so much for joining me today Susan. I know from working with you in the past that sense of place has such an important and central role in your work. So given that you were born not too far from here, I'd like to begin by asking you to talk a little bit about your early experiences and influences here in New England.

Susan Gagliardi

Sure. I grew up in Orange, Massachusetts, which is a small town with a population of about 8000 people rather consistently. There was a sense that even on the surface, it might seem very homogeneous, but actually it was very fractured. People came from different places. People had different kinds of experiences. People beyond the hometown I think often thought of it as a working class town where there wasn't a lot happening. I've really been interested in the complexities of identity, and how that informs how we think about the arts, and how it is that we have certain assumptions based on identity that we want to try to unpack. And really the first time that I started to think about the importance of where I came from in terms of my own research was after I gave a lecture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I had this very rare opportunity to give a lecture with an historian in the room who was really familiar with exactly the same area where I had done my research. And it happens that her father actually comes from the same small town. And the next day she said to me, "Huh, somehow the fact that you come from that place shapes your argument." So I think for me, there is a strong sense that somehow the peculiar nature of this small town within and then also perceptions of it have really led me to ask the kinds of questions I ask and the

kinds of conclusions, and to not want to rest on what people's perceptions are of any particular place.

Alice Matthews

When did you begin to gravitate toward art history? Was it something you find yourself gravitating toward while you were still in western Massachusetts? Or did it happen a little bit later on?

Susan Gagliardi

In terms of my own interest in studying art history, I'll say that I definitely had the experience in my childhood of my parents taking us to museums in Boston and New York, and that was always a trek. We went out to Williamstown also to go to the Clark Art Institute. My mother was a humanities teacher for a few years in the local public schools, and then she also worked at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. So going to museums was always part of my being. And I remember she would take me to the Museum of Fine Arts on snow days. And I would roam around the museum as a 10 year old, and it was my playground for the day. Just once a guard asked me what I was doing in the museum all by myself.

Alice Matthews

[Laughs]

Susan Gagliardi

When my parents brought me to Johns Hopkins for my first year of classes, we went to the Baltimore Museum of Art [BMA], which happens to be on the Hopkins campus. And my mother said to me, "Well, maybe you'll major in art history." I was like, "Mom, no I'm not going to major in art history."

Alice Matthews

[Laughs]

Susan Gagliardi

But I think she was on to something. But art history was actually my second major. And the way she recalls it is that I didn't tell her for a long time that I actually had decided to major in the history of art as well. So I think it's just something that I came to organically, but it was also something that my parents had cultivated by taking us to museums, and my mother and grandparents have run antique shops. So I think also that leads to some of my skepticism because I

saw how antique dealers work and how they tell stories about objects to sell them. So I imagine somewhere along the way it made me think "Okay, well we have to investigate what the basis is for these kinds of stories" and that we can do that with art history.

Alice Matthews

So you went to Johns Hopkins. I'm wondering if there's any classes or works of scholarship that you remember from your undergraduate years or even graduate years that really continued to guide the way that you think.

Susan Gagliardi

Definitely. There are really important courses, and as I said, I didn't think I was going to major in history of art. It was something that my mother had suggested. And so I went to Johns Hopkins thinking that I was going to major in international relations. And I do want to tell you about one course in international relations because for me it was definitely the moment when I said bye to international relations--

Susan Gagliardi

--and that was my third semester when I took Contemporary International Politics. I was preparing for the final exam, and I realized we had dozens of authors on our list of things we had read during the semester, but we only had like five women on that list. So I walked into that exam, knowing what I was going to write. It didn't actually matter what the big question was at the end. But the big question was, "Is it more relevant to analyze international politics on the level of the nation state, or on the level of multinational organizations?" And I said, "Actually, it doesn't really matter because if you're not really paying attention to half of the world's population, and most of the people thinking about international politics are sitting in suits in Washington, D.C. disconnected from the everyday experiences of the people who those policies affect, it doesn't matter if it's analyzed on the level of the nation state or multinational organizations." So for me, that was instructive in helping me know I wanted to understand the everyday experiences of people. I wanted to understand very individualized personal experiences. And so I started to reflect on the course that I'd taken in Introduction to African Art in the second semester at Johns Hopkins. The only time a course on African art history was offered at Johns Hopkins was while I was there. And I took that course because I needed a work-study job. I ended up working with the curator of African art at the Baltimore Museum of Art

