

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

Transcript of Episode #3: Our Stories Are Our Journeys

SPEAKERS

Qanita Lilla (host), Sebastian De Line (guest)

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Hello and welcome to *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*. I'm your host, Qanita Lilla. This podcast runs alongside Agnes' exhibition of the same name. The show, *With Opened Mouths*, interrogates conventional museum practices. It asks if objects that originate outside Western knowledge-making systems can find their voices in new ways. In this podcast, I sit down with artists, musicians, curators, and spoken-word poets to discuss the expression of their practice and to find out what inspired them to open their mouths and to be heard.

[Music]

Today, I'm very fortunate to be joined by my colleague, Sebastian De Line. Sebastian is an artist and an Associate Curator at Agnes Etherington Art Centre. He/they also works as a teaching fellow for the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Queen's University. His/their doctoral research focuses on the manufacturing of capitalist values and economies that transform agential, Indigenous and racialized Ancestors into labouring objects of extraction, accumulation, and consumption determined by the acquisition criteria within museum collections. His/their publications include *The Journal Official Cultures* and *Junctures*.

Hi Sebastian, how are you doing today?

Sebastian De Line: Hi Qanita. Hey.

Qanita Lilla: There you are.

Sebastian De Line: Hey, there I am. Thanks for inviting me.

Qanita Lilla: It's a pleasure. I would like you to introduce yourself since I introduced you.

Sebastian De Line: Oh yeah. Great. Hi everyone. I'm Sebastian De Line, as Qanita had shared earlier. I am a newly appointed Associate Curator at the Agnes Etherington. Previously, I was a Research Associate, and I primarily work with the Indigenous collections and in building

relationships with community in terms of care for the Ancestors in the collection and in their return, and in the ways in which community -- taking community-centred, community-led approach to the care of their Ancestors that are currently housed at the Agnes Etherington. So that's, you know, the bulk of what I'm working on here at the Agnes, as well as in the future, working on some curatorial projects. So, thank you so much for inviting me to join you today.

Qanita Lilla: Thanks, Sebastian. I always, I like to start with, you know, going back into people's life to see how it is that they came to be the people they are and the creators they are. Could you tell me a bit about growing up?

Sebastian De Line: Oh, my goodness. Yeah. Where does one start? I don't know about you, but if anyone asked me when I was younger, if I -- you know, what my life plan was, I don't think at that point I would've told you that I was going to be a curator or even an artist actually, probably at that point. So, my life, like some people have -- has taken a bit of a windy trajectory to where it has become -- you know, where I am at this point today. But I started out early on, in my 20s, actually, as a craftsperson. I was making shoes and I did that for nearly 20 years. And then that evolved into design, which evolved then into going to art school and moving more into other installations, sculpture and visual art, and now a little bit more actually performance is kind of the direction it's going at this point. So multimedia and from there the trajectory has shifted also to include interest in academia and theory and curation. So, I don't know about you Qanita, how your direction was, into your doctorate, but I'd love to hear about that too, if you --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. I'm fascinated by the shoes, Sebastian. I've always -- you know, I think that, yeah, they're part of our stories that we kind of, you know, don't think are as important. You know, especially when you are in academia, you kind of focus on things that make sense at a particular time, but that -- but the shoe story, you've got to tell me how you ended up making shoes. It's a very unusual craft.

Sebastian De Line: Yeah, that's true. Everybody always wants to know about the shoes. [laughter] Well, we all have them. We all -- most of us need them. So, you know, that was a big part of it too, right? It was when I was finishing high school, you know, like some people, I really didn't know what I wanted to study in university. And, you know, the thought of going to university at that point at a young age and not knowing what I would focus on, and seeing people that I knew end up with very large student loans afterward, and which, you know, they're paying for, you know, a decade of their student loans and still winding up with a degree that they were not necessarily happy with or didn't end up leading them to a career in which, you know, was meaningful, didn't sound for me, at the time, like a good decision. And what I knew then was that what I was seeking was competency. And so that -- that's how I actually started getting into shoes, is that I first went to trade school and I studied sheet metal. And I found that it was easy to pick it up, but it missed, like that creative aspect of it. And I actually became bored quite quickly. And so, it was a friend of mine that suggested, you know, we were talking about different professions and different trades, that said, "Well, you know," we're kind of tossing different ideas around. And she said, "Well, what about shoemaking?" And I thought, wow, that sounds very kind of a dying art, you know, in Canada [laughter] as not many people

