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Intergenerational Activism and Buried Histories: Jamelie Hassan

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast
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SPEAKER

Qanita Lilla and Jamelie Hassan

TRANSCRIPT

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Welcome back to a new episode of *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*, where we sit down with artists, curators, scholars and performers to learn from their creative journeys. I am your host, Qanita Lilla, Curator of Canadian and African Art at Agnes Etherington Art Centre.

I recently had the privilege and pleasure of visiting with artists Jamelie Hassan and Ron Benner at their home in London, Ontario. We'd met quite recently, but I feel as if I've known them forever. Talking with Jamelie and Ron feels like a true meeting of hearts and minds.

This time, I was in London to interview Jamelie, but I also wanted to visit Eldon House, the historic house museum. On an earlier visit, Jamelie had spoken to me of her artist residency in 2000 and her descriptions of the house sounded bewildering in the way of many carriers of the colonial past are.

I am interested in how colonial museum collections exist in the present and in the different ways artists and museum curators engage with their painful histories. But I also wanted to visit Eldon House to see the site of Jamelie's innovative artist in residency project. In that project and like the iconic post colonial scholars, writing at the time, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, who Jamelie knew, her creative practice deconstructed colonial master narratives and gave voice to subaltern realities and forgotten histories.

It was a hot summers day when Jamelie and I finally visited the Eldon House Museum. And London Ontario was getting ready for the Canadian rock star Brian Adams' concert. So as we made our way around the garden, the chords of the "Summer of 69" rose up around us. Released in 1984 the song is an anthem of Canadian teenage nostalgia. In the song, we hear that Brian had a band, spent his time at the drive-in and had a girl who said she'd wait for him. That those were the *best* days of his life.

I realize that in the "Summer of 69" Jamelie would have been 21 years old, born in Canada to immigrant parents she was part of the vast and expanding Arab diaspora completely unrecognized in the Canadian experience communicated in Adams' song.

As we walk in Eldon House's Victorian garden, Jamelie shows me the grass gazebo where she did her public painting during her residency. She marvels at how the magnolia tree had flourished in the intervening years. How its trunk and boughs had grown thick and the heads of its flowers hung heavy with beauty. We stop by the lily pond with the goldfish and the fountain with the cherub holding a dolphin. I remember these kinds of fountains from a childhood of visiting historic homes with my parents in England. Europeans seemed fond of tiny fountain sculptures of naked, urinating infants.

From the bright summer light we go inside the house museum. We were engulfed in the darkness, of heavy velvet curtaining, thick embossed wallpaper and wooden paneling sitting in-between old animal trophies, mounted on the walls. We learn from the tour guide that Eldon House is London's oldest residence. Remaining unchanged from the 19th century, it housed four generations of the Harris family during the height of the British Empire. The house is testament to the family's wealth but also to darker histories of collecting and colonial exploits.

But in the year 2000, Jamelie initiated *Trespassers and Captives,* her artist-in-residence project. This was a collaborative intervention with other artists consisting of installations, lectures, tableaux vivants (ta-blow vah vant) ("living pictures") and musical presentations. Responding to archival materials and collections she considered issues like race, class and gender in relation to British Imperialism and European Colonialism.

In this way, Jamelie reconfigured Eldon Houses material and archival collection and transformed the site of the museum to reveal buried history's. The resulting artworks challenged the traditional narrative of the historic house by including subjects that were considered unworthy of attention like: an unnamed human skull, women's travel writing, servants' duties and recollections based on diary entries.

When we visited that summers day in 2026 the house was very much the way Jamelie had first found it at the start of her residency. But one important painting was missing. She told

me that the first artwork to enter Eldon House was of the abduction of Tipu Sultan's son. The painting documented how the British East India Company forced the Sultan of Mysore in India to surrender two of his young sons, but it also points to a larger history of political dishonesty and corruption under Imperial rule.

The painting was originally in the library and became an inspiration for her residency. But when we visited the house that day, it had been removed and was no longer on the library wall…

I am honoured to have Jamelie Hassan join us today. She is a visual artist and social justice activist based in London, Ontario. Her maternal grandfather and her father travelled from mountain villages in Lebanon to North America in the early 1900's. They fled Turkish military conscription and the First World War. After her high school studies Jamelie Hassan travelled to Rome, Italy in 1967 and Beirut in 1968 where she studied art.

Since the 1970s she has exhibited widely in Canada and internationally and her works are included in major public collections, including here at Agnes Etherington Art Centre. The recipient of numerous awards, including the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2001, and she received an honorary degree from OCAD University, Toronto in 2018 and in 2023 an honorary degree from Western University, London, Ontario. She is co-editor with Ron Benner of the anthology*, An Alternative Cultural History of London, Ontario: Art & Activism*, published by the Embassy Cultural House in 2024.

Welcome Jamelie, thank you for joining me today…

[Sound ocean waves]

Qanita: It's a real pleasure to have you here with me. So to start off with, I'd like to talk about how you grew up as one of 11 children in London, Ontario, and what that was like.

Jamelie Hassan: I feel, in many ways, the larger community as well as my own family had an enormous impact on me growing up in London. And it was a very exceptional family that I grew up in, as well a big extended family that my parents were very involved in in terms of supporting and bringing in their family from Lebanon, in particular. So growing up, I was in the middle, number seven. So I had a perspective that looked at what my elder brothers and sisters were up to, and I also had a role and responsibility in terms of my younger brother and my younger sister. So there -- You know, there's a lot of different ways that families manage large families. And so, yeah, it was a very rich household with a lot of activity. And my parents were very involved in the Arab and Muslim community in London, Ontario and beyond. So their consciousness in terms of the political, cultural, economic, and geographic space that we occupied in London, Ontario was very much affected by their activism and what they were doing and in terms of on many levels. So Palestine was really

important as I was born in 1948. So, you know, this is the Nakba period of Palestine, and then Algeria was also extremely important. One area of activism was within the Arab world itself and thinking about lots of relationships and that sort of thing. So definitely it was a large world of Arabic-speaking people that I was surrounded by their language very much so. And even when I went to public school in London, Ontario, I didn't actually know that the language that I was speaking wasn't the language that everybody else spoke.

Qanita: Wow. Yeah.

Jamelie: That's how dense the linguistic space was within our home on this street in London, Ontario. So, yeah, the extended family was very present because that was also the year that my grandmother was able to immigrate and with her -- my uncles. And so there was space in -- So it was an ongoing -- ongoing project --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- in terms of the way that my parents thought about their relationship and their opportunities in Canada, and how that should be shared. But also how to move it. How do you move -- How do you move the environment to be more fair, to be more aware of what the challenges are for communities that are coming from not an, you know, an Anglo or French background?

