**Catherine Odora-Hoppers Interview Transcript  
Global Engagement Speaker Series  
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By Carla Hills

LCJ: Do you mind if we record?

CO: Whatever.

LCJ: OK.

CH: We were at your talk yesterday and had a very enjoyable time. I wondered about your background. Tell us a little bit about yourself. You have a pretty interesting background because you were born in Uganda, right? And studied in Uganda and Zambia, and then you became a Swedish citizen. So tell me about your growing-up experience.

CO: Well, I was born in northern Uganda in a town called Gulu. I was born in a very political family. My eldest brother was the chief whip at Uganda’s independence from Britain. So he was the chairman of the parliament. And many other brothers. They were very educated. My brother who was the chief whip was a mathematician. And we had pilots, we had engineers. We had also some people, very very highly educated by the 50s [?]. So education does not impress me really. I take it just as it is.

CH: It was a part of the growing-up experience.

CO: Exactly. But when Idi Amin came, he harvested my brothers like this [fingers make scissor motions]. So we lost almost seven of them during the peak of Idi Amin’s time. That led to my first exile, at the age of 18. I went to Kenya first and then Zambia, and I settled there.

CH: What about your family?

CO: What do you mean, family?

CH: Did you go solo when you exiled? Did you go by yourself?

CO: Yes, I escaped Uganda by myself but I got married in the meantime.

CH: So I’m interpreting…You had a remarkable journey to get where you are. How did you choose what you’re doing now?

CO: It started when we were in primary school. I remember one of the questions in the exams was, “Who discovered the Murchison Falls?” Which was 30 or 40 kilometers from where I was born. And answers A to D were various European names. Answer C was “None of these.” I take the answer E because I knew that my forefathers had respected that falls before any European came. In fact there is a famous, famous Acholi song that sang of that falls, which had so many memories for our people. So I fail that exam because of my choice of E. That led me to see that there is something wrong in the education itself. If I could be marked wrong for saying a truthful answer, what do you think I would think about the system itself? It means they were rewarding lies. Yes. So that incident stuck to my mind and every time I followed the pattern of untruths in education. You get me?

CH: Yeah, I do. I understand.

CO: Thank you.

CH: Do you find that your work now, as you’ve developed your intellectual track, that it’s being embraced? Is it being resisted? Do you see progress now?

CO: I wouldn’t be here if I’d failed. I wouldn’t be advising UNESCO and the world intellectual property organization in Geneva. I wouldn’t be advising the parliament of South Africa. I wouldn’t be advising UNICEF. I wouldn’t be advising the agencies in the North. No.

CH: This can educate me, because I don’t know, but how much integration is there between political and education leaders? Do education leaders run for government positions or seek to be placed, or does education have to work with the political leaders?

CO: Look, it happens like this. You go to school. You pass from one level to another till you reach university. And then you are crowned by the university.

CH: All right.

CO: And the rest is up to you, isn’t it. You are crowned by the university. It means that you are fit, doesn’t it. You can go and get any job. That is how it works. I think even here.

CH: Right. Is there enough stability now—enough political stability in Africa—to move your efforts forward?

CO: I’m concentrating on South Africa because they invited me to come, for the last almost 20 years. So I did some things that I consider almost ground-breaking.

CH: Speaking of ground-breaking, tell me what it was like to win…not win, but be awarded the Nelson Mandela Distinguished Africanist Award in 2015.

CO: I can’t express what I felt and what I feel now, because there are so many scholars in Africa and elsewhere, how did they come to pick me? And yet I’m not South African by birth. How did they pick me? In the award ceremony itself, my name was read aloud and then the master of ceremonies, it was the dean of students at UNISA, read out a piece for the audience. She read, and when she came to the last paragraph she paused and asked everybody to stand up. People stood up and then she continued reading. If you don’t mind, I would read to you that paragraph, please, because it will tell you exactly what I feel now. I think I will bow down to South Africa because they have accepted me truly. Truly. OK, you hear of xenophobia in South Africa, Blacks hating Blacks and so on. But this happened to me. I’m Black also, and from another country also, and I got the Nelson Mandela also. You get me? So…I don’t know. I will retrieve for you that last paragraph. It is in my computer.

