

DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University
agnes.queensu.ca

Currents of Liberation

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

Season 3

31 January 2025 (Recorded 28 May 2024)

SPEAKERS

Qanita Lilla and Camille Turner

KEYWORDS

Archives, Artistic practice, Blackness in Canada, Canadian Art, Colonial Legacies, Performance Art, Soundscape

TRANSCRIPT

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Hello, and welcome back to the third season of *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*, where I sit down with artists, poets, musicians and curators to talk about their creative journeys. I'm your host Qanita Lilla. Today, I am thrilled to talk with artist and scholar Camille Turner. Camille's work unsilences the entanglements of transatlantic slavery in what is now Canada. Her most recent explorations combines Afrofuturism and historical research. In this episode, we speak about the Afronautics Lab and how it relates, as much to the future as it does to the past. We also talk about intergenerational wounds, what it means to imagine a liberated future and we share how "happy accidents" can lead to beautiful outcomes.

[Music/Ocean Waves]

[Laughter]

Qanita: Thank you so much, Camille, for agreeing to talk to me today. I feel that a conversation has been long overdue.

Camille Turner: Yeah.

Qanita: I've been following your work, like we've kind of like intersected, you know, through like the previous show that you did.

Camille: Yeah. That was really nice. Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah.

Camille: Getting to meet you and speak to you. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah. Like *Fugitive Rituals* and that like immersive room that you had. That was awesome. That was awesome. So thank you so much.

Camille: You're so welcome.

Qanita: Yeah. And I'd like to start by asking you: how did you start your personal journey towards performance art?

Camille: Yeah, oh, my goodness.

Qanita: And like what kind of like child were you? Did it start in childhood? You know, talk to me about that a bit.

Camille: I think a lot of these things do start in childhood, and I love that question. You know, what kind of child I was. I feel like I was a very curious child. I was very quiet. I read a lot. I was really into nature. I remember going into, you know, places where you'd find little bugs and flowers and leaves and bringing them home to my mom. And my mom would say, "These are imps and fairies." And I just loved that. So for me, the world was just full of magic. [Laughs] I think that's important for how things unfolded. And I realized too, when you asked that question, that I actually moved around a lot as a child. Like I went to four different schools by the time I was 10 on two different –

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: Yeah. In two different countries. So there was a lot of upheaval. And I remember when I came to Canada at nine years old, we visited the school that I was going to attend, and the teacher said, "Well, the children are going to tease you because you are another colour, so just tell them that sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Qanita: Wow. My father said that same thing, you know.

Camille: Woah.

Qanita: I don't know whether it's a generational thing, but it's like words really have power. They're awesome.

Camille: They do. They absolutely do. So I actually used that phrase in one of my first pieces. It's called *Suit of Armour*. And it's basically about what young Black children have to go through. The suit of armour, the skin that they have to wear to toughen up in order to survive the violence that they're constantly in, you know, around them. So these kind of things informed what I did. And I feel like my work is so much about home and belonging. This way of trying to situate myself in a place that felt utterly alien and in a place in which I felt like an alien. That was very alienating. So I feel like this spurred myself into action and the work that I've done. And growing up in Hamilton too, Hamilton, Ontario, which is where I ultimately grew up, because I left Jamaica when I was nine. We went to Sarnia, Ontario, which is at the Windsor – the border with Michigan. And then we came a year later to Hamilton. And that place, there was so much open bigotry in Hamilton. There's always – it was a place in which I felt that I was always confronting a lot of animosity. I had to really learn

how to, I guess, understand, you know, what was going on. And my response to it was a lot of times humour, like *Miss Canadiana*, for instance.

Qanita: Yes.

Camille: Yes. [Laughs] It was a very playful, humorous piece, but it got to the crux of that irony.

Qanita: Yeah.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: There's something. I mean, Windsor and Sarnia are heavily like industrialized cities. They're harsh cities.

Camille: Yes.

Qanita: They're hard cities, you know? And that kind of brings out that in people.

Camille: Yes.

Qanita: And something else that you mentioned about your sense of irony, I like picked it up immediately. Like coming from South Africa, we've got this like sense, even in the way that we speak, that using irony is like an indicator of possibility.

Camille: Oh, I love that.

Qanita: You know, like turning something around to mean the opposite.

Camille: Yes. Yes.

Qanita: That is so powerful.

Camille: Yes. Yes. It is.

Qanita: And it speaks like truth to power in an unexpected, lighthearted way that often like people who are kind of on the outside and trying to communicate, have to do. It's just like a, you know –

Camille: It's true.

Qanita: Yeah. So I saw that like immediately in *Miss Canadiana* because she has the signs of a beauty queen. But if you take a close look, she couldn't possibly be.

Camille: Exactly. Yeah.

Qanita: And it's not only the colour of her skin, it's the fact that you're not overly like primed and polished.

Camille: Yes. Yeah.

Qanita: You're not like – your hair hasn't been ironed. You're not over – you know?

Camille: Exactly.

Qanita: So you cannot possibly be.

Camille: Yes.

Qanita: I mean, like I'm interested in how did people actually make that leap to actually respond to you as like a beauty queen?