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And in our particular case, it was, you know, London very, at that point in time in the '50s, very, very conservative.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: But it was the city given the community of Arabs and Muslims who were founders here in London of the mosque, the first mosque in Ontario. But also they were the ones that hosted the first Islamic conference --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- in North America.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: Not Mexico but Canada and the United States. So people were coming in for these kinds of discussions. And so, you know, right from, you know, that point, I think of when I was very young, there's actually a recording of me dancing at one of these events,

conferences in London. And, you know, I mean -- And the women are really joyful and dancing, and there's a lot of singing and music.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: And the relationship to the arts was phenomenal.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: My parents had a map of the Arab world and North Africa on our living room wall.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So everything else might have been -- looked -- appear to be fairly conventional in the way that it had wallpaper, et cetera, et cetera. But there was this map.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And so they, you know -- There were a lot of small businesses coming into being in the neighbourhood that were run by other Arab families. So there was that going on.

Qanita: Yeah. So, tell me about this piece called 'Meeting Nasser'.

Jamelie: Right. So 'Meeting Nasser' actually comes out of affiliation that my parents had with the Arab nationalist movement and Gamal Abdel Nasser, and becoming one of those figures in the Arab world that they felt there was hope. There -- They felt that there was something that he might lead to a better situation in Egypt. And, certainly, there was that moment in time historically --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- where Egypt and Syria became one country, right?

Qanita: Yes. Yes.

Jamelie: United Arab Republic. United Arab Republic.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So there -- You know, we followed that.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: My dad subscribed to Arabic newspapers. So that material was up, you know, around us. And often, you know, the archive held photographs that I was very curious about later on as I began to do my own practice and my father --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- passed away, I started -- My mom shared the archive with me, and among one of the photos was this photo of a child delivering flowers to Nasser at an airport tarmac. And the back of the head of the child had a long ponytail. I had a long ponytail. When a visitor, a prominent VIP person would come to London who was from the Arab world, my parents would dress me up, take me out to the airport.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And I would deliver the flowers. So --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- I had this immediate connection to the photograph. And I wondered, that can't possibly be me. I don't remember that. I think I would have remembered that if I -- if that was Nasser.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: But the -- what I decided to do with that piece was ask my niece, who also had a long ponytail at the time, who was only about five years old, which is approximately the age of the child.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And I asked Elizabeth, my niece, to perform that particular action and to --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- exchange the flowers for a book.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So the relationship to the knowledge --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- and sharing.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: There's the aesthetic of the flowers, but also there's the beauty and knowledge of the book.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And the book that -- She's reading an excerpt from the book, which is from a novel by Naguib Mahfouz where he's talking about the -- he's criticizing, actually, the Nasser era.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: He's making a point about the lack of freedom --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- and space --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- in -- during the -- that period.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So, you now, there were all these contradictions from my own perception of what era politics was from --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- that period --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- as my parents understood it. And one of the things that was -- While Islam was very prominent in our home, because one of the things that my dad brought with him when he went back and married my mom, was he brought with him, like, a really beautiful Quran. But he also brought with him an inlaid table that was a tawle board, like a backgamma board.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So his relationship to this kind of, you know. You had conversations across this backgamma board or the --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- chess board or. You know, these types of activities were really very deep inside our family's relationship to communities. So people would gather at the house, have their, you know, Sunday coffee, have a game of cards, have a game of backgamma.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You know, the rolling of the dice. So at the same time that they were founding this, you know, relationship to, like, oh how do we get these, you know, Canadian-born kids to understand what Islam is?

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: How do we get them to become part of Canadian society to the extent that they don't lose their Arab identity and --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- their relationship to the Arab world? And so that's really keen. I mean --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- the idea. That's really an important point is that it was the Arab world. It was a kind of sense of the -- where was the Arab language spoken.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: So that was, like, a -- The fact that my parents were involved in founding the Arabic Language School in London, Ontario, was really significant.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So sometimes, like, we would have to give up our time, obviously --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- that was the weekend time or the Friday night time, to go to Arabic lessons, to the school, which was held in one of -- was actually at Beal Tech.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: Which is an important school here in London because it was also where a lot of artists went to study art. So Beal Tech also had this other thing that was part of it.

Qanita: That's really interesting.

Jamelie: Yes.

Qanita: Yeah, that -- It would be like visual art, and music, and, you know, and language.

Jamelie: And language.

Qanita: All at the same place.

Jamelie: Absolutely.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: Absolutely. And sometimes we didn't want to go and --

Qanita: Yeah. I'm sure.

Jamelie: -- there were there were many, many fights about do we have to go? Do we have to go? And sometimes we didn't like the teacher. Or, you know, we -- But if we all went and our cousins went, we --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- basically filled the classroom.

Qanita: Wow. Wow. And I think what's really interesting is this -- the sense of sociality, you know. That it's not -- It wasn't like dogma. It was how to be in the world. It wasn't just, like, religion narrowly defined. It was how do we, you know, socialize our children into this space that is so foreign, you know? And I think that your parents' idea of what that looked like was incredibly enlightened for that time.

Jamelie: Absolutely.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: Very much so.

Qanita: So just thinking about, like, your studies. So then, like, you go to study art in Rome. That's really interesting. Then you went to Lebanon in 1967 to '68 where you studied art at Elba in Beirut.

Jamelie: Mm-hmm.

Qanita: And it was later in 1978 that you travelled to Baghdad to study Arabic.

Jamelie: Exactly.

Qanita: You know?

Jamelie: Mm-hmm.

Qanita: So after all -- after not wanting to go and study Arabic as a child, you go back to Baghdad. So what was that experience like for you?

Jamelie: Well, it's sort of hard to figure out how to explain this. But it was radical in a lot of ways. I mean, coming from a big family and then finding myself in a situation like the first trip, there were a lot of coincidences that made things work. And there was a lot of encouragement from my parents. They really did believe that we should make trips and engage, and if that was the way that my education was going to -- that I would flourish that way that they supported -- they supported that.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: And as well -- I mean we did have family in Lebanon so the key factor there was that I would be with a bunch of our family on my mom's side and on my dad's side --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- and villages -- in the villages. And the homes were there --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- for family visits. But every summer what happen is, like, we'd get our passport, we'd get the needle, we'd get the passport papers prepared, all of this.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: Try to make time to go as a family. And then somebody would write and say they're coming. So all the plans would just go on the back burner for us as a family to go.

Qanita: Oh.

Jamelie: So it was an idea that was always floating around --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- that, you know, we would, some of us or all of us would go.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: But, interestingly, and I like to emphasize this because you get the progressive side of my growing up in London, because a lot of people don't get that. They don't -- They think, oh, patriarchal father, et cetera, right?

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: That falls into the old stereotype. Whereas, in fact, they wrote a letter to my uncle, my dad's brother --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- who didn't -- he and his wife didn't have children. And he wanted -- Earlier in my life, like when I was about 11, he had come to visit and he wanted to adopt me and one of my brothers and --

Qanita: Oh.

Jamelie: -- raise me in Lebanon. So --

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: -- you know, like, it's there, you know?

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: You're going to have your own donkey.

Qanita: Oh my God.

Jamelie: So, you know, very appealing.

Qanita: Wow. That's crazy. How old were you?