pursue that, you know. And so, I didn't actually know how I'd go about it, but I, you know, I remember saying to her that, "I'll give anything a shot at this point, you know, for six months and to determine whether or not it's a good fit for me." And the rest was history. You know, it took a while to get a job in that field. I started out repairing shoes and I worked for a Dutch Canadian employer who came from a long line of shoemakers and had moved to Canada when he was young with his wife and took over a business for a man that was retiring in Vancouver. And then so, he ran that shop there. They ended up staying and raising their children here. And so, from that, I ended up later on moving to Europe and working for his family, who are all shoemakers on both their sides. So I worked for his sister and brother-in-law, who were sixth generation shoemakers. So that was the -- what they had said was that's the best place to go to learn if I really wanted to learn the actual craft from start to finish, because, you know, we don't have a shoemaking school in Canada, so. And shoe design is kind of its own other trajectory. It wasn't centred necessarily on the craft. And I, at that point, I really, I enjoyed -- what I've enjoyed about shoemaking was that there's so many different aspects to the craft. I never got bored. You know, so there's pattern making, and then there's also the sewing of the uppers and the finishing of it. And then there's the soling. And eventually, I got into the last making, which is what I ended up specializing in later in my career. I worked in orthopedics a lot, and so.

Qanita Lilla: Sebastian, who wears handmade shoes? Who -- I mean, it's an amazing idea. It's lovely that you can, you know, go to somebody and have your foot fitted for your own particular pair of shoes, but who, like in reality, besides people who have like medical conditions and stuff, who are these people?

Sebastian De Line: Yeah. In reality nowadays who makes handmade -- well, it's -- okay, if I -- the theorist in me has other answers. [laughter] Really, we can get into the whole complicatedness of actually the handmadeness of factory manufactured shoes. But I think where you're going with it, yeah, primarily the people that can afford shoes that are handmade, like bespoke shoemaking, are generally people that have -- are of a higher income, that they can afford to buy those kind of shoes. But, yeah, primarily nowadays, the bulk of who buys bespoke shoes are actually orthopaedic clients, you know, and that was the field that I worked in. And even that shift in Europe, I had heard a lot from other colleagues in the industry that there was a big transformation that actually happened in the 20th century, it moved from bespoke to orthopedics because of insurance. And so large countries like Germany and the Netherlands who have orthopaedic shoemaking, you know, covered by insurance, that was -- that was a -- there was a big move in the industry towards that direction. So that is primarily who buys handmade shoes nowadays. Yeah. Or like clients with diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis, and leg shortages and other needs that require that, that go beyond the capacity of the conventional shoemaking.

Qanita Lilla: How did you make the transition from shoemaking into conceptual art?

Sebastian De Line: That -- but that was art school [laughter]. Yeah. Yeah. I went to art school in the evenings when I was working as a shoemaker. So I used to work in a factory in the mornings, and then I would go to school at night. There was an adult, you know, mature student program.

I did a BFA for five years, and a lot of the artists that taught the course were also interested in conceptual art. And the school I went to in Amsterdam was called the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, but it was -- had a lot of conceptual artists there and in their interests. So they never taught craft in that way. They always said, "You've got to go out and learn that yourself." They just expected you to be more autonomous in that way. But in the school itself, they didn't focus on that. They focussed on teaching what art is and all the kind of more theoretical questions around art in order to contextualize what we were doing.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: And then, so that's how I ended up taking that trajectory.

Qanita Lilla: But did you somehow -- were you able to transfer your kind of craft-like skills? I mean, you have -- I mean, I'm sure you did, and you were in the field for 20 years, you know, and, you know, like how did you translate that from doing something that was so particular, you know, handmade, like it had to just be perfect. How did you translate that? How did that kind of fit together, you know, like the physicality that you were used to, you know, working with and kind of translating those kinds of things into ideas, perhaps you can kind of talk around like a show that you did or some particular like works or pieces?