Camille: Yeah. Well, that's the thing that's so interesting because it's a piece that operates on so many different levels. A lot of times people don't really know what's going on, you know. They're confronted by their own sort of expectations. [Giggles] I just remember one time I was sitting, and it actually happened a few times where I was sitting having tea [giggles] with a bunch of people wearing the whole regalia. And someone asked me, [giggles] so where are you from?

[Laughter]

So I just point to the –

Qanita: What?

Camille: I know, right? So I just point to the sash. It's really a funny thing. So this one woman said, "You know, as soon as it came out of my mouth, I realized what I said, you know, and I wanted to take it back." So that was interesting. So I feel like that piece is not about me being in the spotlight. It's about people around me looking and they're in the spotlight. It's really a spotlight on them. So it's an interesting piece. And also I just love – I keep meeting, especially young Black artists, women who said, you know, when they encounter that piece, it just opened up a space for them to think about themselves. It resonated. So, for me, that piece has always been way bigger than myself. It's always been this kind of embodiment of something that I just feel much like a vessel, you know? And I'm just feeling so honoured that it shows me to bring this into the world.

Qanita: Yeah.

Camille: But it's way bigger than myself. I could never have, you know, dreamt that up. It came to me, and I said, "Okay"—reluctantly I might add. It took me years before I had the courage to do it. It's such a crazy thing to do.

Qanita: It is. It's completely crazy. I remember seeing a piece of film on YouTube where you're actually handing out Canadian flags.

Camille: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

[Laughter]

Yeah. Yeah. It's an interesting piece.

Qanita: And people also responding like very warmly.

Camille: Very.

Qanita: You know, to the spirits. And I think that, you know, in that way, it's such a powerful vessel to be able to educate people.

Camille: Yeah. Absolutely.

Qanita: You know, about the kinds of things that they grew up with. The kinds of notions in our pasts.

Camille: Yeah. It was such a breakthrough piece for me. It taught me so much. Yeah.

Qanita: I wonder, you know, like besides like that performative aspect, another aspect that's very powerful in your work is storytelling and orality. And these two things like storytelling and orality are like profoundly African, you know? And this is how everything is communicated. Everything. You know, like people – and I think people even have a distrust to a certain point of like a written form. They want you to see them and speak to them, you know, and show yourself.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah. That is true. And it's interesting because, you know, Jamaica is a place of stories. And, you know, I grew up surrounded by storytellers. I remember Duppy stories, stories of spirits and all kinds of, I don't know, like rolling calf. I don't know if you know about these.

Qanita: No.

Camille: They're very frightening spirits. My uncle telling stories like that. They're so scary that I couldn't even go to sleep, you know. So these are the kind of stories I grew up with. And my dad tells the Anansi stories. He's amazing at an Anansi story.

Qanita: Yes.

Camille: And I love that. You know, these stories, some of them were passed on to us through our ancestors. They survived the middle passage. They came in the hold of these slave ships, and they populate the places where the diaspora lives, you know. So Jamaica is a place of stories. And I love creation stories. I love mythic stories that explain how we came to be, how things came to be, you know. So, I think for me, the stories are just, you know, what the environment that I grew up in and I use storytelling in the work. Like right now I'm working on a piece called *Fly*. *Fly* was a slave ship that was built in Newfoundland. It was – when it sailed to West Africa and people were put into its hold, Africans on the coast liberated the people in the hold. So I thought it was so interesting that it was called *Fly*. So in the diaspora, there are all kinds of stories about flying Africans, people who flew back home. The story of return.

Qanita: Yes. Yes.

Camille: It's so powerful.

Qanita: It's so powerful. You know, like in Cape Town, there is a story of a flying ship –

Camille: Oh my God.

Qanita: – that it used to fly from the castle in Cape Town to Robben Island.

Camille: Oh, that gives me goosebumps.

Qanita: Yes. And that is how political prisoners, prisoners of, you know, slaves were liberated. Like the strangest thing is, in the castle in Cape Town which is like, you know, like the southernmost point of Africa, there used to be a painting on the wall of a prison cell. And the story was that prisoners looked to that painting to think about this ship that could like, you know, make them escape. So that's really interesting, this kind of – this collective consciousness about like ships and escape.

Camille: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Qanita: You know?

Camille: Yes. And flight.

Qanita: Yes. Flight.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah. And then the way back home, this idea of return and resistance. Yeah.

Qanita: Even like this was early on. This was like 1856. That's when, you know, like Malaysian and African people were enslaved in Cape Town. So these kinds of stories, it's really interesting to kind of track like these commonalities.

Camille: Yeah. Absolutely. Wow. That's powerful. Stories are so powerful. Words are so powerful as you said before. Yeah. Yeah. So I'm drawing on that story. Yeah. So there's a story "Igbo Landing" of the ship that came into Georgia and the Africans on board who were imprisoned in the hold took control of the ship. And when it landed, they decided that they weren't going to go on shore and become enslaved. So they marched en masse into the water.

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: Yeah. Some say they walked all the way home on the bottom of the ocean. And some say they flew. So this is a mythology that I draw on – a powerful story that I draw on, you know, to animate this story of the *Fly*.

Qanita: Yes. I mean, even in Cape Town, there's this – like we have what's called *leidjies*, which are songs associated with like being in the ship. And we still like sing it. We still sing it.