Jamelie: When my uncle came, I must have been about 11-ish, something like that.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: So I had a really strong -- I liked him a lot.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You know, we were learning things from him. Of course, my grandmother had come before, so that was a different kind of experience. But at that point, when I'm 11, the reality is, like, hitting me like there's, you know, these people I can go to.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And my parents wrote a letter saying -- And it was very common that young women would go home and maybe get married.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: And my parents wrote a letter saying, 'She's not there to get married.' Which I was very grateful for.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: Because, you know, I did spend a lot of time in the villages. And I got a different type of education --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- than what I was getting at the academy.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And the academy also had a music side to it and also had an architectural side to it. So there was studio work, and, you know, there was discourse and things like that --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- going on where you could shift from one space to the other very easily --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- and not -- and disciplined. So that relationship to the different disciplines was actually within the school itself. And so, yeah, and then returning to London and finding the

scene here in London, what was happening here, making friends with people at that time who were running the 2020 gallery, which was the first artists run centre in London --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- like with a collective. There was a region gallery before that. So the whole relationship of artists run centres in -- coming out of London, Ontario, predating Forest City Gallery, actually. So, you know, there's -- I'm jumping a little bit ahead --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- there. But that's all because there's a period of time where working collectively was essential.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: Particularly very important, I think, in terms of being a young woman trying to connect --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- with the community having been away --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- and feeling like I have something that's different.

Qanita: Yes. Yes.

Jamelie: And I think I can have an impact --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- with this group of people who think -- who are already having an impact.

Qanita: Yes. But --

Jamelie: You know, we're talking about people like Greg Curnoe and Jack Chambers who were --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- working here in London.

Qanita: Yeah. But your parents -- Just coming back to your parents, because this is -- It's foundational, I feel, they never had a problem with you studying art.

Jamelie: Oh, no. No.

Qanita: Okay.

Jamelie: No, they didn't. I mean, I studied Latin, I studied French, and I think one of the things that my Latin teacher found funny was like when I went to Rome, I wrote him a postcard in Latin. And my brother was in that class and he said, 'Oh, she would write a postcard in Latin.'

Qanita: Yeah, I think -- Yeah. It's amazing. It's amazing how malleable they were, you know, changeable, like, your parents and, yeah, and I think that influenced you deeply.

Jamelie: Yes, they were activists.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: They were definitely advocates for so many things, including environmental activism. We lived on a street that was on a ravine and there were the coves. So it's a natural space, very beautiful. And a paint company started polluting the waters. The city decided that they were going to fill in one of the coves. The -- You know, and they -- We had a hill that we used to toboggan on. And they came along and they cut the -- they put the, you know, whatever building they were taking down in London at the time. And they put that into -- that concrete stuff into the --

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: -- coves to stop it. And then they laid the soil from our hill onto -- on top of it.

Qanita: Oh my God.

Jamelie: So the idea that, you know, you had a beautiful property that had apple trees, and orchards, and things like that, the city wasn't really paying attention to the fact that in this particular zone of London it was an ecosystem that needed to be protected. Now today, obviously, there is that protection happening --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- thanks to -- a large part to a lot of the activism by other people in the city, younger generation of environmental activists who -- People like Tom Cull who did the --

and Miriam Love, his partner, who did the Antler River cleanups and removing garbage, literally, from the Deshkan Ziibi.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So, you know, the whole kind of connection as well. My parents are extremely close to the Indigenous community here surrounding London, so that was another aspect that -- because my -- how that connection actually worked was always, like, very compelling to me that that consideration and recognition of Indigenous rights, and peoples, and stories was very much a part of how we grew up. And -

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- how people were around us who were the Indigenous population --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- of the various communities around us.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: So, I mean, actually walking up here, I was thinking of -- Yes. Dan and Mary Lou Smoke, because they had smoke signals here --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- at Radio Western.

Qanita: Yes. Yes.

Jamelie: And so they were really important people as, you know, I was gathering, you know, my relationships with people in the city. Dan and Mary Lou Smoke were among those people that we organized many projects with.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: So I had a grounding from my parents that goes far back --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- in relation to that activism.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And I, you know. So, like, I always need to talk about it because to that extent, because it's a part of London, I think, that gets overlooked.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: And certainly, of course, in relation to, like, what's going on in the Arab world now, you know, it's really important to look at what kinds of organizations and associations were being built much, much earlier. Because a lot of people who come into -- Even during the Gulf War, like the first Gulf War with [inaudible] -- with that war happening.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- there were people who were coming in and they did not know about the earlier Arab immigration into not only London, but Canada in general.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And obviously other parts of the world. But I'm speaking specifically about London here.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: And they -- I was talking to my brothers about this, is that the whole idea of, like, affiliation. Like, that's something that Edward See [phonetic] talks about, is that we have affiliation to something. And I love that relationship that he -- that you may not -- We talk about it now as allyship.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: But, you know, he also -- with that context of affiliation, you have this choice that you're making that's beyond where you are standing.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: What -- The ground that you kind of occupy. Where you are in terms of your ideas and your whatever. I'm so -- I want to be so careful with my language at this moment in time because, like, everything is being disrupted.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: In a good way sometimes but in a bad way in other ways --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- so. And we -- You know, we're really struggling, I think, with a lot of the ways that the right wing is using language. But, you know, they talked about their association as a benevolent society, which was obviously very directed and connected to the Chinese benevolent societies --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- that were here in Canada.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: So there was this linkage around the early -- early immigration into the -- you know, Canada or parts of North America.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: U.S., Mexico, Cuba. There are really large Arab populations in South America, as you know.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: So, you know, the family moved.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Not only, like, our family's extension into the Americas also involved moving into different parts of Africa --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- as well as Egypt. So there was a tremendous amount of awareness of the world --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- beyond that map that was sitting on our living room wall.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: Yeah?

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: And so -- What was the question?

Qanita: No, like that's great. But I think, like, following on from that, you know, I'd like to talk about your identity as Arab Canadian --

Jamelie: Mm-hmm.

Qanita: -- as opposed to, like, a narrower Lebanese Canadian. And how this encouraged you to engage with the fracture of colonialism?

Jamelie: Mm-hmm. Oh. Again, you know, I mean I think it's very connected to the type of national movements in the Arab world and the moments where there was hope and possibility --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- as I look at it, like, from that perspective of my parents, and then another generation. And I had a lot of solidarity in terms of what was going on in Palestine, obviously, because of just the injustice, like growing up and being aware of it.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So I feel that the relationship was a very broad one. I mean, that I liked -- I preferred that terminology, Arab Canadian, and I remember, like, being part of a discussion with some Japanese Canadian cultural workers, and they always were saying like we say Japanese Canadian. So you put, like, Japanese and then Canadian.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So it's not, like, Canadian Japanese, it's the other way.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: And I thought yeah, that's so smart. I like to think of it, like, not in the particularity of, like, that national -- present national --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- situation.

Qanita: And think of [inaudible].