in my first semester, and then he offered this course and I thought, "Well okay, if this is my job, I should know something about what it is that I'm dealing with." I was filing a lot of things, and helping him build bibliographies. So after the experience in Contemporary International Politics, and I reflected back on that class, I realized a lot of what we thought about in that class was how people in parts of the world that I had not yet visited made sense of the world at a very local and specific level. And so suddenly I thought, "Wow, this is fascinating. We can look at an object, and that's a document of, I would say, multiple people's experiences. And we can start to better understand those experiences and the ways people know and make sense of the world." So I took the survey course, and Brigid Doherty was super supportive as I started to think about how I wanted to pursue as my second major the history of art, and she really helped me figure out how to make that happen. And I guess I also add that now that I'm a faculty member realizing what that meant. When I walked into her office, and wasn't quite sure what to do or how to do it, and I was very explicit about the fact that I was interested in African art history, which at Johns Hopkins at the time was really beyond the realm of what the core faculty were teaching and doing. And so I appreciate the ways in which she really helped make that happen. Michael Fried's course on pre-19th century realists--so we focused on Gustave Courbet, Thomas Eakins, and Adolph Menzel. And what strikes me about that class is how memorable his lectures were and how the arguments he made have stuck with me. So even though they're not things that I focus on still, I feel like I've internalized those lectures in a way that when I encounter the arguments in them, they feel very familiar to me. That to me is a sign of really remarkable teaching. And there are certain things that he said that have also stuck with me like, "If you're in a city, and you can go back into a museum once more to look at that one thing one time for a few minutes, do it." And I've always carried that wisdom with me. And I think the one other course I would like to mention is reading volume one of Capital with David Harvey, which was really a gift that my undergraduate advisor gave me. She said, "Do this"--to make sure I get into the course because my first major was actually geography, and he was in the Geography Department. And so the ways in which he thinks through Marx's analysis of capital have been very important to me and my own kind of thinking in big broad terms.

Alice Matthews

[Laughs]

Alice Matthews

I'm wondering, when did you decide to pursue graduate school? Was it something your advisors pushed you to do? Is it something you happened on your own?

Susan Gagliardi

So that was also very gradual. When I look back at it now, when I started my PhD program at UCLA, and I was coming from a master's program at the University of East Anglia, I really didn't understand what it meant to have made this decision. I had questions, I was curious, I wanted to pursue them, and this was the way that I thought I could pursue them. So I really thought of it as actually a possibility that was opening up to so many more possibilities. So I didn't understand, for example, why at the time there was a lot of discussion about everyone getting tenure-track positions. I thought that you could get a PhD and do so many things. In the end I've ended up tenured at a university, but that wasn't my goal. My goal was to pursue questions. And I would say it was really my pursuit of questions. So it was at Johns Hopkins I decided that I wanted to study abroad. I went to Ghana. With my financial aid I could choose between two programs that my financial aid would support. So one was to Ghana, and one was to South Africa. I don't know--I felt more curious about Ghana. Somehow it felt more unfamiliar to me, and I wanted to understand what I couldn't understand. And so I studied abroad. And then I came back, and I did research at the Baltimore Museum of Art for the curator, and that led to questions that sent me back to Ghana for a year with a Fulbright, and then to my master's program. But again, all of those questions just kept pulling me forward. And I would say that's still the case--that my questions inform my teaching and my research. And I can look back now and start to make better sense of how they're interconnected. But at the time nobody said, "Oh, go to graduate school. That's the thing to do." I just took this path and ended up in graduate school.

Alice Matthews

So when you did pursue graduate school, who were the mentors or professors that really helped you to think and who are particularly important for you?