Camille: Oh, God.

Qanita: There's one song called "Daar kom die *Alibama*," which is like, "Here Comes the *Alibama*," which was a ship, you know? And it's like still – it's like people still sing it. They recognize it.

Camille: Wow, wow, wow. I'm going to write that down. *Leidjies*. Oh, my God.

Qanita: Yeah. *Leidjies*. Because we were colonized by the Dutch, and then the English kind of took over. But those kind of like cross pollinations are really, really interesting.

Camille: Very.

Qanita: I wanted to like talk to you about which events helped you to start researching like absented Black Canadian history specifically.

Camille: Well, when I moved into an area in downtown Toronto known as The Grange, that's when I started thinking about, you know, what people of African descent were here before me, you know. My father had been in that area in the '60s, and I have a good friend who grew up there in the '40s and '50s. And I met these women who, you know, were raised in that area. There's a church there that is still a Black church to this day. It's the oldest Black institution in the city. The U.N.I.A. [the Universal Negro Improvement Association] was founded right there. All of these things happened there and yet, if you walk around in that area right now, you would never know that there had been a Black community there. And this was a very vibrant community. So many things happened there, and yet it was completely overwritten, completely erased. And so, I kept thinking, how could this history just get, you know, wiped out like that? How can this city just not acknowledge what had been. And then also, you know, people that are living there now, they had no idea. And so I invited Afua Cooper, who's one of the foremost historians of Black Canada to come on board, and we did a project. It was my very first project. It was *Miss Canadiana's Heritage and Culture Walking Tour*, it was called. So Miss Canadiana did a tour of the area, and basically told these stories, she walked around in the area and just repopulated the area with the stories that had been erased. So that was my very first time doing that. And Afua wasn't just bringing me stories from the '40s and '50s, she was bringing me stories from 1793 to when the town was founded. And I found out that there was a woman named Peggy Pompadour, who lived and worked just steps from where I was living at that time. She was claimed as property by the administrator of Upper Canada. And the strange thing is, you know, his name was all over everything. Peter Street, you know, Russell Creek, Russell Hill Drive, his name was Peter Russell. And yet, I never knew anything about her or her family, and she had three children. And, of course, he claimed them as property. And her husband was a free man.

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: Yeah. But when Russell was trying to sell Peggy and one of her sons, you know, her husband couldn't do anything about that. So I don't know – I wanted to think about, you know, what freedom meant. You know, what Black life was like, whether you're free or unfree in that time. So this spurred more stories. So I did a story called *Hush Harbour*. Repopulating this area with stories, some fictitious, but drawing on the archive as well. And I did another story called *The Resistance of Peggy Pompadour*. Looking at this jail cell that was where the Royal – what hotel was it? The King Edward Hotel was a site of the first jail in Toronto. And Peggy had been thrown in jail for resisting. And basically so what I did is I invented this young girl. She was turning 19. Her mother took her, young Black Canadian woman, brought her to the King Edward Hotel for high tea, because they have this high tea. This is a fancy hotel.

Qanita: Jeez.

Camille: But she – right? [Laughter] I know. But she walks in through the revolving doors and she faints. She is a time traveller, but she's an inadvertent time traveller. So basically she faints and she finds herself in a jail cell with Peggy. That was, you know, the site where Peggy was. And she doesn't know where she was. She doesn't know who Peggy is. But they have this conversation and she realizes that Peggy was enslaved, and it's 1793, and, you know, she's in this jail cell. And she didn't realize that there had been enslaved people in Canada, because, you know, we don't learn these things in the history books. It's not a part of the curriculum. And so she learns all of this, and then when she comes to, she basically goes to the archive and finds the ads in the 18th century newspaper where Russell was trying to sell Peggy. And so she realizes that this is true. And so she basically is, you know, telling that story and telling everyone, you know, what had happened. So this was the beginnings of some of the work that I've done investigating these stories of Black Canada.

Qanita: I think that it was phenomenal that you got a name. That you got a name. And that you kind of built on that, you know, because so often these records are numbers.

Camille: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. It's a powerful thing that we have a name. I mean, we basically have just a couple of little ads in the paper. There's a letter where she's mentioned, there's just little mentions. So I feel like it's my responsibility as someone who's come after her to step into her story to honour her, to embody, to investigate, to become a part of, you know – to be able to say the things that she couldn't say and to make sure that she's not forgotten, you know.

Qanita: There's something about looking at that pain because it is pain.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: It's pain in the way these individuals were described.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: It's pain in the way they were demeaned and humiliated and all these things. It's all pain. So how do you like think of ways of lifting this up, of reformulating? Like how do you – because, you know, you don't – you can never erase that, and that's not what you choose to do.

Camille: Absolutely.

Qanita: But you choose to kind of elevate with dignity so that people can see, you know, this was a human being like me, or like my children, or like my mother, or like my sister.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: Like what is the process? Like in the archive, you find an advert, you know, like, say for example, an escaped winch or whatever. That's the kind of like language they use.

Camille: Language. That's for sure. Yeah.

Qanita: You know? And then it's kind of like dark skin or light skin, or, you know, and then it's scars–

Camille: The clothing. Yeah. And the scars.

