

Echoes and Algorithms Podcast

Transcript

Spelman College - AI and Liberal Arts Education

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Speakers:

- Dr. Mark Lee, provost and senior vice president of Academic Affairs
- Dr. Nicole Taylor, chair of the education department and co-chair of the Spelman's Institutional Review Board
- Dr. Michelle Hite, director of the Ethel Waddell Githii Honors Program and associate professor of Literature, Media and Writing
- Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence, founding director of the Social Justice Program, associate professor of sociology

Dr. Mark Lee:

Welcome, welcome. Welcome to Echoes and Algorithms, where we explore liberal arts education and how it meets emerging technology. We're at Spelman College, and here at Spelman College, we're not just about adapting to the future—we're actively shaping that future and helping to prepare young women to address that future.

In today's episode, we're featuring three amazing faculty members from Spelman College who are involved in some visionary projects. They're going to share about themselves and these projects and how they drive excellence in AI at Spelman, or excellence in technology at Spelman. And it's not about technology for technology's sake. Today's discussion is about leveling up our pedagogy and how we teach to meet and exceed the demands of this moment and the decades to come.

But before we dive into anything specific, I'd like to get a couple of introductions. First, I'd like to hear from Dr. Nicole Taylor and have her tell us a little bit about her path from traditional education methods to methods that involve AI integration. Dr. Taylor?

Dr. Nicole Taylor:

Hi everyone. I'm Dr. Nicole Taylor, chair of the Education Department at Spelman. AI definitely is something that a lot of people are looking to education for, because one of the biggest things is: will it replace teachers, or will it replace different things like that? So we are embracing it in the

Education Department and really seeing how we can engage students and put them at the top of the field by utilizing AI in the right ways.

Dr. Mark Lee:

Thank you very much. We also have with us Dr. Michelle Hite. She has a little bit different twist on things. Dr. Hite, can you share with us how you plan to involve digital approaches to elevating and describing the humanities?

Dr. Michelle Hite:

Yes. Well, my name is Michelle Hite, and I am the director of the Ethel Waddell Githii Honors Program, and I am an associate professor of literature, media and writing—formerly English.

Black digital humanists sort of begin with slavery as an archive, and they do such important work in thinking about the ways in which the engagement with data reinscribes the original scenario of thingifying Black bodies—objectifying them, turning them into the biometrics of life.

And so a part of what the project of Black digital humanists is, is to reveal the ways in which that inscription is occurring, to reclaim a different sort of way of working with that data, to tell a different kind of story. And I do think that that is really important work. But I'm very interested in the work that we do at historically Black colleges and universities, and beginning with a different center. Particularly when we're thinking about Black people and the work that we do with Black students, it has helped me to see the ways in which the protocols that are constructed in presumptively mainstream spaces are read differently when you expect Black people to arrive.

So in that vein, no person is more Spelman than Dr. Joyce Johnson. I was reading an article about her—I can't remember specifically the question—but the journalist asked her about her relationship to vocation, and they said, "Give me five moments in your life that speak to your music and vocation." So she names them. Then the journalist says, "Well, you played for the King memorial, and you've got this relationship with Morehouse and Ebenezer. Does that contribute to your sense of vocation?" And she says, "In a word, no." And I was like, "Whoa."

So what I realized is that in becoming an icon, what happened with Dr. Johnson is what happens generally with art, with icons—they get frozen in the story that we tell about them, and what happens is they stop being who they could be in their fullness.

So what I knew was that Spelman had Dr. Johnson's papers. I thought, wouldn't it be fantastic for our students to do what our other visionary at Spelman, Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, wanted to do with the archives—and that is, recover Black women's stories? And so it gives us an opportunity to think about and to tell Dr. Johnson's story in the way that she wanted it to be told. These digital tools allow us to comb the archive and find narratives with all of the information that's available, with all the data that's available, in a much richer way. So briefly, that's the project.