Susan Gagliardi

So I do also want to recognize some of the undergraduate mentors who I've mentioned, so Frederick John Lamp, who is at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and Erica Schoenberger, who was my advisor in geography, and also Sara Berry, who

is a historian at Johns Hopkins. I remember when I was first thinking about studying abroad in Ghana she answered a lot of my questions--very everyday questions about what it was like to live and do research in Ghana, so I'm thankful for them. And then I feel super fortunate because I had a dissertation committee where I had close relationships with every member of my dissertation committee. So each and every one of them was critical to supporting me and helping me: Zoe Strother at Columbia University, she was at UCLA, she was the my dissertation advisor; Steven Nelson, who's now at CASVA [Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts], but was at UCLA, he was the chair of my dissertation committee; Polly Roberts, who unfortunately has departed from this world, but she was also very instrumental; and her partner Alan Roberts, and so I would spend a lot of time talking with all of them--and also Cecilia Klein, who was a pre-Colombianist at UCLA and has retired. But they all each in their own way contributed to my understanding of art history, and also the development of my dissertation project, but really even my broader thinking about African art and art history more generally. But then I also had a number of mentors in Burkina Faso while I was doing my dissertation research. And so I would include in that list Dahaba Ouattara, who worked with me, who really helped me navigate my research there, and also Karfa Coulibaly. So Coulibaly is a specialist whom I interviewed a lot, and he also really helped me know what kinds of questions I could ask, and he would answer them, and he really supported my work as well. And then there are two Burkina-based scholars who received their PhDs in the US, who also were instrumental: Boureima Diamitani, who is an art historian, and Lamissa Bangali, an anthropologist. And I could probably spend the entire interview with you naming everyone who has helped me and people who have enriched my understanding, but I'll spare you that long list. Those are some of the people who first come to mind, but by no means are they the only people who I have to thank for where I am.

Alice Matthews

Can you talk a little bit about the dissertation project?

Susan Gagliardi

Those questions that I told you first led me into research and to graduate study, or I should say they're the first questions I developed when I started doing research when I returned to the BMA from my study abroad in Ghana. So I was assigned to do research on several objects in the museum's collection. One of them was a figure identified as Lobi, another stool identified as Lobi. And I

thought, "Okay, what is this term, *Lobi*?" And when I read that *Lobi* is a term that people don't necessarily use for themselves, but their neighbors use for them, I was very perplexed. It didn't match my understanding of what these labels/ethnonyms meant or how they operated. So the starting point for my dissertation was really that kind of question. I needed to figure out, "Okay, where can I address this question?" So I wanted to look for a place where the labels were muddled. So I went to Western Burkina Faso to an area that's recognized as Senufo, but where there were arts that more commonly get recognized as Bamana. And that's really thanks to the research of Boureima Diamitani, whom I mentioned. He had done some research, and wrote his dissertation in 1999 to show that this was happening in this area. And so I wanted to try to understand that and how that could happen. And I realized that the arts and knowledge about the arts were being transferred across these vast interpersonal networks of experts. So it wasn't that the arts were an expression of a particular cultural or ethnic group identity, but rather that the arts were a way in which people could make evident the extent of their knowledge while also concealing some of that knowledge. So that research required me to spend time in western Burkina Faso to speak with specialists like Karfa Coulibaly. And it's Dahaba Ouattara who really helped me navigate that, as I've said.

Alice Matthews

So I'm guessing that during all of this fieldwork and all of the research for your dissertation you started to develop--if you didn't already have it--your research methodology. So I was wondering if you could share that process. How much of your research methodology then and maybe today comes from art history, and what comes from other disciplines?

Susan Gagliardi

Thank you for that question. I think too behind that question is something about how it is we approach learning and trying to understand. So when I went to Ghana with a Fulbright--so I was there for study abroad, and then finished my degree at Johns Hopkins, and went to Ghana with a Fulbright to pursue this question, what is *Lobi*—I spent three months doing work in the National Museum in Accra, working with the curators in the museum to study and catalog objects in the collection from Northern Ghana. And then I spent the rest of the time in northern Ghana trying to get at this question. And I would say, while I was in northern Ghana, I thought about: What does it mean to actually do fieldwork? What are the logistics? How do I interact with people? How do I build