Qanita: – and the clothing.

Camille: Oh, my God. Yes. Yes.

Qanita: You know, of childbearing years. Like how do you make that transition? Because for me, when I see those things, it's like a punch.

Camille: It is. Absolutely. Yeah. Where do we even start? What I ended up doing – because I finished my dissertation, my PhD, just two years ago. And it was interesting because it was through COVID, and I had to find ways to work because I couldn't go into archives, and I had to find ways to work. So I went into memory and I went into just really thinking about what it is that I'm doing, and to start trying to articulate my methodology to try to be able to share what I'm doing. And so I call what I do Afronautic Research. And the principles are this, I centre Blackness. And that's hard to do. When I'm looking at these ads, they weren't placed there by Black people, you know. They were placed there by White people who thought of Black people as chattel, as property. So I have to step into it. Centring Blackness sometimes means stepping into that story myself. I think about time as non-linear, and that is a very key element. If time is non-linear, then that means I can go into the future and I conjure a liberated future. A future in which black people are truly liberated. And I anchor myself to that future. From that future, then I'm able to look into the past, you know, and that gives me insights that sheds light on the present. And then I think about imagination as a tool for world making. And also looking at silence, because a lot of times that's what we are faced with is silence. And silence not as a void, but as information and as direction. You know, silence can speak volumes. Sometimes it's the silence that really tells us what's going on.

Qanita: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: I mean, yeah, we just have to look at the context today, you know, to see who's speaking and who's not.

Camille: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. So those are the ways that I try to work from that space of a liberated future, you know?

Qanita: Yes.

Camille: I think it was Angela Davis talks about, you know, you have to act as if a different world is possible. You know, everything you do has to be with that knowledge. And so that's how I try to work. Thinking from that future. Thinking about the past from that future. That is the way I survived the violence in the archive. Because in the archive, you know, people, as you say, a lot of times do not have the dignity of a name, a place, anything, just a number, you know. It's such a dehumanizing – you know, they were so dehumanized, and to reclaim them as kin, to reclaim them, you know, as – to reclaim them in all their humanity, it's – yeah, so this is how I try to work. Yeah.

Qanita: I think that that, since you mentioned the Afronaut, I think like there would be like a wonderful transition into *Nave*. Which is going to be in *Ukutula* at the Museum London in Ontario opening in November! So like *ukutula* means singing in isiZulu. And I thought very long about how

to, you know, make that kind of – like how would contemporary art communicate with masks, like African materials and, you know, like deeply spiritual materials and how would they communicate with contemporary art and contemporary artists? And I just think that *Nave* through the figure of the Afronaut is just so powerful, and it speaks very well. So could you please describe *Nave* for anybody who hasn't seen it?

Camille: Sure. So *Nave* is a free channel immersive installation. And I created it out of the experiences that I had looking at slave ships that were built in Newfoundland. So I never knew that there were slave ships built in Newfoundland. There's very few mentions of them anywhere. I didn't know about them until, I think it was 2015 or 2016 when I was invited to Newfoundland by Bushra Junaid and Pamela Edmonds. And Bushra is of Nigerian and Jamaican descent. But she grew up in Newfoundland, she is a Newfoundlander, and she's been looking at the intersections of the Caribbean and Newfoundland for decades. And so she invited me to be a part of this show. She shared with me her research, and one of the things that I found out was that there were slave ships built in this place. Yeah. And not just Newfoundland, but all along the eastern seaboard of what became Canada, right? So, through this research, there was something like 42 ships built along the eastern seaboard, 19 of them built in Newfoundland. So I wanted to think about the thousands of people that were carried in the holds of these ships. I think there was 4,798 people carried in the holds of these ships. Over 700 died en route. So their bodies would've been thrown into the ocean. I wanted to think about these people, these nameless people because my ancestors were carried on ships like these from Africa to the Caribbean just like these ships and maybe even these very ships. I don't know. I cannot trace it. And so I think about these people as ancestors, and I wanted to honour them. So in *Nave*, one of the things that I found out through my research is that some of the first builders of Newfoundland were shipwrights. So they built the ships, but they also built the town.

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: And so, if you look up into the naves of these churches in Newfoundland, it's like looking down into the holds of the ship.

Qanita: That is crazy.

Camille: Isn't it? So I just basically flipped the church and used the church as a way to enter the hold of a ship. And so the Afronaut, the time traveller, she is coming into this nave hold to pour libations for the ancestors. And the other figure is an ancestral figure. And this is played by Emilie Jabouin who is of Haitian descent. She comes out of the water, so this ancestral figure comes out of the water, and she's singing in Haitian Creole. And it's a reminder to the African diaspora of what we've overcome. And of who we are and of this whole journey. So these two figures together comprise *Nave*. So yeah. It's a piece that came together so beautifully when we created it. But at the time, I could not go to Newfoundland. I had to hire somebody. [Laughs] I had to hire a cinematographer to go and shoot the outside of the church.

Qanita: Yeah.

Camille: And then I had to find a church in Toronto [laughs] that was suitable for the inside of the church.

Qanita: But what about those beautiful scenes along the coast where you are walking and it's just like spectacular, the cliffs. Where was that?