Jamelie: Exactly.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And then we -- And then also given what -- the time period of immigration for my immediate family, both on my mom's side and for my dad, it was the Ottoman Empire. And I remember actually being in Istanbul talking at a conference and people were going -- flipping out saying, 'No, that's not even possible.' Because they couldn't comprehend that, you know, I could have a father that was old enough to have immigrated --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- when he was on his own, when --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- he was young, 14 or 15, from a part of the world that was still part of the Ottoman Empire. Because --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- it was just pre-First World War.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So we're looking at a situation where things are shifting, the borders are shifting, everything is being redefined. A lot of people said, well, like, why do you think about it in the way that you think about it? Well, my dad used to sing this song that had, like, all these places that were the Arab -- that were places of the Arab world.

Qanita: Mm.

[Foreign Language Spoken]

Jamelie: You know, he used to sing this song, 'The Country That I Love'.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: So, you know, it had Damascus in it, it had Baghdad in it. So we had these songs in our head as we were growing up. And --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- I think, for me, that kind of -- We had a lot of music in our family. We had derbake players and drummers.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You know, dancing. A lot of it. Our living room could handle it. So I think, you know, that relationship to the thinking about the Arab world definitely had a lot to do with that perception from my youth. And also the relationship of, like, thinking about being with people who were doing things in a traditional way. You know, like even in the '60s, like, that was -- Clearly, like, I was not only in the Beirut environment, that elite --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- class.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: Right? I wasn't only in that. I was partly in it.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Not because I was born into it. But because I was in a --

Qanita: And studying in it.

Jamelie: Yeah, I was --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- in the academy.

Qanita: And that was cosmopolitan.

Jamelie: Absolutely --

Qanita: Right?

Jamelie: -- cosmopolitan.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: I mean -- And our classes were in French and, you know, and there was all this, you know, francophone kind of relationship going on --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- in Lebanon at that time. But, of course, there was also a lot of U.S. interest going on in there, too. So --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- it was fairly clear that things were tense and --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- things had been tense.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: But, you know, the whole kind of like the -- Like, my dad would think we need to go to Damascus. You know, it wouldn't be like we need to go to Beirut.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You know? We're in the village and there's a road that can take you one way to Beirut, the other way to Damascus. He was more comfortable at Damascus.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: So this relationship, like, it was -- Those cities felt very real.

Qanita: Yes. But what was the difference for him between Beirut and Damascus?

Jamelie: Yeah, because they were both under French occupation --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- after the Second World War.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: And, you know -- Or the French Mandate period.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: So they both had to deal with that. The language -- The functioning language was French, although Lebanon became much more with, you know, the establishment of the American University in Beirut. And -- Which was much earlier, obviously, but, you know. So there was a strong English component entering into Beirut. But that wasn't the case in Syria.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: So for --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- my dad, like, his language that he functioned in comfortably when he was in the Arab world wasn't --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- French.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: It was Arabic.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: And -- Or it would be English today.

Qanita: Mm-hmm. Mm.

Jamelie: But that -- In that time zone, that time period rather, he would be -- And for my mom, I mean, she experienced very close proximity to the French because they actually occupied her house.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: Yeah. So she -- They were -- The military occupied her house in her village. Because --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- her father had returned from a period of time, 20 years almost, in the U.S. and returned and resettled in Lebanon. So this idea of, like, waves of immigration only in one direction was simply not the case in my family.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: There were people going back and forth.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And, you know, we had a relative of my great uncle, actually, who was in Argentina. And one day he came to us, you know? So, you know, he had a big family and, you know. So there's a whole side --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- of potential projects to --

Qanita: Yes. Yes.

Jamelie: -- to be done --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- with Argentina.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: I mean, because, you know, you have these connections and the histories --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- and the stories behind these families --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- and whatever happened. So as we begin to put those stories together, that generates artwork.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You know? And the narrative, like, for instance like your earlier question that you asked about 'Meeting Nasser' was the displacement of, you know, the bouquet of flowers, that role of the child in this, you know, situation of innocence delivering a book and reading -- or exchanging it, rather, and reading -- turning her back on the leader and reading a book --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- about the dangerous things that are going on. And it was a tough text for her to read at five.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And one of the things she asked us to do was to make a big, big sign. And that's actually in the footage of the 'Meeting Nasser'.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: She said, 'Make a big, big sign so I can read the big, big letters, Aunt Jamelie.'

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: You know, so she's going to make big -- And she's -- You know, she's making gestures with her hand. And so we --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- made a big, big sign and then she could read from the big, big sign.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Naguib Mahfouz

Qanita: Aww. Oh, it's beautiful.

Jamelie: And at that time, you know, Qanita, a lot of people didn't know who Naguib Mahfouz was.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: That's the Egyptian pronunciation.

Qanita: Yes, yes.

Jamelie: And he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: After, not because of, 'Meeting Nasser', obviously.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: But that work was shown at the National Gallery in 'Songs of Experience' that was curated by Diana Nemiroff and -- And, yeah, I mean, the -- just a really important exhibition for myself at that time.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: I was working very closely with, you know, these histories.

Qanita: Yes. But I also feel with a kind of tenderness because it feels really -- It's so close to you, you know?

Jamelie: Thank you.

Qanita: Yeah. So your activism and your work as an artist are inseparable. You're very vocal about the ongoing genocide of the people of Palestine. And this is something that has not just started now but has been ongoing for your entire adult life. What does solidarity with Palestine mean for you as a person living in Canada?

Jamelie: Well, it's major. It's definitely a major part of our life right now. There -- And has always been, you know, something that has to be brought into the conversation. We've experienced a lot even previous to this genocide in Gaza. And then Israel's ongoing invasions and repeated invasions, actually, of Lebanon. And then, you know, of course Syria and other things that continually happen. So, you know, it's all interconnected as far as I'm concerned. I mean, the whole relationship and desire to see a just world. And Palestinians, I think, have been definitely the -- in my lifetime anyway, have suffered enormously through Western governments supporting the State of Israel in the way that they support the State of Israel, unquestionably -- unquestioning the State of Israel regardless of what calamities and nightmare scenarios they witness. So it's definitely something that I, you know. I just keep returning -- I'm sorry, but I have to keep returning to the activism of my family, inside my family, and that solidarity has informed a lot of, you know, other causes, other situations, other injustices.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So I -- You know, I think that when -- It's really, really important, I think, to have that community of people that you can share this with and hopefully it broadens to more activist space. And I think, like, through the collective projects that I've been involved in especially with Ron Benner, my partner. So, you know, we have a lot of political alignment --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- together with other people. And, obviously, solidarity with Indigenous communities is extremely front and centre for us. And actually, like when we were recently in Vancouver for the Vancouver Art Book Fair, the first thing we did the day we arrived, my great niece, my great niece, right, is active in this solidarity work in --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- Vancouver. And says, 'Oh, Aunt Jamelie, you might want -- and Ron, you might want to attend this event from, you know, Turtle Island to Gaza to Palestine.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You know. The speakers are -- This is happening.' And we went. And this is Vancouver. It's a big city, and it was a big hall, and it was full. We don't get to see that in London --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- in that same way.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: I mean, I actually remember that if a speaker came, like a VIP speaker came, through the arts and humanities. And you raised a question and they -- Because they might be talking about human rights issues or freedom of expression. And if I raised a question and said 'Palestine' in the hall, you know, the whole hall would turn around and look at me, you know?