CH: Let’s go to present day and your talk yesterday…Oh, thank you. Actually we would appreciate that. When we read it we were so impressed, is probably the word, but you don’t know, sort of in the moment, what it means to *you*. I’m sure it was a great day.

CO: I’m just retrieving that paragraph. And you’ll read it.

CH: Where do you go after you leave here?

CO: Straight to South Africa.

CH: Do you ever get the jet lag kind of thing?

CO: Of course!

CH: I don’t know how you can help it…Do you have it? [the paragraph]

CO: Yes…When she read up to here, then she asked everybody to stand up and then she read this. Can you read it aloud?

CH: [quoting] “Today Professor Hoppers is being recognized as a scholar of distinction, an administrator of repute, a leader and mentor, a selfless individual and an extraordinary pan-Africanist who leads us and who will continue to give us leadership and motivation. We cannot thank her enough. We cannot honor her enough.” That’s beautiful. That is beautiful. Very nice. Did you have to speak after that?

LCJ: How could you speak after that?

CH: That’s beautiful. So that probably inspires you every day. Right? That’s beautiful. Because some days you probably felt like you weren’t making the progress you wanted, I suppose.

CO: Not really. Because if you see the way I work, I anchor it in sincerity. You get me? So you can’t shake me because I’m sincere to myself. I don’t wait for other people’s applause for me to continue. You get me?

CH: Oh yes.

CO: But this paragraph was just…I don’t know how to say it. Imagine the president of South Africa, his excellency, Thabo Mbeki, was standing there with the certificate and the medal, and the master of ceremonies was reading this. And I was standing there. I didn’t know whether to cry or not. If you know how I work…You know people are afraid of their actions. I’m not. I’m not. I anchor everything I do in truth, so I’m not worried at all whether people applaud me or not. If I receive hugs and so on, I think to myself my god and so on, so forth, but I’m not seeking it.

CH: Right. With the present day and the discussion yesterday, you talk about cognitive justice. Can you elaborate a little bit about the importance of cognitive justice?

CO: Long ago, we fought or we were defeated or something like that. And those who got subjugated lost everything. They lost their language, they lost their beliefs, they lost their everything. When you were defeated, you lost everything. But democracy came, in which the underpinnings of that understanding is that everybody counts, even if you were defeated. You get me?

CH: Yes.

CO: It knocked out slavery. So even if you’re a son of a slave, you still have a vote. Now, how about knowledge then. Is knowledge supposed to be only from the conqueror? Really? Or should we expand the base of knowledge to include the knowledges of the defeated also? You get me? That is why my chair is aiming at democratizing democracy itself. When we expand the basis of democracy we include voices, yes, counting the ballots and so on. But it should go further. We should embrace them even if they do not have shoes. We should share the banquet table with them even if they do not worship our gods. We should attach “s” at the end of knowledge even if their knowledge is not yet articulated. You get me?

CH: Yes.

CO: That is what cognitive justice is.

CH: What are some of the constitutive rules and norms?

CO: OK. Look. In universities you get rules everywhere. Don’t do this, don’t do that, if you do that you’ll be punished and so on. That is the regulatory rules that are meant to keep things in order around an institution. What I am talking about there is the constitutive rules. It means that we have to go to the basis upon which the institution has been created in the first place. If I am going to go to the constitutive rules of the university itself, I have to take it apart. For example, what makes a university? It is disciplines. So I go into each discipline and trace the genealogy of that discipline up to its origins. Law, up to the Roman law, where it started. Science, and so on and so forth. When I have done all this excavation up to the root of it, I lift it up and I look at the pattern of what actually happened and I see the way to expand the basis of each discipline, so that they can accept other ways of doing, not to throw the present one away but to trace the genealogy and then at the base, check whether at the root of it, it can take in other ways of seeing. For example, law. It came from Roman law. It forked into common law and Roman Dutch [?] law. But if you look at the constitutive rules, it focuses on property really. And every value and every ethic and so on, they are connected with property.