Sebastian De Line: You know, maybe in a way, I feel like I kind of took a different trajectory in the sense that I saw art school as a place that I could try other things, you know. I saw it as a way that it could open up my practice, that I wouldn't -- that what it had become at that point. So, kind of fixed in a certain process of making shoes that then it was actually very hard when I started art school to open up my mind a lot more and expand my practice to something that, yeah, was very, you know, with making shoes, it is so tied to the function that, you know -- you know, mind you, there are other shoe designers that designed first from a conceptual basis and then try to manifest it, let's say, materially. But because my practice first was grounded in the craft, I could never free myself entirely from it. I always, you know, whenever conceptualizing something, I've tried to imagine how it would be made, what it would be made with, and, you know, that I had been keeping the engineering of it in mind all the time and the ergonomics of it. And, you know, biomechanics was always my background as an orthopaedic shoemaker. So, in that sense, it was actually challenging when I went to art school to -- even when I remember many moments I've had in my life where I thought that I would -- was somewhat free from it in my practice, there are always people that still remind me that there's an aspect of a shoe still in a lot of the, you know, sculptures I make and stuff like that, even if I don't see it myself. And so, you know, sometimes I actually feel a little bit kind of kicking myself, you know. [laughter]

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. No, but I'm sure that it's just, it's so deeply buried that it's subliminal. It must be. You know, it's kind of like, if you -- like for example, I was taught fairly early, like how to cook, like at 10 years old because I had to kind of help everybody out, and we had a big family and so forth. And then later, like, you know, in my 20s, I was like, "No, you know, this is not a woman's role. This has like been stifling me, like completely." But, you know, in my heart of hearts, it's something that I really love and enjoy, you know? So it's kind of like trying to find a balance between the things that, you know, you choose and the things that are like inherently there.

They just like part of like it's -- and it's beyond us. It's kind of like ancestral, even, you know, like the kind of things that we were taught or that we just genetically programmed into doing or something, you know. I really get that sense and, you know, the things that we kind of have to also just like make peace with, you know, kind of move beyond those things. So I can definitely understand why they just said that it comes back. I mean, the shoe is just -- it's just such an incredible kind of metaphor for, you know, life's journeys and things. And it was an amazing place for you to start, you know? Yeah. And also, I don't believe it's, you know, these things kind of fall from nowhere, you know. They just must've been something that made you like, so attuned, you know, to that. So, like what do you think -- like, what was a particular project at that time that you felt proud of?

Sebastian De Line: I, you know, I have -- I tend to try to tie things together. So, my mind is trying to tie everything together a little bit, which is why I'm just taking a moment to pause.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. Oh, it's fine.

Sebastian De Line: But -- because I'm thinking about what you're saying, you know, about how maybe sometimes when we come into learning something that is a labour, you know, and we might not -- there's kind of that tension of appreciating the joy of it or the artistic part of like, let's say with cooking, you know, but it's never, you know, inseparable from the consciousness of being a woman and labouring, and that kind of form of domestic labour, you know. But there might be moments of like, I can imagine, I love cooking too. Like when you're, you know -- it's highly creative, you know, to be able to, but then, you know, when you're cooking for your family, there are just days where you're really tired and --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- you know, you might not have the creative capacity to --

Qanita Lilla: Oh yes, yes. And it's going to be kind of fish burgers in the microwave.

Sebastian De Line: Yeah. [laughing]

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. It's kind of been going like that.

Sebastian De Line: I feel like the shoemaking journey was a bit like that in a different sense that, you know, like getting back to like maybe, you know, being young and not growing up with a kind of competency. And then I lost my father when I was very young. And so, growing up and not having someone around to kind of teach me that sort of tradition of a craft or what, you know, what your parents would pass down to you. I'll get to that part of the story later, because actually my mother is an artist, so I ended up inheriting in a way her tradition --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- as a narrative, but I didn't start out in that direction. You know, I think I leaned towards wanting to learn what I was missing. Right? And so, and part of that was, I think

part of my healing journey and learning, you know, was to carry on as a young adult and find a way to take care of myself that I could live and work anywhere, everywhere, everyone needs shoes. Right? And that was part of, I think, you know, the psychological, at least, impetus behind picking a craft like that, that I could carry that competency wherever I went and take care of myself, and finding joy in it, you know, where those moments were finding the joy and the creative aspect of it that allowed it to become much more, you know. And there was that kind of, I definitely went through a period in the years I studied and made shoes too. I think I was interested in a kind of self-mastery, you know, and I liked that this craft, everyone that I know who makes shoes, it's a lifelong journey, and no one ever becomes in that. I would argue to say that most people are never fully a master at making shoes because there's so many different aspects to learn about it. You can constantly improve, you know, and so we're -- when you meet other shoemakers, you're sharing tips and tricks and, you know, you're constantly learning better ways to make things more refined and et cetera, you know? So, there's -- it's a long learning curve, you know?