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: It's like oh, did she say Palestine? And at one point there was one speaker who got off the stage and actually walked -- walked to where I was sitting at the back to talk to me. So, you know, the reality of, like, that moment stayed with me and that was in the '80s. So, you know --

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: -- I think that the -- that to move it like it's the younger generation. It's this younger generation that we are seeing who are able to push it in a way that -- Oh, I always feel like we didn't do it. Like, it's sort of a sad kind of reflection about our generation that -- But at the same time I do feel like there is a history there and people should be aware of it. Like, we took our project against -- 'Artists Against the Occupation'. We took that project to the United Nations.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Forest City Gallery project, you know? A --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- summer project. We worked with a Japanese artist who through -- put out an email to the world and said who wants to join me? And I wrote back. So she came to London and we did a show called 'Artists Against the Occupation'.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: And then it moved to different cities. And as it --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- grew in momentum. And then we took it to the United Nations when they did their question -- Like, they have a conference annually on Palestine.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: That's how the United Nations fulfills its obligation. But a lot of people don't know that.

Qanita: Yes. I had no idea. Not at all. Oh. Well --

Jamelie: In New York City.

Qanita: Yes. You know, Jamelie, I'm thinking about you're bringing up the London arts community. And I know that it's, like, critically, it's the -- It's been critically important to your work over the years. Could you talk about the importance of the Cultural Embassy House in the London art scene and what that looked like?

Jamelie: So Embassy Cultural House started out of a conversation that several of us had about how discontent we were with the way things were moving at Forest City Gallery, having been very involved with Forest City Gallery.

Qanita: Okay.

Jamelie: So the idea was -- I had done some work with my sister. The hotel had been founded by my father. It had been -- It had been leased for some years and then my sister and her family decided to take over the lease and run it, and then invited me to do some work in the hotel, which was just like a project I did with my sister, you know? And it was also honouring my dad --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- in that the people who were still in that hotel were people who had been hired by my dad.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So I did portraits. And they were now living in the hotel. Some of them were actually -- That was their home.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: So -- Because, you know, it was a basic style working class hotel in the east end of London.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And so part of it was also feeling that it's a rough -- it was a rough neighbourhood at that point in time. It wasn't always like that. But like a lot of cities, it had, you know, its hard times. And so, you know, we started feeling that if we could build an art community within the hotel. My nephew was very interested in music programming. One of the other founders was Eric Stach, who did improvisational jazz. So we thought -- He left the Forest City Gallery as well. So we thought, okay, we'll do music, we'll do film, we'll do poetry, we'll do art exhibits, and we'll just see what happens.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And it really did take off where even, you know, people who were, you know, doing projects in Toronto were saying, like, 'Can we come and work with you in London?' And so it began to grow and have good momentum. From 1983 to 1990, we had a continual program. We had a tabloid. We did radio. We did -- You know, we did lots of different types of --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- video types of projects --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- all across the country and internationally, including working with Cuban artists and going to the biennales and things like that. Meeting people and talking about the work we were doing.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So -- But then, you know, our lives were really complicated in the mid '80s when we made a decision to actually buy a building and protect ourselves from what the developers were doing in the city. So Ron and I joined in that endeavour.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And a lot of our focus was on, like, getting that done and taking care of, you know, everything around us and our son. You know, you're busy --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- you're -- as a mom. It's every -- all those different roles.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: So we --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- decided that we would just -- And also there were a lot of opportunities in terms of our own work that we needed to pay attention to. And we started doing projects internationally in partnership with other independent curators or galleries that were interested in the international programming that we were able to make happen. Because we started -- You know, a lot of our work was being shown internationally.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So from that, it jumped into a whole lot of things. So then during the pandemic, we're all locked down. And Tariq, our son, is in Kuwait. And so he said, 'Oh, you know, in this period, you know, we should start looking at the archive, we should start looking at Embassy Cultural House.' Because, in fact, a lot of the stuff that you did at Embassy Cultural House is the same stuff that's going on now.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You know? I -- We had an exhibition of art by children in Palestine, art from Gaza, art from the Intifada, you know, throughout that whole period --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- in the late '80s, hosting people, speakers, trying to raise awareness even at that time with the Embassy Cultural House. So, obviously, it became a very strong and embedded within the programming of the Embassy Cultural House. But we actually didn't realize that we were starting on another epic journey with the Embassy Cultural House --

Qanita: Online?

Jamelie: -- after pandemic.

Qanita: Online.

Jamelie: Online.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: That it -- You know, that it would continue, and it would continue. And then it would, you know, it would be involved in publishing. And one day, we're on the phone, and Tariq says, 'So you must have a project that you really want to do, like before anything. What were you thinking about you needed to do?' And I said, 'Well, you know, for Embassy, I really think it would be great to do an anthology.'

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: An anthology that brings together a lot of different contributors. And I was looking at -- Again, I was looking at Stan Douglas' 'Vancouver Anthology'.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: I very -- greatly -- greatly admired that anthology, and they just recently did a reprint of it.

Qanita: Amazing.

Jamelie: So, you know, we had a mission there in terms of a project that we thought we could, you know, bring the community together around, past contributors, more recent contributors.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And have that dimension of what kind of work took place in the Embassy Cultural House. So that is the alternative cultural history of --

Qanita: Of London, Ontario.

Jamelie: -- London, Ontario.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: Art and activism.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: Right?

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: Art and activism.

Qanita: Very cool. Yeah. Like coming together and that kind of -- That just traces, you know, your journeys and your international collaborations, you know, and how those came together at that time.

Jamelie: Mm-hmm. Mm.

Qanita: It's a fantastic book.

Jamelie: Thank you.

Qanita: Yes, it is.

Jamelie: We're very proud of it. And there's only about -- This is my Embassy Cultural House advertisement. There's only about --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- 40 copies left.

Qanita: Oh, wow.

Jamelie: So if you don't have one --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- order one from the Embassy Cultural House.

Qanita: Yeah. No, I think it's -- Also the way you produced that book, could you talk a bit about how that -- Because it's -- Like, your archive is huge. It's immense. How did you consolidate those -- all that work into a book? And it --

Jamelie: Well --

Qanita: -- was basically you guys, you know?

Jamelie: Yeah, we worked with Blessy Augustine, who was doing her PhD in visual art at Western. And was one of our contributing editors. And we also -- The designer was -- is -- was and still is someone we're working very closely with, Olivia Mossuto.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: But we had a list of areas that we were interested in addressing. And by that point in time we felt that there were people who had a really big commitment to seeing this being realized. And we were also trying to sort of bring in surprising aspects, you know, that would even be new to us.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Even though they weren't necessarily our -- in our archives --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- they were totally directly related to activity at the Embassy Cultural House. So, for instance --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- James Reaney who was the art journalism for -- art and culture journalist for the 'London Free Press' in London for a number of years during the period that we were doing the Embassy Cultural House. He wrote and then the accompanying images, like, he's writing on music and odd stories that we have in common.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And, you know, it sort of came out of, like, a situation where I said to him, 'Do you remember this performer King Ganam? He was Lebanese. He was on CBC. He was like -- I grew up listening to his -- him playing the violin and --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- country and western. Do you remember him?' And he just jumped at the opportunity to do the research and to, you know create a narrative and a history about this amazing musician who had, you know, screen time at that time --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- as we were growing up.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And we would gather in the evening to watch it --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- watch him perform in this program. And in relation to that, we had a series of drawings that were done by Don Vincent who actually had a day job at London Life, but he also was a photographer and he did drawings. And he had done a whole series of drawings of performances, music events at --

Qanita: At the -- Mm.