CH: Which usually meant privilege.

CO: Exactly. All through the years, all through the centuries. But it has got itself tied up now, because what people in other parts want…For example, the legal systems that come from this present law. If you do something wrong, you are taken to court, before a judge, and the people who stand for you, they are very very knowledgeable about the law. But you are not. So you have to call these experts to represent you, because even if the law has been there for centuries it is not open for everybody to internalize it really. You have to call experts to help you interpret that law. Now, genocide comes and people murder themselves by the thousands, by the millions. What judge is going to sit there for decades, listening to all this whatever, denials and so forth. We need another system which can…not really speed up, but deal more honestly with the case. For example, the present Western law. When you go to court it is mandatory that you deny and let the others claim or prove you right or wrong. OK? It is based on denial. Imagine a court which is open and you can feel confident enough to just come and say I did it.

CH: That would not be the Western way.

CO: Thank you. You get me. “I did it.” So what shall we do? What can I do? Where you are a part of the event itself, the perpetrator and the victim are part of it. They do not defer the matter to an expert. They are part of the proceedings themselves with the elders and so on. I tell you, if you read the records of what came out of many legal systems that use this way of handling truth, it almost surpasses the Western one. So you can’t go and say, you bring gacaca[[1]](#footnote-1) now and stole it in Michigan. No. You have to go deep into what the legal systems in Michigan are about and go up to the constitutive rules, and see from there how gacaca can come and be part of it without mixing [up] your system. But be part of it, to coexist without duress. You get me?

CH: Yes. And it is a very big challenge to get people to acknowledge a systems change.

CO: The problem is for us to recognize the other, really. To embrace the other. You get me?

CH: Yes.

CO: If you genuinely embrace the other, you accept the other as he or she is, even if you do not understand the same language. By embracing, it means that you accept that person. But language is only a small matter.

CH: Someone asked that question of you yesterday at the presentation.

CO: Yes. Language is only a small matter, because even if I understand your language it doesn’t mean that I trust you. Even if I speak English or French or something like that, it doesn’t mean I trust you. But if you hug somebody, it means that no matter what, you accept that person. Let language come. Let the odds come.

CH: I thought it was a good question yesterday, when you talked about the language barriers, or not barriers, sometimes they’re not barriers, but what was really interesting to me was when you talk about getting to the core of where the issues are and then trying to build and take it up to a different system. That seems like a remarkably challenging thing to do. And I’m wondering…Guide me in this questioning, are there institutions or communities that have embraced this more quickly and others who have resisted it more certainly?

CO: You know, when you are embarking on something like this, you embark on it for the long run. You get me?

CH: Yes.

CO: I don’t count which communities have embraced it, because I do it for the long run. I lay the basis and then over the coming generation they will know that this basis was already laid. Not in my generation. No. But the next and the next and the next, they will know that work was done. If we want to effect it…I’m laying the foundations just like Martin Luther King laid the foundations for the civil rights. I don’t have to hurry to take part in it. No. Laying the foundations of something very very important, you lay it for the long run.

CH: With coming to Michigan State University and talking with our researchers and working with our office, with Dr. Fitzgerald and Burt and everyone, what do you think that MSU can do…What can Michigan State University do to advance the education in Africa?

CO: For me…Sorry that the camera is pointing this way because I would like to write…

CH: Yes.

PP: Feel free. [moves flip chart around in front of camera]

CO: Michigan, in this week that I’ve been here…I interacted…I was brought here…I don’t know what the organization chart of the university is, actually. I was brought through the community engagement portfolio. I don’t know whether there are other portfolios or not. And I don’t know as it goes vertical, I don’t know what lies here. But from here, I assume many many projects. I think it crosses into other projects also, in the university itself. I don’t know whether there are other portfolios that generate projects also. But I encounter a lot of projects. So, in the first breakfast I had with Burt, I said OK. So how do you filter the gems of these projects? They are so successful, each of them. But how do you filter the gems of these successes and channel it up? Maybe you can tell me.