Dr. Mark Lee:

That's amazing. That's also a perfect segue to our next guest, Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence. Dr. Spence is thinking about technology and AI, but she's doing it the Spelman way by bringing in social justice. Dr. Spence, please introduce yourself to the audience and tell us: how are you infusing social justice in this new era of technology and AI?

Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence:

Well, thank you very much. As the founding director and creator of the Social Justice Program, it's always been important for me for students to be able to merge their intellectual interests with their social justice concerns. And certainly they can't do that without situating the questions and the concerns and advocacy portals that they're most interested in within everything else that's happening within the socio-historical and political space.

And so for me, the social justice lens provides a very important way for us to engage AI, and technology in general. Our students have a number of social justice entrepreneurship projects. These are projects where students have matched their intellectual interests and things that they're learning in class with projects that are centered around advocacy.

As I think about some of the advocacy projects—including the ones that focus on criminal justice reform, or those that are focusing on health equities, or voting advocacy, or environmental justice—I think AI and technology provides an opportunity for us to say: how is technology being infiltrated into all of those spaces?

For instance, in the criminal justice system, how is AI being used as a tracking mechanism, as a mechanism to help police officers engage in more targeted surveillance projects? How is AI being used in the health field to predict illnesses, to predict the ways in which individuals will engage the public health system?

And so as we gather together in the Social Justice Residence Hall, we talk about these issues. We talk about where are the gray areas. We understand that AI is important. We understand that it is not leaving us. But we also understand, as Safiya Noble, who wrote *Algorithms of Oppression*, showed us, that algorithms are embedded with sexism, with racism, with classism—with all kinds of isms that have to be interrogated when we think about the utility of these platforms, when we think about technology.

Who's actually behind the door? Who's actually feeding into the systems the information that will do the projections that are necessary? Whose rights are being violated? Whose rights of privacy are being violated?

And so certainly, as we engage the presence of AI and various other technology advancements in society, as women who attend Spelman College, we must always be very clear that our questions need to be posed from an intersectional lens. How will this affect Black women? How will this impact Black men? How will it impact individuals who are on the margins of society, individuals who have access to health care and who don't have access to health care? How

much information is too much information, so that it becomes more of a problem than a solution?

And so these are the kinds of discussions that our students are involved in, and we're looking forward to engaging scholars in the field, people like Nicol Turner Lee, who does work on digital invisibility—which communities are being excluded? So these are all social justice issues and concerns. And I'm very excited about the level of energy that our students have, because they certainly, as my colleague indicated, are familiar with AI, and they're familiar with how AI can be used as a tool. And for many of us as faculty members, we're not quite comfortable with how they're using it as tools, but we also want to engage them in an analysis of: how is AI another example that must be examined through a justice-oriented lens?

Dr. Mark Lee:

Beautiful. That really brings us to what role HBCUs must play in this space. And I'd like you, Dr. Spence, to talk about HBCUs generally—especially given your UNCF Mellon lens—and what you think Spelman should be doing in particular as it relates to social justice and AI.

Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence:

Well, certainly, HBCUs must be at the forefront of this particular technology, because as the producers of future leaders—that's who we say we are, we're producing future leaders of society—and the data bears that out.

So it's very important, number one, that HBCUs invest in training and in educational opportunities for students so that they can, in fact, understand the inner workings of AI and all technologies that we can't escape from. HBCUs must make certain that we're providing research opportunities for our students, internship opportunities for our students.

But all of that we cannot divorce from making certain that our students, when they're engaging and when they're being trained to become the leaders in technological fields, that they always have a lens toward making certain that they don't become a part of the problem—where you're perpetuating inequalities through the application of technological advances.

But it is our job to continue to prepare students across all HBCU sectors to take advantage of funding that is available, but always don't lose sight of the fact that this could, in fact—it could be a train that just keeps running and we don't quite understand where it's going. So we should be at the forefront of asking the appropriate questions and the problem-posing associated with any advancement in society.