Qanita Lilla: That's great.

Sebastian De Line: I missed, sorry, the second part of the question.

Qanita Lilla: I can't remember -- I can't remember. I was just thinking how, you know, like for myself, I went to art school almost on the opposite, kind of -- with the opposite kind of impulse not to do something practical, like not to, because I felt that, you know, like when I was at school, I got introduced to art and I thought -- and to museums and I thought this is like a completely new world that I just never understood existed or, you know, at all and was very foreign. Like my family is very traditional but luckily, they let me kind of do this somehow because my dad felt, you know, you kind of had the same, said girls needed to be educated, which was incredible, you know, coming from a really kind of a traditional person. And so, when I went into art school, it was so peculiar because it was a very, a highly traditional classical art school. And I was -- I also came into it like from I just had no experience like growing, plus the costs, you know, like [Michaelangelo's] *David*, and, you know, all these, you know, the time slavery and all these crazy things that, you know, where kind of transposed into Africa. And then also life-drawing, you know, naked domestic workers. It was just all this kind of -- and it was so alien and alienating that I found solace in theory because I felt I was kind of hidden there, you know, like my -- and I was safe. It was kind of like a safe space to practice and kind of develop my ideas and, you know, the art classes -- art history classes were so enormous, it was almost like a thousand students. And like, you never wrote your name on a script, so nobody knew who you were, which was fantastic for me, you know, because I would always stand out when I was in that lecture hall, you know. It was like 99.9% White, so people could always see me, but when I wrote, nobody knew who I was. So it was, you know, this kind of like freedom in, you know, being anonymous. But then, yeah, it's really, really interesting, like, you know, this fact that you felt that you needed to do something that people needed, you know, which is so important. I felt that people needed to -- like I needed to be in a space where people could just like hear my voice, even if I -- you know, with just reading what I have to say, just because of the kind of traditional constraints like on me and, you know, the racial constraints and all of those kinds of

things. Yeah. And I think it's interesting because mostly people find that space in creative art, you know, like you kind of went through like to conceptual art and found that kind of freedom, and that you're kind of struggling with those, you know, constraints that I was introduced to right in the beginning and thought, "No, this is like absolutely not for me. I cannot do this because I'm kind of fighting too many barriers besides my own kind of incompetency, because I just don't have the background," you know?

Sebastian De Line: Yeah. You know, you're reminding me of is in a different sense, when I was working in the factory and studying art at night, I remember most people where we all worked there were all immigrants, most of us, because living in the Netherlands, I think probably about over 75% of the craftspeople working there were folks of colour, you know, from different Dutch-colonized homelands that came there with their families. And so, I can identify in a way, what you're talking about, as theory being a kind of solace and freedom to it that, you know, when I would be sitting, sometimes I would listen to podcasts or I would listen to lectures a lot on, you know -- in my ear buds and on YouTube, and be able to dream, you know, and listen to philosophers. And while I was, you know, standing in the factory, it felt like it was a freedom, you know, that I could dream bigger and how to get out of there, you know, because of the classism and the racism. Whereas I felt like when I was making shoes, part of that what had helped me go to, you know, pursuing academia was because some of the barriers that I experienced in that industry, you know, where I was never promoted for jobs, and I had the highest education in the factory by -- with my BFA, and then my MA, I did there too. And I could never even get a job as a, you know, just a supervisor or anything outside of that craft. It was very masculine. It was very male. There were only a couple of women shoemakers that worked there. And so, there was a lot of sexism and homophobia, and transphobia, and it was, you know, very racist. So, it was challenging. And I hear you in that way, like there was that, you know, there were moments where I could be in my own little world with my earbuds on, you know, and, you know, listen to my favourite theorist at the time or people talking about art and it was the gap, the class gap between my colleagues, really, I noticed increased a lot over time. Like sometimes, you know, I think after my second degree, my colleagues still never really understood what I was doing and they kind of equated it to doing Sunday painting classes. So sometimes they'd ask me, "Are you still --"

Qanita Lilla: Doing that thing?

Sebastian De Line: -- doing that painting?"

Qanita Lilla: Oh, yeah. No, no, no. Like I get that totally. Like, I got that from my grandmother, from my parents. Like, "Are you still doing this thing?"