networks of relationships? How do I ask people questions? So sometimes I ask my students to imagine someone just shows up at your house and says, "Okay, I'm here to ask you lots of questions about some of the most important things in your life. Are you just going to sit down and start talking with me about those things?" So a lot of it was really trying to think "Okay, how do I build relationships and why is it that I'm doing this work? Why should I be asking these questions?" So all of that gave me a foundation before I even really ever went to graduate school where we spent a lot of time thinking of those things. So I would say the mechanics of fieldwork, theories of fieldwork, they were built into the courses that I took at UCLA from Zoë Strother, Steven Nelson, also courses that I took with other faculty outside of the art history department. And they do definitely reflect an engagement with discussions in anthropology that more squarely I think has a history of doing fieldwork. And I would say what I was learning and thinking about as a graduate student in art history benefited from a lot of the concerns and debates and reflections in anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s, so before I started my own graduate career, but that was really folded into those discussions. I also want to be hesitant because I know sometimes there's some anxiety about anthropology being separate from art history, but I was learning these things from art historians and anthropologists. So in my own formation, they weren't seen as separate. I don't know if it's always productive, right? Because I think that research depends on the relationships we build, whether it's a Europeanist going into archives in Europe, or an Africanist going into a small rural community. And research also depends on the kinds of questions we ask, how we ask them. So I just don't get too hung up on that kind of distinction. Was I learning things that maybe came out of anthropology? Because I think they can inform research in so many disciplines. And I would draw on social art history, the work of people like TJ Clark and Michael Baxandall, thinking about the political and social contexts in which the arts are made, and realizing that there are bigger and broader implications. So Baxandall's classic idea of the work of art as a deposit of a social relationship was really key to the kinds of objects that I was studying. And I would say they're these accumulative objects that reflect the interpersonal exchanges of the specialist with other specialists. My fieldwork was informed by many different disciplines in some way, and I think the idea of doing fieldwork can be relevant across disciplines as well.

Alice Matthews

How would you say the kind of research that you do today builds out of your earlier experiences? Or how is it different? How are you different as a researcher?

Susan Gagliardi

When I started my fieldwork in Burkina Faso, and when the nearly two years of research I was doing for my dissertation came to an end, I really thought I was setting up a very long term relationship with people in the area of Western Burkina Faso where I had been doing my research. And so I constructed a small house in the same courtyard where Dahaba Ouattara has his house. And I imagined I would return every year, and for a variety of circumstances made that challenging, and then political instability combined with now greater terrorist activity in that region has made me had to rethink that idea. I haven't been able to return every year to conduct ongoing research and to really get a better sense for change over time. I can reflect on the times I've traveled to Burkina from 2004 to the present, but the last time being in 2014. But I still think that's different than if I were able to go back for a long time each time. Now, whenever I've had a chance to travel to Cote d'Ivoire, to Ghana, to South Africa, those instances have been shorter amounts of time, and so it's different kinds of research. It's not the same thing as 20th century understanding of fieldwork. But I still think that research comes back to building relationships, listening to people, thinking about the questions that I asked, thinking about the context. Now I can communicate with Dahaba Ouattara by WhatsApp, and have a phone conversation where he's talking with Karfa Coulibaly, and asking questions. And the same principles of thinking about how I build relationships and think about asking questions are important when I myself go into archives, whether they're archives on the African continent, or archives in Europe, or in North America, and when visiting museums. So I think that there's a lot about research, at least as I understand it, that has to do with our interactions with people, the relationships that we set up, the ways we think about the exchange of information. And we listen to that information, we test it, we question what we think we know. So in some ways, I think all research is fieldwork. I think maybe that would actually have been a better starting point to say all research is fieldwork in those senses.

Alice Matthews

Great starting point and great ending point for that question, which is a good segue into my next set of questions. I'd love to talk about your current work:

what you've been working on recently, *Mapping Senufo: Art Evidence and the Production of Knowledge*. It's also what you primarily worked on while at the Clark, and I know it's still ongoing. So I'm hoping you could talk a little bit about what the project is.