Dr. Mark Lee:

Wow. Listening to you describe that made me think of Du Bois and his duality. It appears that no matter what happens, those of us of African American descent have to cope with the current reality, but we also have to translate it through our lenses of ethnicity, color, and possibly gender as well. Thank you very much for that.

Dr. Hite, the Joyce Johnson project is very fascinating—to imagine that a person's life and the time and effort that they've placed into significant civic events could somehow be chronicled and described and articulated. What unique insights do you anticipate emerging from this work directly related to Dr. Johnson and her ability to even be able to reflect on it?

Dr. Michelle Hite:

Well, I think it's important to acknowledge that she said it herself—that while she was honored and she was prepared to step into the moment, her life was fuller than just one moment. And I think it's interesting, first of all, to recognize that she sees her life in full terms that we've never probed, because in many ways, we've accepted that the master narrative of who Dr. Johnson is is captured in the moment of King.

And so I see this as a really generative moment for thinking about the possibilities, for thinking about what kinds of stories might emerge through her. Because we do love and care about Dr. Johnson, and so she becomes a figure for what happens when you get beyond the pervasive stories that we tell about Black women and you actually engage and interrogate who they are.

And so I think what becomes interesting about the way that we might use the tools in combination with our training here is to think about how we can make those tools work for our sake. And, to Dr. Spence's point, I'm really interested in the way that we have historically innovated for the sake of our own liberation, and what it means to draw on our training to drive AI—like, what are we going to do in this moment to push and prod the tool for those same ends?

And I see us doing that for the sake of telling a fuller story about Dr. Johnson and coming to know her, because she's clearly aware of it. I mean, she rattled off five things and they were five things that the person didn't expect. But what was very clear was that she knew what she meant. It wasn't that she had forgotten. She was very aware and in command of her story.

So I think that relationship to storytelling is important in what we do in the AUC specifically, but in historically Black colleges in particular—that we tell stories with data for the sake of Black life. That tends to be what makes us different. We are not training our students to ensnare and to capture. We're training our students to liberate and to free. And so continuing to appreciate the way that our storytellers and our creatives have imagined a new world will be important for how you train them to see how these tools can free and liberate. So studying those stories, studying those poems, and the way people built those worlds will matter.

Dr. Mark Lee:

I am struck by this. It makes me think how her stories have been missing from history. It makes me think about how this could be a model for Spelman being a place to describe and articulate how to tell Black women's stories—Dr. Johnson being potentially the first of many. I am sure we have an entire list of women who have come through Spelman and who have served Spelman's legacy and moved our mission, whose stories could and should be told, or other women around the world whose stories should be told with a Spelman voice. So that's amazing.

I'm going to switch over now to Dr. Taylor. As we think about AI and a threat to education, you seem to be describing a way that this threat can be turned into an opportunity to build and strengthen even those who are involved in education. How can you make my question sound better with your answer?

Dr. Nicole Taylor:

I'll try my hardest! But just keeping in mind that we're in a unique position because we are literally the only all-women's HBCU that offers teacher certification programs, period. And because of that, we consider a lot—we consider how we can advocate for diverse learners. We consider the equitable learning experiences that can come about when we do integrate technology.

Technology has always been a platform in education, but now we're just looking at it very differently in terms of: what are these experiences? And we're really trying to shape our future educators to be critical consumers of it and not just accepting it.

So at the end of the day, teaching is a heart connection. It's a human connection. That can never be computerized. But we can use technology to enhance those connections. We think about, you know, if you have a student in your classroom who has never been to a beach, who has never heard the waves, seen the waves, anything like that—what can we use AI for to create an experience like that for them, to really bridge and transform the learning experiences of kids who might not otherwise have certain experiences?

So we're looking at it in that vein, while also critically considering the narratives that are out there. And as my colleagues have said, who is feeding into the narratives? Which is why we have to be critical consumers of it. We have always tried to be critical consumers of research—literally in paper journals. Why not the same for this? But that is essentially our mission in the Education Department.