Camille: Oh, so there's two different pieces here. The one you're talking about that's *Afronautic Research Lab, Newfoundland*. And that was completely done in Newfoundland. So it's another piece, but it's the same character.

Qanita: Oh, so she keeps appearing? She keeps appearing.

Camille: Exactly.

Qanita: Wow. Okay.

Camille: Yeah. She came into this piece. Yeah. Yeah. So that one, that was really interesting. So that was completely in Newfoundland, and that was 2019 for the Bonavista Biennale, that I created that piece. And I wanted to further explore the ships. You know, when I came to Newfoundland, you know, in 2015, I can't remember if it was 2015 or 2016, *New Found Lands*, the show that Bushra and Pamela did, I knew about the ships, but I didn't really know very much. So I took the opportunity in 2019 to just go deep into it. And what I found out was that there was trees that covered the land right down to the ocean.

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: And within, you know, a few generations, the trees were completely deforested. The shore was completely deforested. So I'm walking on these barren shores in a place where there were trees, and I'm bringing a rock, and the rock is from West Africa. It was brought there by a slave ship that was built in Newfoundland. So it was brought there as ballast.

Qanita: Yes. Yes.

Camille: So the ballast rocks would – you know, the ships were built as displacement vessels. They're built to carry a load, but in the absence of the load, they had to be weighted down with whatever is heavy, whatever is, you know, in the local vicinity. In Newfoundland, it would've been rocks. And so when they would sail to West Africa, they would take out the rocks so that the people could be loaded in. So yes, this character, the Afronaut is, you know, bringing this rock back to Newfoundland to tell the story.

Qanita: That is so powerful. That is so powerful the way that you animate that rock. And she carries this rock as a symbol, you know, of all the bodies –

Camille: Yes. Yes.

Qanita: – you know, that have been displaced, but also land and property.

Camille: Yes. Yes.

Qanita: And greed and, you know, trying to kind of soothe this traumatic history, trying to acknowledge it, but sooth it. Like thinking about rocks and the ballast of ships bearing witness to

history, to histories of slavery, particularly, what was that creative process for you? Like how did you come to associate that rock with that heavy, heavy meaning?

Camille: Yeah. Yeah. I was so blessed to work with an amazing friend, colleague, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, who is Cree and Metis. And she is someone who loves languages. She's doing her PhD on the entanglement of language and sound and land. And she talks about in the Cree language, that the word for rock is *asinîy*, which means slow moving grandparents.

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: Right?

Qanita: Wow. Wow.

Camille: I know. Yeah. I feel like that statement and that idea just completely transformed the way I understood the world, really. And so thinking about who was the witness to these histories, these crimes of the past, you know, the rocks. You know, they're long, slow life cycles. You know, they saw everything. They are the witnesses. So, yeah. That I think was such an important understanding for me that brought me into this idea of the rock as the storyteller. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah. It's like amazing that that's what she would bring back.

Camille: Right? Yeah.

Qanita: You know. And it's these regular grey rocks.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: You know, like you say, rocks do not forget. They will always be part of this place.

Camille: Yes. Yes.

Qanita: Yeah. I thought that was really, really powerful. And I think like just thinking about like the role of that rock as storyteller, I would like call your work and acting rituals of recovery, because it feels like through the Afronaut that she's recovering stories, but she's also healing. There's something healing, you know, about her presence.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: Since *Nave* and like the histories of slavery in that area were not known prior to *Nave*, or not spoken about –

Camille: Yeah. Not spoken about. Yeah.

Qanita: – yeah. Could you talk about the responses like to your work generally about the histories of slavery in Canada?

Camille: Yeah. I feel like what I'm offering is something that's a part of a conversation that's been going on before me, which, you know, Bushra was definitely a part of. And there's been other people that have mentioned the slave ships for instance, and enslavement in that area. So yes, I feel like it's a part of this bigger conversation. It's been interesting. I remember when I first started doing this work, I would reach out to the historians and archivists, the heritage people, and they would be very polite, "Oh that's not a part of my expertise." You know, nobody said, "Oh my God, what? Let me help you. Let me, like, you know, find out." So that was an interesting way that that research began. But I feel like since it's, you know, out in the wild now, there has been so much interest. The media picked it up, and that was kind of overwhelming for me, just having so many interviews, so many people interested in what is being uncovered. And I'm very grateful that, you know, this happened. But, you know, it was a bit overwhelming as well. I remember going from Bonavista to St. John's and, you know, I had all these radio interviews and people knew who I was when we started talking and I was telling them about my work, "Oh, I heard you on the radio." [Laughter] But it's fantastic. I feel like it's been a very interesting journey. One of the things that I – one of the projects that I do is called *Afronautic Research Lab*, and it's an archive. It's a futuristic archive that contains suppressed and silenced documents in Newfoundland. It contains the documents pertaining to these ships. And people are given sticky notes and pencils so they can write back to the archive. And some of the things that people wrote, two really stand out. One was somebody who said, oh my God, my father and grandfather and, you know, forbearers were sawyers. I wonder if the wood to make these ships came from their sawmills, you know?

Qanita: Oh, wow. Yes.