Jamelie: -- Embassy Cultural House. So, you know, there were these surprising things that came together. Like, I did not know that James Reaney, how far he would go with that project on King Ganam.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Since I had this memory of King Ganam playing on my violin.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You know? So I had this kind of immediate memory and connection. He came to London, he was so famous, to cut the ribbon for the opening of the New Market in London.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: And our family was the family that hosted him.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So there was this, you know, across the, you know, generations, this thing going on that had to do with, like, memories that, you know, we had. Like, memories Ron had, you know?

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Tariq had memories. So, you know, we had -- Because he was growing up in the middle of all of this with the Embassy Cultural House.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: And attending a lot of the events.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And that was the other thing about Embassy Cultural House, it was child-friendly. As a lot of people were having children, you couldn't go into a lot of places where events were taking place if alcohol was being served. But we were in the gallery -- The gallery was inside the restaurant.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So, in that case, you could bring a child in --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- to that part of hotel.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And, obviously -- I mean, I used to visit the hotel when I was a kid. So --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- you know, when my dad and mom were part of, you know, running the hotel.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Or they were the ones running the hotel so. The -- You know -- So that -- It's important to say, too, that the Embassy Hotel, it was sold and -- My sister sold the hotel and then there was, like, a lot of tough situation that happened where there was an attack on the hotel. And it was burnt down --

Qanita: Oh.

Jamelie: -- in 2009.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And, actually, it was -- I remember the date, you know? And so a lot of people went down to the site where the fire was.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And so it -- You know, it brought a whole lot of people who knew the hotel for its art -- its art and culture contribution --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- and wanted to say goodbye --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- to this. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah, iconic place in --

Jamelie: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Qanita: -- London, Ontario.

Jamelie: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Qanita: And you actually -- You've done a mural --

Jamelie: Yeah.

Qanita: -- on the current building.

Jamelie: Yes. Well that -- And it's based, actually, on the original watercolour that I painted at that time, in 1978, when my sister took over the running of the hotel.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: And she had commissioned me to do those watercolours. And the whole -- Sorry. The whole series was inside the hotel at one point. And then my sister died and her family wanted to know what to do with -- Well, actually, my sister and I were talking about what to do with the watercolours. And she was not well. And -- But we didn't realize how ill she was and so I didn't realize how important it was to find a home for the watercolours at that moment in time. But Museum London wanted the -- wanted to receive the watercolours into their permanent collection.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So that was the last thing my sister was able to do.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: Yeah. Together with me --

Qanita: Yes. Yes.

Jamelie: -- right? I mean, you know --

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: -- so there was something that was going on there. And, yeah, so we had that relationship that, you know, involved, you know, supporting different kinds of art happening that started with that immediate connection within the family, but went --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- way beyond that.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: And, obviously, Ron's kind of network as well and what he was doing made a -- Because the three of us, Eric Stach with the music, myself, and Ron, we were building our own ways of having an advisory circle come in and work with us. So that became really important that we weren't just ourselves doing it. That we wanted it to have, you know, that particular model of the artist run centre.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: So that decision making and taking curatorial projects, taking hold of them, could happen, we would write for project grants, we never had core funding.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So the activity was always dependant on how well received a particular project was.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: I think we were one of the first spaces in Canada to address the issue of AIDS with the 'Body & Society'. And that was, like, a series of three exhibitions --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- that went on over the month of 1988.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: Three months, rather --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- over 1988.

Qanita: So that was, like, in the middle of the HIV/AIDS --

Jamelie: Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: -- pandemic.

Jamelie: And we brought in people like Douglas Crimp and Simon Watney from the UK --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- in collaboration with Western University.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So there -- And John Greyson and, like, ongoing collaboration with John Greyson with Queer Cinema for Palestine, which is, like, we were the first space to inaugurate that program in Canada.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: Which is now a program that is coming up for the Embassy Cultural House again, June 27th. And that particular program has now grown from, like, 15 cities to more than 60 cities --

Qanita: Hm.

Jamelie: -- internationally. So it's a global --

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: -- initiative. It's a --

Qanita: That's incredible.

Jamelie: -- global initiative.

Qanita: Yeah. Incredible. You know, the sense of the archive --

Jamelie: Yeah.

Qanita: -- is, like, an ongoing theme in your work. And so on -- in April 2025 this year, I listened to a talk of yours at the Jackman Humanities Institute hosted by the Muslims Archive in Canada at the University of Toronto. Titled 'Into the Archive: A Reflection of Muslim Place-making and Art-making'. So -- And just thinking about your -- the book that you recently published, you know, could you talk about, like, the -- your -- the interest in archiving in your practice?

Jamelie: Well, it's -- I don't know if there's one word for it. I mean, it's just a continual engagement with the idea of the archive. And, I mean, a lot of my work does deal with the archive. One of the projects I did in -- was to go into the archives of Claude Levi-Strauss in Paris. That was probably one of the earliest works that I did that directly involved an institutional archive rather than the family archive.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So you have these two relationships going on.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And I really value that relationship between, you know, maintaining my family's archives and, at the same time, you know, the -- what is the institution recognizing? What is the institution believing is an important document or photo to maintain? So I was very excited when the Muslim Archives in Canada contacted me to give a presentation on my work. And my brother Hanny had already donated from his archive from the projects that he'd been involved in with the Muslim community. Because he has a whole other set of archives of -- you know, related -- not necessarily directly related to the archives. And a number of journalists who they are collecting, like, Haroon Siddiqui. They have, like, 28 boxes of Haroon's archives --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- in the office of the archivist who saw it. And I'm going, like, you have Haroon's -- You have Haroon's archives. But, I mean, it's a very small space and yet, you know, the project got funding for, I think, ten years. It's really an important, you know, politically, culturally, geographically enormously important at this juncture in time for Muslims to have a place that is going to care for their archive. And they're not a library, they are an archive.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So they're not really about trying to collect books unless the book is directly related to the archive.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: So the -- So that was, like -- When was that? Twenty-twenty-six. Just a couple of months -- Was it? Yeah, months ago.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: Yes. April.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: Yeah. And -- So from, like, the mid 1980s with the Claude Levi-Strauss to where I went into his archive at the Musee de l'Homme and -- in Paris, while I was in residence there I got permission to go in. From that point in time, I guess, that would be the first piece that really was directly generated from an institution, no archive. And then parallel to that is, like, the work we talked about, 'Meeting Nasser'. Then, of course, there's my own, you know, photographic or slide archive --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- that I have from my travelling days of, you know, wherever I went.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Where I was documenting and photographing. And among that archive, you know, is, like, an, you know, when I had an opportunity to do a billboard on, that's where that image came from.