Dr. Mark Lee:

Beautiful. What do you see as the biggest challenge for the kind of work you presume to embark on?

Dr. Nicole Taylor:

So with the Google Educator Certification, one of the challenges is really helping students to understand the "why" of it. Besides, you know, "Why do we have to do another certification? We're already in a certification program." So what is this going to help me with if I achieve this certification, and if we continue to incorporate this technology into our lesson planning, into the classrooms?

One of the things we've been telling the students is they're readily in the schools. Our students are in a unique position where two days a week they're in class, three days a week they're in

schools. So what they're learning, even from a Google certification, they can readily see it, and they can readily apply it with these students.

So we look at the facts of it, but we also look at: you want to go out into these schools to be as prepared as you can be. We say, literally, what's standing between you and a classroom is your Spelman degree. That is it. And because of that, we do want to take opportunities to really see what's going on in the P-12 space.

AI is in the P-12 spaces. It's in the elementary, middle school, high school classrooms already. And we want our students to walk into those spaces prepared to engage. So yes, you can use AI to assist you with grading and to assist you with developing a lesson. But we want to have that combination where we want the heart to match the AI as well.

So that's one of the reasons why we are doing the certification with the students—so that they can really just be best prepared to match and then make decisions. I saw somewhere where they said teachers in the classroom make over 1,500 decisions a day. So this is going to go into their arsenal of decision-making. What can I employ? What can I do to really meet these students where they are, and enhance their experiences, and enhance their experience as a practitioner in general and as a professional in general?

Dr. Mark Lee:

Beautiful. Dr. Hite, in five years, what will they say about this Joyce Johnson digital humanities project?

Dr. Michelle Hite:

Hopefully, what they say is: "What else don't I know?"

I think the biggest tribute that we can pay to an investment in anti-Blackness is to wonder about the lives of Black people openly. And so if they ask, "What else didn't we know?" then we will have succeeded. Because a part of being able to have people open to the story is getting over the mountain of King. So that would be, for me, a wonderful outcome.

But in the short term, I think people will be interested in how Dr. Johnson tells her story—not just through the music (not that that's a small thing), but that it accompanies the voice.

Dr. Mark Lee:

Thank you for that. Dr. Spence, in five years, how much will Spelman's legacy in social justice around AI be part of the story?

Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence:

You know, I think they'll be saying, "Here they go again. Those Spelman women are in leadership positions in the area of technology, and they're asking questions that have never been asked before."

They're not just making assumptions about the value of AI—and who knows what it will be in five years, right? Technology moves so quickly. But they'll say that there are Spelman women who are sitting around board tables, who are sitting in corporate offices, who are sitting in the company of other tech giants, and they're pushing. They're saying, "Yes, I like this. I like this innovation. But what does it mean to my community? How will women be impacted? How will girls be impacted? How will children be impacted?"

So I think in five years from now, ten years from now, Spelman women will be taking on leadership positions. And not only will they lead, they will in fact probe and ask questions that are designed to make certain that whatever technology we embrace, we can find ways for the betterment of society—so not just the advancement, but for the better of society.

Dr. Mark Lee:

Given that, and your legacy of your time at Spelman as a Spelman woman yourself—in several ways, you've probably seen an emergence, an excitement, a fear of technology over time. You've seen Spelman survive those moments and thrive in those moments. I'm sure you have Spelman women who led you. You've become a Spelman woman leader yourself, and I just want to hear you reflect on that intergenerational experience you've had—by being inspired by some of the greats, by being one of those greats yourself, and then hopefully helping to produce another group of individuals and young women who will come and do the "Dr. Spence thing."

Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence:

You know, I consider myself truly blessed to have been placed in the garden of Spelman. I come from a family of Spelman—my mother, my sisters, my sister-in-law. So we're Spelman people. And I say that because Spelman has always been seen as a space for the development of young Black women.