CH: Well…

CO: And in such a way that they can influence the portfolios and they can influence the overall profile of the university.

CH: I am not a researcher or a faculty member, but one of the things that we have been trained to look for as communications people is the ability of that program to meet a set of criteria, such as how many connections and how strong the partnerships are in the communities.

CO: So you look downwards, hmm? I mean, down from each project.

LCJ: We tell stories.

CO: I know, I know. You look to the projects and their collaborations.

CH: That’s right, and we work with…

CO: You look downwards at the projects.

LCJ: And we ask what works.

CO: Yes. But who are you to ask it? What is your status?

LCJ: I’m an editor. We are storytellers. Writers.

CO: Editors. So when you have asked them, what happens then? You publish it.

LCJ: Yes.

CO: What happens to the publications?

LCJ: They go across campus for sure, and Dr. Fitzgerald gives them to his peers at different institutions. We send them to the legislature…Whatever we can think of.

CH: One of the things that we look for when we’re describing these partnerships is the collaborative research methods that generate from the community. Meaning the researchers work with the communities to discover what needs to…What outcomes are they aiming for. Or what are the issues in the community that the researchers and the community can work on together. So it’s really an up and a down. You start with communities and if you’re broadening out, you’re attracting other colleagues to work on the project with you. So it’s interdisciplinary. It’s multidisciplinary. And then you’re talking about the impacts of the project. What is the scope of the project. Can you scale it up.

CO: [writes on flip chart] You see? In every establishment there is a vision. And this vision can be taken apart and put together as strategies.

CH: Yes.

CO: That guide these different portfolios. And the different portfolios have programs in which the projects fit. Now, my question to you was how, at the end of the projects, how do you filter out one gem [writing on flip chart]…Which of these fit where? If these fantastic projects…How do you, in your level, influence the vision of the university? It is not a question for you to answer me, but I’m wondering…I’ve just been here for four days and I’m taking this with me to South Africa…I sense a disconnect between the myriad of projects, but no upward synthesis of the projects into strategies. How does the university align its strategies using the insides from the projects or something? Anyway this was on my mind.

LCJ: That’s part of what our department is supposed to do, is look for commonalities…

CO: You sit on the senate.

LCJ: Hiram does.

CO: Because it means that what you do has to fit somewhere in the structures of things. If you are a member of the senate or a member of the council of this university, OK. Your newsletters can be policy documents then. But I don’t think so. There has to be a process of converting a newsletter into a policy brief for it to reach here.

CH: I think that we answer this question differently than Dr. Fitzgerald would. Because I think what he would say is that at MSU, community engagement, and scholarship of engagement, has a priority with the administration, and there is an emphasis on how we work with communities. And why we do that is to benefit society. So the projects…

PP: [whispers] Time.

CH: [people enter the room] We’re having a lovely time. So I think it would be a further discussion with Burt, or maybe…And I know that Hi is not here now, but there is a significant emphasis on engagement here at MSU, which is why we’re all here.

PP: It’s in Bolder by Design. Right behind you.

CH: Yes. These are strategic imperatives here, where we enhance the student experience, enrich community, economic, and family life, expand international reach, increase research opportunities, strengthen stewardship, and advance our culture of high performance.

CO: But how does this link with the projects and how does the outputs of the projects be evaluated using these…I mean, because at some time the projects will write their reports. Who takes this report and converts it into a policy document for the senate or for the council or for the board of this university?

CH: The president’s office would do that.

CO: OK.

LCJ: And it’s carried out in promotion and tenure documents as well.

CO: Thank you.

CH: It’s been very lovely to talk with you. Thank you for visiting us.

1. A system of community justice inspired by Rwandan tradition; loosely translated as “justice amongst the grass.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)