Camille: Yeah. That was really something. And then the other one that stood out for me was someone who said, "Well, these ships were not like custom built or purpose built as such, were they? And they weren't actually built by Newfoundlanders. They were no doubt built by British merchants. And they were just like carrying, you know, different types of merchandise, like –"

Qanita: People.

[Laughter]

Camille: Yeah. Roman molasses from the Caribbean, people from Africa. And we just went on and on about the different types of merchandise. [Laughs] Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah.

Camille: So those are kind of two extremes in terms of how people respond. But it definitely has sparked conversations and people cannot say they don't know.

Qanita: Yes.

Camille: And so there is this knowledge that is being produced, not just by myself and by this work, but by other people as well. There's a conversation that is being heard. You know, the CBC has interviewed me so many times. And, you know, people have gone on to do projects that look at this history. So I'm really pleased. I'm pleased that there's a space that's opening up. And I'm pleased that *Nave* and *Afronautic Research Lab, Newfoundland* is a part of this conversation. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah. I think it's definitely been impactful. And generally, it seems to be people are taking it on. They're engaging with us, which is fantastic, you know?

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: I want to just ask something like quite personal about the journeys of the Afronaut. Has this reflected your own life's journeys, perhaps?

Camille: Absolutely. I am the Afronaut. [Laughs]

Qanita: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Camille: Yeah. No, it's been such an interesting ride. One of the really insightful and impactful moments for me was when I went to Senegal in 2014. I had such an interesting – oof – Okay, so there was a couple of things that happened that really stood out. One was standing in the Door of No Return, which is the most western point of West Africa. And I'm standing there and I'm looking out across the ocean. It felt like I'm looking and somebody's looking back at me from the other side of the ocean. And then in a couple of years later, I find myself in Newfoundland, in Cape Spear, which is the most eastern point of North America. And I'm standing in the door of a battery at Cape Spear, and I'm looking across the ocean, and I realized that the person I'd seen looking back at me was me.

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: That was a powerful moment. And then also I kept – I went to Senegal because I wanted to explore the roots of Afrofuturism. I wanted to explore what I'm always drawing on, but I wanted to understand it on a deeper level. And I was thinking, so how are Africans understanding the future? So I'm there with this question, but everywhere I went, I just kept coming up against the past, you know, like, you know, the door of the return, for instance. And I kept returning. I kept going back. I just almost obsessed with it. I was recording sound. I was recording the waves outside the door, you know? And then finally I decided, okay, I need to get away. So I went to this beautiful place in Wolof, the local language, is known as Ndar. It's Saint-Louis. It's such a beautiful place. It's a world heritage site. Everything is pastel and misty and very beautiful, but almost like it's crumbling into the water, kind of beautiful. And the second day I was there, I went on this architectural walking tour. The guide said, "So the house you're standing in, it was built by this young French couple. They were the first traders in this area. Many others followed. They traded in gum, Arabic palm oil, and enslaved people. And by the way, you're standing in the place where the enslaved people were kept."

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: Qanita. [Laughs] I could not get away. And so I'm standing there and, you know, I told you about that figure that I created, the inadvertent time traveller who would fall into the past, that's how I felt. I felt like I fell into the past, and I'm standing there and everything just kind of faded away. The guide, I couldn't hear him anymore, the people around. Mmm, all I could – it's as if I could see the enslaved people around me. And I was back in this past. And all I kept thinking is, "Imagine if

I could just like stop this horrible thing that's about to happen. What if I could find the roots of it and I could just root it out? What if I could, you know, change history? What if I could –" anyway. This was the journey that I was on. I felt like this was a really key point in that journey. So everything that happened since *Nave, Afronautic Research Lab*, all of the work that I've been doing came out of that moment. And that moment in time travel, that's Afronautic exposition that's ongoing.

Qanita: And, you know, like who are these people and what do they want to say? And what do they want from me? Because they've revealed themselves to me.

Camille: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Qanita: And I'm supposed to be this mouthpiece, what am I supposed to say? What am I supposed to say?

Camille: That's exactly it. So I feel like I just opened myself to the story that is unfolding. And it's a story in which I'm implicated.

Qanita: Yes.

Camille: You know, it's a story in which I come into being. And so yes, this is – I feel like I'm a vessel for this story. Yeah.

Qanita: Because I also think, you know, it's fundamentally like a counter archival impulse, because in the archive, everything is blameless. There are no names of who put those records in? Who made those choices? Who decided to tell this story and not that story? You know, and you actually saying, I'm Camille Turner, I'm the Afronaut, this is me. I'm the vessel. I'm carrying these stories. Completely eradicates that anonymity. You know, and it kind of creates a point, you know? And that point is like it's very necessary. It's necessary.

Camille: Yeah. Wow. Thank you for articulating it that way. Sometimes it's hard to even see what's going on or be able to –

Qanita: Because you're like in their shoes?

Camille: Exactly.

Qanita: You're in those like fantastic little booties.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: Where did you get those booties?

Camille: I know. You know, they're actually liners for boots. Like fishermen would line their boots with these. Yeah.

Qanita: Are they silver?

Camille: Uh-huh.

Qanita: Are they like – so they come that way?

Camille: Yeah. They're silver. They come that way. I know. It's wild.