Susan Gagliardi

So *Mapping Senufo* is an attempt to think about the contingency and partiality of knowledge, and how what we know is dependent on particular people in particular places at particular moments in time, what their interactions are, what they see, because I think, one thing for me when I was doing fieldwork, I thought, "Wow, how am I supposed to go everywhere and talk to everyone?" And I thought based on what I had read about African art, especially the so-called historical or classical arts of Africa, I was left with this impression that scholars had somehow been able to go everywhere and talk to everyone. And well actually in my own experience, no matter how hard I work, day after day, for nearly two years, I haven't been able to talk to everyone. I haven't been able to go to every single town and see everything. So I started to realize that anybody's perspective or point of view is going to be shaped by their experiences, the people they had talked to, their perspectives, the kind of information that they sought. So *Mapping Senufo* is an effort to take the interactivity of the digital environment and to create a digital publication that doesn't insist on one way of moving through this material that is material related to different individuals, observations, and understandings about this category in order to show that our knowledge is always incomplete--that it's dependent on a particular time and place, and then also where we encounter it. So when I heard an archaeologist speak about when archaeologists are working, the first place they dig, everything else is in relation to that. I think it's a similar kind of principle, right? The first place where we think about, "Oh, this term 'Senufo,'" everything else that we know is in relationship to that. So in its final form, the viewer, the reader of *Mapping Senufo* will come to a spot and choose the starting point, and that could be different for each and every person. So it means as a researcher not trying to be authoritative, to have the final word, [and instead] to really insist part of the argument is about the ambiguity of what we know and that we need to embrace that uncertainty and contingency.

Alice Matthews

It's been really exciting for me to see *Mapping Senufo* unfold while at the Clark and over the past summer. And it was really primarily where I encountered the

term "digital humanities." I had heard of it before, but this was my first big exposure to it. So I was hoping maybe could tell us a little bit about the point in your research that you came across the digital humanities or decided to take it up into your project.

Susan Gagliardi

So it's not that I was inclined to end up in this realm, but I remember very distinctly, the same week that Emory presented me with a job offer, I was sitting in the archive at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, and I was doing research on a project that led to *Mapping Senufo*, and I thought, "Okay, actually, I need to see all of these data about individual objects reportedly tied to specific regions or towns. I need to understand if these data match the ways in which people often talk about this corpus geographically." So I had in mind this multilayered map. And then I show up at Emory for orientation, and the co-directors of the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship Wayne Morse and Allen Tullos say, "Well, we have this Emory Center for Digital Scholarship, does anyone have a project in mind?" And I thought, "Yeah, I just need this multilayered digital map that's going to do all these things for me." *Mapping Senufo* has gone beyond the geographic mapping of place to really the mapping of knowledge and the ways we know. So it's really transformed. But it was through that process--it's really thanks to the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship, and then the Kress Summer Institute on Digital Mapping and Art History in 2014 that I started to realize that I was entering this whole realm of digital humanities. Anne Helmreich also talks about the importance of letting the questions lead us. My questions were leading me to using digital methods for analysis. And to go back to your question about fieldwork, I think that that was also a really critical thing in terms of fieldwork. Is it forced self-reflection? I had to constantly ask myself, "Why am I here? Should I even be here? What are the benefits, and what are the costs of that?" So there was a lot of reflection on the process. And thinking about this current moment after everything that happened in 2020, I think we are being asked to ask those kinds of questions. And I'm not sure that's something that art history as a whole has done comfortably in a sustained way. There are people who are doing it, but I think there's also resistance. And I would say for me in my own experience as someone who did fieldwork in the classical sense or as an Africanist, that kind of reflection is built in, and it's also what I think is part of my understanding of the digital humanities. It's a lot about process. It's a lot about thinking about the iterative nature of research, and then collaboration being so important.

Alice Matthews

In terms of the resistance of art historians moving toward the digital, I wonder if it's maybe a fear of the new skill set you might need to acquire to work into the digital humanities. Is that something that you encountered yourself having to pick up a new set of skills?

Susan Gagliardi

So I think this is a super important question. For me, it actually forced me to realize what I don't know. And so to me it forces an awareness of the limits to my knowledge, which is why the work that I've done on *Mapping Senefo* has had to be collaborative. So *Mapping Senefo* has so many people who have been involved. We've worked with database specialists. We've worked with programmers. We're working with a visual artist and graphic designer. I've worked with a number of undergraduate, and as you know, graduate research assistants. Everybody brings something in, and I should say there's so many other people. But everybody on the team, people who serve on the advisory board, people who have consulted with us, people who have informally provided feedback--everybody contributes something. So I think some of the anxiety may actually be around that mode. So I want to try to learn as much as I can. But I also know I can't learn everything. I think that may challenge a mode of being an art historian. So it's not the mode of "I am the authority. I am the expert. I know everything and I can do everything." That is just not my way of being an art historian, and developing *Mapping Senefo* through so many things really led me to that. So I'm not sure it's the skill itself, but it's letting go of the idea that as the person with a PhD in art history--as if that means a lot--I know everything.

