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AFRICA IN OUR LIVES: JULIE LIVINGSTON

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The second of our featured *BIG STORIES + CLOSE (UP) RESEARCH* (<http://africa.wisc.edu/health/>), presenters, **Julie Livingston** did not initially foresee an academic career. She shares with us how a course on Africa changed her mind, and how her research on African health and systems of thought has developed since.



(<http://africa.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/Livingston.jpg>)

"I like teaching about the human body, because everyone inhabits one so we have some core basis from which to think about what makes us human amid all our tremendous diversity of shapes and sizes." -Julie Livingston (Photo courtesy of Julie Livingston)

Hometown: Boston, but I have been living in New York City for the past 15 years.

Field of study: History and Anthropology of the Body, especially in southern Africa

How did you first become involved in the study of Africa?

I was a pretty disaffected student when I was in college. I actually failed out for a brief period. But then in my senior year I had to take a course about Africa as part of a distribution requirement and it got me so excited that I took another, and soon I was hooked.

Tell us one surprising fact about you.

I swear a lot.

What is your most vivid memory from the time you spent in Africa?

SEARCH

I don't know if it is the most vivid, but this is a memory I revisit almost every day. One time when we were living in a peri-urban village in Botswana, my then-husband and I had each separately purchased a loaf of bread. So we had two loaves in our kitchen. As we were making our way through one, the other was going stale and about to turn moldy, so I threw it out. A friend who was over at our place for a visit saw an entire uneaten loaf of bread in our garbage and was profoundly disgusted. She called that waste of food evil, and gave me a serious (and in retrospect badly needed) lecture. I try never to waste food anymore. Of course, we are now learning how my friend's ethos about food is so critically important for our current ecological crisis.

Tell us a bit about your research in Botswana.

My past research has explored the ways that people experience bodily vulnerability and how they manage and make sense of those experiences. I am interested in how people take care of one another, and also what happens when they don't. I am also interested in African systems of thought. I have written about disability, aging, HIV/AIDS, and chronic illness in Botswana. My most recent book was set in a small cancer ward, where I followed patients, their relatives, nurses, and doctors as they tried to cope with a rapidly emerging cancer epidemic. Currently I am working on a new book that tries to understand the relationship between economic development in Botswana and planetary ecology.

What subjects or topics do you most enjoy teaching and why?

I like teaching about the human body, because everyone inhabits one so we have some core basis from which to think about what makes us human amid all our tremendous diversity of shapes and sizes. And because the body is the vehicle of perception, and site of vulnerability and care.

What would you tell students who are debating whether or not to study Africa?

Absolutely study Africa! Africa is an incredibly diverse, fascinating place. It is at the center of so much of our world, both historically and today, and studying Africa has the potential to blow your mind. It is a place of tremendous creativity, in literature, dance, music, but also in agriculture, ecology, religious practice, and economic and political philosophy and organization. Yet unfortunately the continent is poorly understood by many Americans. Many Americans, even those who travel there, tend to think of Africa mainly as a site of need or lack, of suffering and deprivation, and by extension Africans as objects of their own help and/or expertise. This is a real shame, because as a result many Americans miss the chance to learn from people there. If you study Africa, you get to open your imagination to all kinds of knowledge and possibility.

Why is the study of health and science in Africa important?

Science and medicine are important in all places, because they are part of how people organize power and knowledge, and how they attend to problems and plan futures. Medicine and science are always a part of how political power is both wielded and subverted. This is no different in Africa than elsewhere.

**Give us a teaser for your presentation at BIG STORIES + CLOSE (UP)
RESEARCH: Health and Science in the African World.**

I will be looking at a photograph of a rainmaker in Botswana from nearly 100 years ago as a way of thinking about lost ecological knowledge.

Profile produced by Kyra Fox.

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