I was very fortunate to be a sociology major. I came through Spelman when we had a dynamic department, very nurturing professors. I call upon the work of Dr. Diane Baxter, who's Dr. Diane Wrestling now, and I'm still in contact with her. She's the one who introduced me to quantitative reasoning through statistics, but really using statistics to tell the stories of our people. She was very much a feminist, so we used it to talk about what's happening around gender and gender equity.

I was surrounded by Dr. Harry Lefever and the late Dr. George Napper, who were really interested in criminal justice. And I credit Dr. Napper as someone who kind of focused me more in terms of criminology and criminal justice and looking at how data tells stories, and how you create those stories that really reveal inequities in society.

I think that Spelman is a place where, if you are willing, faculty members will invest in you and will prepare you to go on and to build a legacy. And you're not doing it intentionally, but it's just the way that you were trained to be concerned about your community.

So my social justice lens is something that probably started with my family—two parents who grew up through segregation but were very much, at that time, race people. And so I understood that everything that I see must be questioned to make certain I understood how it would impact my families. And so my teaching is always about that.

This morning, I taught a course on reproductive justice, and we talked about what the data says and how you use the data, but how is it affecting marginalized communities? And so this is what I hope I impart on students as well as faculty colleagues.

This is a very special place, but we can't be complacent to think about how great we are. I hear all this "how great we are," but we're great because we always are seeking to be better. And so that's something important that was instilled in me as a child. So I can't give Spelman all the credit for that, but certainly Spelman has been very important, and the faculty that I engaged with as a student, I try to model their engagement. The leaders that I've engaged with at Spelman, I try to model their behaviors.

And I just hope that the legacy will be one where we always were a step ahead of the game. And again, as we think about social justice, as we think about AI, as we think about technologies, that we don't get so wrapped up in the technology part of it, but we do engage in the heart part of it. As my colleague mentioned, it's about heart and the qualitative approach to data analysis and telling people's stories. We have to care. We have to care. And I think that's a value that has been instilled in me, but I also believe that it is a historic value of Spelman—that we must care about our students and make certain that they care about those who are not students, that they care about the members of their community.

Dr. Mark Lee:

That sounds like helping a Spelman woman achieve her goals can be a mechanism for community impact.

Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence:

Absolutely.

Dr. Mark Lee:

Dr. Hite, I want to ask you another question here. When you were talking about Dr. Johnson and having her legacy separated from some other greats, I didn't even think about having her story told by people that other people might recognize first could be constraining to her story. As I sit here and listen to Dr. Spence also talk about having her story not just be limited to what Spelman's influence was in her life, we have a lot to learn about how to talk about women and their trajectories, don't we?

Dr. Michelle Hite:

Yes, I was thinking... I went to a wonderful symposium recently where we were talking about Dr. Martin Luther King and his time at Morehouse. It was really interesting to hear how people were using history to think about gender, and the way they clearly understood gender historically was to say that, well, patriarchy looked like this, so this was the quality of our relationships.

But to the point about our humanity, I think that it is true that when we recognize the human condition, we know that living like we're free is part of the human story. So it became this really rich conversation about what women want. And women didn't just start wanting freedom—they wanted it before 1980, right?

So I think when we tell one Black woman's story, it opens up the possibility for the richness of those questions for us to consider—like I said, what else we don't know. So yes, even to the point of the discussion about technology, it really is about getting back to the human condition. It's allowing us to better explore what it means to be human.

Dr. Mark Lee:

Now in my own writing about higher education reforms, there's always a quantitative drive for data, right? How large is your sample size? How big of a delta can you show? What I'm getting from what you describe is the power of the story of one. That some of our institutions that have so-called low enrollment or small school size, we may not have 3,000 in our subject group, but we may have a story or two from some individuals who themselves we should articulate and we should unpack those stories. And there's power in the story of an individual that we should be able to capture. Thank you for that.

Dr. Taylor, when you think about what education will look like for a Spelman graduate going forward, what an education studies major will look like in five years, do you have any idea of what that might look like?