Alice Matthews

When and how did you decide to open up *Mapping Senefo* into a collaborative effort? Did this happen naturally when you turn to the digital humanities? I know that you've been collaborating for a long time with Constantine Petridis from The Art Institute of Chicago. So I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about how that relationship started.

Susan Gagliardi

So *Mapping Senefo* is in fact a collaborative project at its core. So Costa and I worked together on the project that I was alluding to earlier. It was an exhibition

project. So in February of 2012, he sent me an email and said, "Oh, I have a question for you." And I thought it was gonna be a very small question. I didn't realize it was going to be a question that was going to lead to nearly a decade of collaboration. But he invited me to work on an exhibition. And at the time he was at the Cleveland Museum of Art [CMA]. So we had very clearly delineated responsibilities. As the curatorial advisor, I was going to write the book that would accompany the exhibition, and it was very clear it was going to be a book. And he was going to take my thesis in that book, and he was going to translate it into an exhibition--so objects, text in a gallery that people could walk through. And so when we were in the final stages of getting ready for the exhibition to open in February of 2015, we had a lot of disagreement around the labels because I have for a long time felt discomfort with the ways in which curators of African art and other scholars of African art will or have presented the so-called historical or classical arts of Africa in very broad and generic terms. And I wanted to be much more specific and clear about what we knew, like when we knew something and could back that up, and when we were speculating based on comparison, based on hearsay. I wanted to really pay attention to that, but that wasn't going to work out well. So I already had this thought about this multilayered digital map, and Costa and I had talked about that. So even though that was an idea I had in the archive--I almost went from the archive and said, "Oh, I have this idea for this map." So he was built into that. But really, this discussion around the labels led us to realize there's actually another project. This is another thing that *Senufo* [Art and Identity in West Africa], the exhibition at the CMA, and the book that I published—were the foundation for *Mapping Senufo*. And then we realized, "Okay, we have to start thinking about, well, what information do we have? Where do we stand on somewhat more solid ground and where things speculative?" So it was built into the project at its core. And with the support from the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship, some of the first graduate research assistants, the first web designer, the team has just started to build and grow. And I should really say that it's thanks to Erik Steiner, at the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis (CESTA) at Stanford that we ended up thinking about working with a visual artist: Mark Addison Smith. And that has really been this amazing opportunity to add another mind that just helps us think about what we're doing in vastly different, but generative and productive ways.

Alice Matthews

I'd love to hear what you think about the role of collaboration between the museum and academia in your field and in your work specifically, and where you might like to see it go.

Susan Gagliardi

Sure. Costa is based in a museum, and in fact the Senufo exhibition and *Mapping Senufo* aren't the only ways we have collaborated with each other. We've collaborated around the design of my courses. We've collaborated around some other research related to conservation that I'm working on with him and other people. So I guess in the same way that I just don't find it all that useful to get hung up on disciplinary boundaries, I also just don't find it helpful at all to get hung up on the boundary between the museum and the academy. And even as a graduate student at UCLA, it was very important to me to work at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. I benefited from working under Polly Roberts there and Marla Burns, and learned a lot from them. And I just see that boundary is very porous. Again, I'm not sure it always has been or that everyone sees it that way. But I just think there's so much that we can learn from working across these boundaries that can sometimes I think hold us up. The title of my dissertation is about crossing borders. So I'm very much about trying to open things up.

Alice Matthews

During your Clark colloquium, you and Costa--I remember this, you spoke about how your different backgrounds and different methodologies mean that you sometimes disagree about certain things, but that it ultimately helps your project to become stronger and better. And this really struck me as important. So I was hoping you could speak a little bit about the role of disagreement.