Qanita: That's fantastic. Like your whole kind of [inaudible] is fantastic. It like it's so – it feels like entirely of this time like today.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: But it feels like it's trying to make that transition, you know?

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: Like into the future and the past and it's kind of blending things up.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah. I love those booties.

Camille: Thank you. Yeah. It was just so brilliant. Just going shopping and like, oh my God. Like things just, you know – like, oh, of course.

Qanita: Yeah. She's like totally.

Camille: You're right. Exactly. It's true.

Qanita: Yeah. You know, just like moving back a bit to sound and like the power of sound, I ask you to share a few pieces of inspirational music with me, because I find that anything, you know, that is remotely African like has orality, but has like music. And it's such a powerful way of like expressing where we are. When we are feeling kind of disorientated and we listen to something, it takes us back.

Camille: Absolutely. Yeah.

Qanita: You know, to the past. It can take us – yeah. So it's also got this strange kind of timey kind of, you know, feel about it.

Camille: Yeah. It's true. It's a great way to time travel, music.

Qanita: It is. Like it really is.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: And like as I listen to your choices, you know, to Alice Coltrane, Boukman Eksperyans, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, I was like, oh my gosh. Wow. It was like a feast of that specific thing. You know, like Alice is all kind of ephemeral and like light and jazzy, you know, hop.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: You can't actually get any – yeah, crazy.

Camille: Right?

Qanita: You can't actually get more kind of floaty.

Camille: Yes. Yeah.

Qanita: You know?

Camille: Absolutely.

Qanita: And then like this Boukman Eksperyans, I've never heard them. That's why – I know. But it's like they're on the ground. Their feet are on the ground.

Camille: Yeah. Yes. Yeah.

Qanita: But they're like jiving, and it's like their spirits are getting full with this like energy. And then like, oh my gosh, like Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Oh my gosh. They are just – you know, they're sitting down, you know, on the ground.

Camille: Yeah.

Qanita: They're sitting down together. You know, their hands are on the ground in this very like profoundly loving deep, deep way and time is slow, you know, where we can kind of think about like the earth beneath us, you know?

Camille: Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: So I thought like the choices that you make definitely speaks to your practice like, you know, fundamentally. And it really got me to understand, you know, those kind of cadences that you, you know, that you like engage with. Like can you talk to me, please, about like sound in your practice?

Camille: Oh, my gosh. For me sound is – I did some sound pieces that were stories that were created entirely using sound. And those were some of my favourite pieces. So *Hush Harbour*, for instance and *The Resistance of Peggy Pompadour*. So *Hush Harbour* takes – what I was trying to do was to create a space using sound. So I used binaural recorders that I put in my ears so that I can hear – it basically picks up sound. You know, whatever I'm hearing is what the listener will hear. You know, I feel like our ears are so amazing. They're, you know, about six inches apart. They're cupped facing forward. So you can tell whether sound is coming from left or right, or from front or back. So they map sound. So with the binaural microphones, I'm mapping sound exactly as I hear it. So I'm bringing the sound into this – I'm creating this space inside of your ears. Like I'm actually creating space. And then I'm using a narrator to tell you where to walk, where to put your gaze, and then reimagining what you're seeing using the sound, and then feeding sounds into that space. So it was an incredible exercise, a very lush piece. And that was my first sound piece and I feel like since then sound and listening has become an important way that I understand a place. You know, like walking in Newfoundland, I could never have made the work I did if I hadn't actually been to that place, walked on the ground, listened to those waves. You know, places have resonances. The way that we

pick up, you know, our environment is through listening. And so many times we're not even aware of it, you know. Like imagine right now, Qanita, you know, we're hearing sounds from the past, or we're hearing sounds from the future or from a different place. It's so displacing. It completely unhinges you.

Qanita: Yes.

Camille: So I use that. I use these sounds in that way to transport, to bring the listener into a completely different world. So to create worlds with sound and to be aware of a world through listening, through the sounds that are emanating. So, yeah.

Qanita: So in that, is it an installation, the sound piece? Would people be wearing headpieces?

Camille: Yeah. Headphones.

Qanita: Okay.

Camille: Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. So *Hush Harbour*, you basically can access it through your phone and with headphones, and you're walking through a space that's created completely with sound. Yeah.

Qanita: Very cool. I hope I get to see that wonders.

Camille: Yes.

Qanita: So like as I mentioned that ukutula translates as singing in isiZulu, I would like to know who are the people that you as an artist and as a human, sing in chorus with. Who were the people that had a profound impact on you and who nurtured and tended to your artistic voice?

Camille: That's a really great question. One of the people I'm really indebted to is John Akomfrah. I've never met him, but his work really speaks to me. And I remember in 2015, I went to the Venice Biennale with Bushra, and we are standing in this space and watching his piece *Vertigo Sea*. If you ever get a chance to see it, oh my God.

Qanita: Writing it down.

Camille: Oh, it gave us goosebumps. I must have sat there for like two hours and then I left, and I had to come back to Venice again to see it because it just called me back. Powerful, powerful piece.

Qanita: Sorry, what is the name of the artist?

Camille: John Akomfrah.