Qanita: Oh wow.

Jamelie: The Baghdad billboard.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Which, surprisingly, got bought by, you know, an institution. Here it is, a piece of ephemera.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: It was also a postcard. So as a postcard and as a billboard. So it's not some -- They have a digital file now so that it does get installed at the Belkin Art Gallery in -- at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So it's a piece that does come out from time to time.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: And so I was really excited when Scott Watson, who was the director curator at the time, contacted me and asked me what had happened to the billboard because the billboard itself had travelled quite extensively --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- and had been in a number of exhibitions. And even with the postcards, I was able to give the postcards to a truck driver that I met in Amman, Jordan, who was driving to Baghdad. And I asked --

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: -- him to deliver the postcard.

Qanita: That's very cool. The title Jamelie, 'There Was And There Wasn't A City'.

Jamelie: Of Baghdad.

Qanita: Yeah. 'Of Baghdad'. Where -- How did that come about?

Jamelie: In Arabic, it is kan wama kan el medina Baghdad. So it's the way the stories are told in Arabic. So it comes from, like, the 'One Thousand and One Nights' and --

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: -- its relationship to narration. And setting up the how do you tell this story, who is control of that narrative. So in -- on the postcard, it's in Arabic.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: On the back of the postcard.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: I was able, you know, to add more to it --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- in the postcard context.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So, yeah, it -- I -- That was -- I wanted to reference that relationship.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: I had done another billboard. It was actually shown in Havana, Cuba, that also came out of my own photo archives when I was travelling in Iraq. One of the reasons why I wanted to go to Iraq was because of the marshes in Iraq. Because I was really into plant -- water plants, and the marshes, and having grown up around the coast, you know, there were lilies, there were -- All this stuff was there -- a part of my childhood if you can --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You can actually trace it back if you so desired. But when I think about it, it's like a -- We grew up in a -- in a green and, you know, oasis in this -- right in the heart of a city --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- that you wouldn't imagine that these plate pockets of space are in the city in view of where you're growing up.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Or those are places that you trekked as a kid.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And then you realize oh, you're just kind of repeating that. You're going to places where you can repeat that experience in another -- another landscape. And --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- so, for me, I really wanted to go to the southern Iraq where the -- where the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers creates the marshes.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And I had read about it and the [inaudible] -- the -- you know, the houses that were created by the reeds. And so I was very fascinated with this, you know, idea of that project and I was --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- doing a lot of watercolours. And so the Arabic fell, by the way, actually, because I was travelling and I was in a program for foreign -- 'Foreign'. I'm putting quote marks around that. Foreign students, not only Arabic students or Arabic background students to study. So there were -- It was an international community of women in my section and then men. But we were all in the same classroom. But we -- our residences, obviously, were divided.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And so there were people who came from Finland, and from Germany, and from Kuwait, and from different places.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So we lived in a house, you know, where all these different languages were percolating and talking. And we had -- Certainly, we had a lot of freedom. Because we were a group of women who just said, oh, no, they can't tell us that we can't --

Qanita: What to do. Yeah.

Jamelie: -- go 25 kilometres beyond the city of Baghdad.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Was the rule that the ministry -- on the condition of us being there.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: So we didn't live by that rule.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And, you know, so there were journeys that I was able to make.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: Because I was based there and because I just said oh, to hell with that. I'm going to do what I want.

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: Because I don't know when I'm going to be back here again.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: So I went to the north.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: I went to up to the area of Kurdistan and -- which is defined as Kurdistan.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Where the Kurdish population was. And spent time there doing work up there. And I, surprisingly, like, had an exhibition with the Union of Iraqi Artists with all these watercolours --

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: -- that I had done.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Because I had met so many artists in the community --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- by not being overly obsessed with, like, I've got to go to my classes. I've got to do this. I've got to live by the rules.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: I can't do any other way.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: You know, so just by like saying, no, I'm an artist, I'm doing this.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And I remember going to the embassy to pick up my mail, because Ron was in Canada and he would be mailing me, and I'd pick up my mail from the embassy. And they go, 'Are you the artist?' And I go, 'Yeah, I'm the artist.' And then I go the next time, 'Are you the mother?' And I'm like, 'Yes, I'm the mother.' And then the next time I go, 'Are you the student of Arabic?' They didn't realize I was the same person --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- until a few months later. They began to realize, wait a minute --

Qanita: Oh.

Jamelie: -- that's the same -- that's the same person. And so, you know, there was an interest in, like, what is that person doing?

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And, you know?

Qanita: You know, Jamelie, like one of the most romantic things, I think, like truly like romantic was, like, your heart that I feel about you and Ron, is this shared passion with watercolours. And it's so incredible because, like, on the walls of your house you have these two, like, the same scene that you both painted. Like, you know, and I was looking at the album yesterday with this, like, similar scenes like around the world, you know? And how you, like, capture it both in your own way. And I feel that that just says so much. It speaks so much to your relationship, you know, together. Like, that you both share this passion for art and for watercolours. But you give yourself, like, each other the space to do that how you feel that you, you know, should. And it's just -- It's very beautiful to see. Yeah. And, yeah, I'm just amazed that you -- You know, like, did you -- Just technically, do you influence each other? Like do you -- The way that Ron paints leaves, for example, is phenomenal. He has such an eye. I feel that -- Like, it looks like fingers, like the fingers of a plant, you know? And the way that, like, you paint water. It's just totally -- Like, you can see that you, you know, you're like deeply individual, like, in the way that you, like, express a landscape through paint. What has -- Like, what has been the influence between the two of you? Like, you have the most, like, beautiful -- one of the most, like, beautiful relationships.

Jamelie: Thank you so much. Yeah, I always like to do watercolours. And one of our early trips together, I was in Mexico, and, you know, it takes time. You're sitting there, you're looking, you know, you're feeling everything around you. And Ron had a notebook, so he was really into writing at that time and drawing. And so he was fine sitting there while I was doing a watercolour. And Tariq was certainly fine puttering around doing what he wanted to do and experience the world -- you know, the -- You know, we're experiencing the world

with him as well as a child at that point in time. So, you know, I think he thought it was okay, but he didn't really think it was worth his time at the beginning. An anyone can do a watercolour kind of attitude. And I remember the moment. I just said, 'You think it's so easy?' I threw the brush at him. And then I threw the paper at him. And I said, 'Do a watercolour, see how easy it is.' And that's the first watercolour is that volcano, Colima Volcano, that you saw.

Qanita: Wow. Yes.

Jamelie: Then he gave me that watercolour.

Qanita: That was 1976 or '78.