Dr. Nicole Taylor:

It's going to be a lot. One of the things we have to consider is that our students are impacting essentially the least of these—that is, children. And we have to think about where society is going. We have to consider what kids are exposed to, the families they are coming from, the situations they're coming from—whether good, bad, or indifferent.

In five years, they are literally going to have to have weaponry to combat every battle in the classroom, in the education space, because our students—they go to the classroom but also to other spaces. So what echoes in my mind is preparation and just being really prepared to battle, because they really are preparing the smallest of the generations to come.

And quite frankly, if we all sit here and think, we can all think of one teacher and say, "Yep, it was that one who made a difference." And I really—that's my goal. That's our goal. It's really heart work. As I said before, we're saying, how can we have our students make a difference?

First, we as professors, how can we make a difference in our students' lives personally so they can really gravitate towards that and say, "Wow, I had a professor who really changed my trajectory, who really impacted me. Now let me do that for someone else."

So it's that Sankofa principle—really reaching back to move forward and to really move ahead to give to the next generation. So I see more and more of that in the next five years.

Dr. Mark Lee:

Beautiful. Thank you. So Dr. Taylor, in closing, can you tell us what it is you want people to remember about the work you want to do with students with AI?

Dr. Nicole Taylor:

I think I mentioned before that I want them to be prepared. I don't want them to be blindsided by what's to come. So I want them to be knowledgeable and not ignorant to the fact that things are changing, and we have these resources that can be used for good and can be used for bad.

So I really want them to be well prepared to really advocate for the things and the trajectories and the individuals that they hope to advocate for. I think through AI as a lens, it adds enhancement to what we've always done at Spelman, but now we have a new vein, a new road that we can take to really prepare these students well to go beyond the gates.

Dr. Mark Lee:

"Go beyond the gates." I like that.

Dr. Hite, give us your comments on what you want the larger community to take from your work around Dr. Johnson and what storytelling might look like through a Spelman lens.

Dr. Michelle Hite:

That you don't know Black women. And I think that that is the presumption—that we are already known, that everything about us is apparent and available and familiar. What you should know from this one story, to your point, is that there's so much more that you don't know. That the way that you show regard for Black women is to recognize what you don't know, and to get to know them.

Dr. Mark Lee:

So you're encouraging us to stay curious. Dr. Spence, what are your parting words about AI, social justice, and the Spelman influence?

Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence:

Spelman has a tagline—"A Choice to Change the World." We know that students think that is the motto, but it's not. "A Choice to Change the World" is in fact the tagline. And Spelman

College, through our coursework, through our living and learning programs—specifically the Social Justice Program—we are equipping students to actually understand what it means to change the world. What are the mechanisms? What are the technologies—and I use technologies broadly—that are used to create an architecture to change the world?

So we will continue to embrace AI and anything that's coming beyond AI, but we are looking at it to determine: how can we, through the lens of a Black women's college, engage these technologies in an effort to change the world, to make it a better place? That may sound cliché, but that's what we're doing every single day here.

Look at our graduates. That's what they do. And I'm very proud of the ones who've come through me, but the ones who come through my colleagues—who are really out there on the forefront, making a choice to change the world. Certainly, they will be a part of the AI innovations and they will in fact bring that Spelman lens with them. So I'm very proud of all of the accomplishments. I'm proud to be able to equip students with the knowledge and the skills and the compassion needed to actually be meaningful contributors to change.

Dr. Mark Lee:

And if we don't have the audacity, who are we waiting for to tell our stories? And Spelman has been that bastion, been telling those types of stories since inception—1881. And I'm sure, looking forward to social justice, telling the stories of African American women and their impact and the efforts to transform education through the work you all are doing. So I want to say thank you.

Affectionately, I call you my three queens because you were the first individuals to take me up on my offer to take a little bit of seed money and use your ideas and run with it with Spelman students and let's see what happens. I imagine in a couple of years, we're going to look back and we are going to see this as a seminal moment. So I thank you again for being here. Thank you so much. This was Echoes and Algorithms, Episode One.