Susan Gagliardi

Right, we had a disagreement around the labels that led us to really thinking, "Okay, we have to work on *Mapping Senufo*." And those disagreements I think have led us to realize that, really, it's not so much about one person being right and the other person being wrong, but that each of us approaches information in a different kind of way. But one thing was really fascinating, we gave a presentation at Emory at the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry in February of 2019. And we made our disagreements visible as we did at the Clark colloquium. And we noticed that some people in the audience were very uncomfortable with this: that two people can work together and disagree. And at the time, I

remember saying to Costa "Actually this is super important." Within the academy and beyond the academy, I think as we're living in a world where we're seeing more and more polarization, and I don't think it's only with respect to politics in the United States--I think with so many issues, we're seeing more and more polarization. I am just increasingly convinced that it's important to show that people can have different perspectives, can respect each other, can work with each other, and that that can be very generative. So for example, we work together to write an article for History in Africa. And it was very generative because I might write something and he'd be like, "Wait, why?" And so he could check my own assumptions. I might like to think that I could do that. And I just felt like it was a richer process in the end because we were thinking together, and there was always someone who was going to challenge me, and I would challenge him back. I find it super invigorating and exciting. But I think a key thing is to have respect for each other in a way to talk with each other because otherwise the disagreement can go awry. But I don't think we should avoid it. I think we should figure out how to lean into it.

Alice Matthews

Absolutely, and I can't overstate enough how helpful I think it was to see that as a graduate student at the Clark play out in the space of that seminar room. Switching gears just a little bit, a question you repeatedly pose as a guiding one for your recent work and what you've alluded to in this interview, is so memorable that I now think about it every single time I set out to begin a paper, and the question is, "How do we know what we know?" Can you talk about how that question takes shape in your work?

Susan Gagliardi

So I think that's a question that I really started to realize was underneath my research and way of thinking about the world as I was finishing my dissertation, and starting my post-dissertation trajectory. By the time that I was interviewing at Emory, I remember distinctly saying that this was the question that undergirded my work, and then several years after I joined the faculty at Emory, I participated in a program [that was] part of the QEP, the Quality Enhancement Program that Emory has to go through for its accreditation, so something that can seem kind of dry. But Tracy Scott, a faculty member at Emory, really thought carefully about how to structure the QEP, and she structured it around the nature of evidence. And so I participated in some events and some workshops. And so that idea of the nature of evidence to me really gets at this kind of idea.

How do we know what we know? What do we build our knowledge on? And how can we question that? It was really generative and productive in terms of my teaching, and also my research because I realized this question I was asking was actually part of a bigger thing. And I think that there's an increasing urgency in this digital age to think about these questions. And I specifically have in mind two reports that came out of the Stanford history education group, one in 2016, and one in 2019 about the fact that in the digital age, students at all ages cannot determine fact from fiction on the Internet. And I don't think it's limited to students, right? I think we just need to think about how it is that we know. And I would say even more so than we need to internalize a lot of raw data because now we have access to that. We can Google anything or we can search in a browser for anything. We have to understand what the outputs are. And we have to know how to think about those and how to discuss them. Two other really key thinkers come to mind and excite me from some of their recent work around this. So one is Mbongiseni Buthelezi, a scholar based in South Africa, who wrote an essay called "We Need New Names Too" in 2016. It's part of a two volume work called Tribing and Untribing the Archive by Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer. But he's really thinking about what we think we know, and how we actually need to understand the power structures that are embedded in that, and rethink that. So I find his argument there really compelling and important to consider. And then also Elisio Macamo, who is a sociologist born in Mozambique. He has been based at the university in Basel, and he gave a keynote lecture in 2017 at the European Conference on African Studies. And he was really reflecting on this question "how do we know what we know?" And he had some images that have really stuck with me, but one, every single time we can think we land on solid ground, that ground should then actually start to break apart. We should constantly be questioning what we think we know and realize that there isn't necessarily solid ground and be okay with that. And another part of his argument was, because he was speaking to a group of Africanists, is that Africanists study Africa in order to know how to understand the world because so much of our knowledge has been developed around Euro-American assumptions that once we start to look outside of them, we can start to see better what those assumptions actually are. So those are the kinds of arguments that really excite me, I think because they open up possibilities for discussion, and I hope provide opportunities for coming at--I don't know if I want to say shared understandings because I think everyone will have a slightly different way of understanding things, but some kind of collective sense that's going to be ambiguous, imperfect--like Swiss cheese in some way.

Alice Matthews

I want to thank you for joining us today and for taking the time to share some of your thoughts with us.

Susan Gagliardi

Thank you so much. What a pleasure.

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clark.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.