Jamelie: Yeah, '76, I think. Yeah.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: Yeah, '78, '76, yeah.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: Yeah, so that was his first watercolour. But I had been doing watercolours and, you know, part of it had to do with, like, time limitations for me doing a big work. Or I just loved watercolours and the ability to, like, pick up, and sit down, and do a work. And just everything that's going on around you. Like, I did a whole lot of work in the fishing village of Port Stanley on Lake Erie. Because I was actually doing an installation about water plants. And I got close to this family that has Moore Water Gardens and very famous water -- They actually cultivated the Lotus in Canada.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: Yeah. So I had that in my installation. It was 'Swamp in the Forest City'. And, you know, so from that in the late '70s on I was going out to Moore Water Gardens to paint out there, and to Lake Erie. We used to cottage out there. And that harkened as well back to my childhood because it was one of the closest beach towns that families would go to.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And my dad liked Port Stanley so we used to go to that. And turns out that Ron's family also liked Port Stanley and they used to go out there.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So there was, like, a lot of interconnections in --

Qanita: Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: -- you know, in our childhood memories and things. So we have done a lot of work in local locations but also afar. And there's something about sitting in a place and observing that place. And Ron's technique is completely different than mine because he's engineering kind of drawing type of work.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: It's very formal.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: And whereas mine is a lot more spontaneous.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Like, I hardly use a pencil.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: He uses a pencil.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So there are these -- Like sometimes --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- I use a pencil if it's a little more complicated for me --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- architecturally if the situation is in that --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- context.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: But sometimes a watercolour, having been like in a place like Campeche in Mexico where I studied Spanish and lived there for a while. You know, the place that we stayed at, it had a courtyard of palms and I painted that courtyard of palms as a watercolour. And then, like, I was right in the middle of the courtyard. Well, when Ron painted that same courtyard, like, he's above and looking at it from the door.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So there's a completely different --

Qanita: Perspective.

Jamelie: -- way -- perspective and way of it.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And then later on, that watercolour actually became a large installation work --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- in clay.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So a ceramic mural, actually --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- that is actually -- is here at Western.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Installed in --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- University College.

Qanita: Cool.

Jamelie: So there is this connection, right? I mean, in terms of, like, a watercolour lays down a way of thinking about a place, a way of bringing that into space. And maybe it will be a much larger project, not necessarily.

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: But, you know, the potential is always there. And if it --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- resides with you for a -- enough time then, of course, you, you know, you try to do it.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And for a number of years that mural, like, was banging around the studio. And they're giant ceramic panels. Like, all -- Like, on the scale of, like, Babylon, you know?

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: Marian architects. I don't know. It's just, like, really --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- big tiles.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Two thousand pounds of clay, like, we're talking.

Qanita: Wow.

Jamelie: So that got delivered, and worked on, and that -- From a small watercolour.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So the relationship to the watercolour is also part of, you know, realizing something larger in -- possibly in the future, but not necessarily. And it was also -- I think I mentioned to you earlier in one of our conversations that sometimes I -- Well, I had a studio that didn't have any heat. So it was really important to get away in the winter. You know?

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: We had a wood stove, that was it.

Qanita: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Jamelie: It was an old -- Well, the building is torn down. I mean, that's sort of what was happening to a lot of great spaces where artists like to live and work.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So I would always sort of try to create a scenario where I had worked really hard, raised some money, and then with that -- And sometimes our -- And sometimes people who were interested in the fact that I was travelling to these places would actually pay me in advance for the watercolour and -- in the confidence that I was going to come back with a watercolour that they wanted.

Qanita: And then you would use that on your travels, like, the money [inaudible].

Jamelie: Yes. Yes.

Qanita: Yeah. Yeah.

Jamelie: That would support me --

Qanita: Yes.

Jamelie: -- being away for five or six months at a time.

Qanita: Wow. Yeah.

Jamelie: Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: Yeah.

Qanita: Amazing. That's -- Yeah. That's very beautiful. You know, like, in closing, you know, I feel that, like, everything that the Embassy Cultural House does, you know, like especially your current work is closely, like, aligned with, you know, a new generation of artists. And putting out or sharing, like, your experiences. And you're very, very generous in that way. So, like, could you speak a bit about how, like, important that is to you at this, you know, like time as an artist and what that means?

Jamelie: Well, we definitely work on the principle of intergenerational and grew up in that intergenerational context. So I love to have young people take control and then start telling me what needs to be done. I would actually prefer that, you know.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Like, they have technology, they have a way of thinking through issues and problems that they're facing. And, like, let us remember that it was founded at the second iteration. The re-emergence of the Embassy Cultural House was during the pandemic. So it was a gathering space digitally.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And that definitely created the opportunity for younger people to join us in a way through internships. And those internships resulted in credits for them. So we took it really seriously. And we thought you're not going to get this -- you might not get this over there. But --

Qanita: Yeah.

Jamelie: -- you'll get it here.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: You might not have the opportunity to understand what is your relationship to Indigenous culture?

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Right now, what is it? Do you know about the Woodland Cultural Centre? So that would become, like, a continuing part of our relationship was the Woodland Cultural Centre at Six Nations right from the beginning. Like, and one of the last projects that we did at the Embassy Cultural House --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- was about the Oka Crisis. And it went from Embassy Cultural House's organization to the Woodland Cultural Centre at Six Nations.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: So the kind of dialogue and, you know, we would do these carpooling trips --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- and delegations. And we called them delegations. We're making a delegation. We'd be met by originally Patricia Deadman, who died last year.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: Unfortunately, we lost a really important artist in our community. Very tragically, suddenly. But we had that relationship already established.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And we wanted to continue it with the new people at the Woodland Cultural Centre. So that was part of it is that these trips were being, you know, organized through Embassy Cultural House to bring that experience through that contact. And always --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- there was, like, a connection to food. Like, we're -- Have to have a good meal.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: We have to sit down and, you know, like take our time.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: We have to -- We had a mantra, it was like no pressure.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: And still we -- Even though we're where we are now, six years on, I still feel that it's a really important thing to remember to take care of each other and to say damn it, no pressure.

Qanita: Yes. Yes.

Jamelie: You know, like you --

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: -- have to take -- You have to take a pause, you have to take a -- And it didn't -- You know, like other things came up with it. When Embassy stopped programming, other things did happen, other relationships happened. And the intergenerational dynamic, it was real. It wasn't like just speaking, you know, in a rhetorical sense.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: I mean, our grandson did the animation of our logo. So, you know, there -- it's -- I don't think of it as a -- kind of, like, a nepotistic family project.

Qanita: Mm.

Jamelie: It's more like, oh, you're such a creative person. And let's open that door and keep that door open. And that's something that Tariq used to say, 'Oh, just keep telling people that door is open.'

Qanita: Mm. Yeah. Oh, fantastic. Thank you so much, Jamelie. It's been so exceptional. Thank you so much. It's been wonderful.

Jamelie: Well, thank you.

Qanita: Thank you.

Jamelie: Oh, Qanita. Wow.

Qanita: Amazing. Oh my goodness. Whoa. Jamelie.

Jamelie: I teared up. I teared up.

[Music]

Qanita: Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Very Special thanks to my guest Jamelie Hassan for speaking with us today.

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[Music]