Qanita: John Akomfrah.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah. He's Ghanaian and lives in Britain, so British Ghanaian. And his work is absolutely profound. And, in this particular piece, the sea is the main actor. So the sea – and he starts with this idea – you know, there's so many people that are drowning in the Mediterranean trying to leave, to go across the Mediterranean and drowning in the middle of that ocean. So there's

– you know, it's such a tragedy. But there was a tragedy that happened within this tragedy. There was something like 38 young African men who were stranded. Their boats collapsed, and they were stranded in the middle of the ocean, and they were hanging onto this sort of fishing net in the middle of the ocean. It was off the coast of Malta. And it wasn't that the Europeans didn't know that they were there, but they were arguing over whether to rescue them or not for three days.

Qanita: Wow.

Camille: It took them three days to rescue them. So John's question was: what could account for this? Like how can this even happen? And so what he did is he created this immersive – it's a three channel installation, and of course, *Nave* is a three channel installation. So it's this immersive piece where the ocean is the actor. And what he did is he was kind of widening the frame. He starts with that particular incident, but he widens the frame to see, you know, other disasters at sea and other locations within the ocean. He's looking at the Chilean Junta, how they were throwing people into the sea. He's looking at the Vietnamese boat people, you know, in these overcrowded boats. He was looking at all kinds of – the whaling industry – all kinds of different things. And then he widens it. Then he's looking at the transatlantic slave ships. So sort of going back, and back, and back to see, you know, what has happened and what the sea divulges. So for me, that was a pretty powerful piece. I really love the work of Christina Sharpe, what she's doing is –

Qanita: We all do.

Camille: You see, right? Right?

Qanita: Yeah.

Camille: Totally amazing. Catherine McKittrick, she opened up a space for me that help me to understand space. Saidiya Hartman.

Qanita: Yeah. That's what I was going to say. I can like totally see like critical fabulation, like at play in your work, like totally.

Camille: Right?

Qanita: Yeah.

Camille: Right?

Qanita: Uh-huh.

Camille: Yeah. So incredible. Dionne Brand. I just absolutely –

Qanita: Oh, oh! Like *A Map to the Door of No Return*.

Camille: Oh my God. Totally incredible. Yeah. Yeah. And also there are so many artists that are doing some really interesting work. Bushra Junaid, she curated an exhibition. You know, when we were standing there together, she just said to me, oh my God, I need to curate an exhibition and John Akomfrah's work needs to be a part of this. And so the rooms brought in Akomfrah's work, and

Bushra curated an exhibition that included the work that I was doing. So much came out of this experience of watching this work and being in conversation with Bushra. So I would say that she's been such a huge influence. Yeah. There's so many interesting – it's an interesting time right now, and I'm excited to see what's going on. Oluseye, you know, the work he's doing.

Qanita: Oh, yeah. Like on *Friendship* specifically?

Camille: Incredible. Incredible. Incredible.

Qanita: Yeah.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: But I also think that you guys, you know, like the influence and the love is like multi-directional, you know, from like everybody. Yeah, you know, you definitely draw so much from each other, and it's fantastic. It's really amazing. It's amazing.

Camille: Yeah, so blessed. Yeah.

Qanita: So, Camille Turner, what are your new directions? I'm sure there are like, you know –

Camille: Oh my gosh. Well, since I finished the PhD, I started a postdoc. I just finished the postdoc at U of T [University of Toronto] with Barbara Fischer, Director of the art museum. And I have created a whole bunch of new work that came out of that same exploration. It was an opportunity to just unfold all that I was holding, thinking, feeling, that I couldn't do while I was doing the PhD because writing was so important at that point. But now I can – you know, all the things that came out of that engagement. So I've got a big show in September and it's called *Other World*.

Qanita: Fantastic.

Camille: Yes. Yeah. So I'm so excited about that. So this is the new show that will bring together all of that work.

Qanita: And where will it be?

Camille: At University of Toronto Art Museum.

Qanita: Okay.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah. And I believe it opens September 5th. Yeah.

Qanita: Amazing, so there's time yet. I'm very happy that I have to speak to you like now. Amazing. Incredible.

Camille: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Qanita: Oh, Camille, jeez. It's been amazing. I'm so happy that I have got to talk to you – incredible.

Camille: Oh, likewise. Qanita. Thank you so much.

Qanita: It's been wonderful. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Camille: Thank you so much.

Qanita: It's been wonderful.

Camille: Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah. And I hope we get to continue our conversations.

Camille: Absolutely. Yes. Yes. This is just the beginning.

Qanita: Yes. Awesome. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Camille: You're so welcome.

Qanita: Thank you, Camille.

[Music]

Qanita: Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Special thanks to our guest Camille Turner for speaking with us today. I am your host Qanita Lilla. This podcast is produced by Danuta Sierhuis and Agnes Etherington Art Centre in partnership with Queen's University's campus radio station, CFRC 101.9 FM. Episodes are edited and mixed by Chancellor Maracle. The music is composed by Jameel3DN and produced by Elroy "EC3" Cox III. Episodes of *With Opened Mouths* are released monthly, and you can find them on Digital Agnes, CFRC's website and on your favourite podcasting platform. If you liked what you heard, please leave us a review and subscribe now so that you don't miss a single episode. We'll see you next time.

[Music]