Sebastian De Line: This art thing, like --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah, like, you know and it's yeah, like basically anything -- like, nothing is basically worth doing, unless you can -- you -- it's employed. You know, you -- it makes you employable. And I completely understand that. I completely, you know, understand that like coming from my mother, who she left school at 14 because she had like seven siblings to kind of help take care

of. And it's just, yeah, like why would I? Why would I like write the papers that nobody pays me for? Like what -- you know, like my grandmother, you know, she was like, "When are you going to have children at 24, 26, like high time?" you know, those -- you know, those kinds of things. And yeah, but you know, theory kind of just does -- it gives you that space. It gives you that space to be, you know, like a potential of who it is that you imagine. And then like curation like opens up a whole new field, you know, to actually making that visible, those ideas, like trying to -- and try to share it with like new audiences and people who might never have thought about seeing things the way that you, you know, can show them.

Sebastian De Line: Yeah. I think that was part of one of the -- I mean, I have a different appreciation of art now than I did when I was young, because, you know, when my mom, after my dad passed away, you know, my mom raised my brother and I, and she was an artist, and actually went to art school and did her BFA. But watching her struggle as a single mom and not being able to then choose her career, you know, and have to put that aside to raise us and take a "normal job," that was a big deterrent or a discourager, you know, for me getting into the arts later on, because to see her not be able to, you know, finish pursuing her dream at the sacrifice of taking care of us, you know. So, you know, and growing up and having family members too that would say, "That's not going to make you any money." And like, "That's not going to put any food on the table. Why do you want to be an artist or yeah, draw on Sunday, but get a 9 to 5 job?", you know, and having that 9 to 5 job, but then feeling really impinged by it and not feeling that it really nourished my growth and my spirit. You know, that was that shift. And I don't know about how it was like for you, but I think maybe it was that being also supported enough, you know, by my mom too, to pursue that even though it seemed impractical, you know, and a little bit risky probably for them, you know, risky for her in that regard of, I, you know, definitely think like she saw it as a kind of investment in her children, you know, to not have to struggle the same way that she did, you know. And it's been a long, long journey [laughter] --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- you know, only now kind of finding its legs and where that leads.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. Like totally. Like I could completely and totally understand. It's not, you know -- I mean, like you too, I had to work. I had to work like long hours because I had to support myself. And so, it takes long. It takes like really, really long, you know, and life happens, things happen, children happen, relationships happen. You know, and I just -- this kind of idea that you kind of have to, like, as a woman, lock yourself away in a nunnery and do your PhD, and then you kind of emerge, you know, and you know, suddenly you kind of have like an epiphany, and then you kind of get, you know, chosen to go and teach somewhere. It's just, it's completely alien and impractical, and never -- most of the people I know, it just doesn't work like that at all. You kind of just, you struggle and struggle, and struggle, and you know, every now and then you get like a break and an opening, and like encouragement, like from people, you know, who, yeah, who've kind of been through, you know, on the same path or, you know, kind of tell you that you're not insane, basically, because they're just so -- there's so few people who you kind of

you can like aspire to whose life you can kind of, you know, follow. It's just, yeah. But yeah, I just -- like, after, you know, many years, like in my community museums, because in South Africa, like after '94 with like apartheid being disbanded, there was this, you know, increased appreciation for people telling their own stories and telling their own histories. So, it was a really exciting time to be like involved in museums. But then I realized that, you know, I was always telling other people's stories also, you know, that that -- and that was good, you know, in a way, except that there was like limited resources. And as time went on, you know, those kind of resources kind of got more and more like constrained. And I felt, no ways. Like, I, you know, surely, like I need my own space to be able to kind of develop my own ideas. And yeah, that was like with two kids and both of them say now, you know, "You would like really -- you were like a bad person at that time. Like during your PhD, you were like a terror, just don't -- you know, when you go and work, please, don't become a terror again," because it was just it's so like emotionally taxing, you know, but I just had to go through that. I had to go through that and that's insane. It's insane to have to go through that process to just tell yourself you're okay, like you -- like, just to validate your existence, that's insane, but that's just kind of what I felt I needed to do. And, you know, I'm like at peace with all the mess and all the, you know, the broken stories, and things that just don't make sense, you know, in my life, because that's just what it is. It is what it is.

Sebastian De Line: Yeah. They say that a lot, how PhDs are really very hard on families. You know, it's a really challenging time when you have a partner and children, it's a lot for the whole family.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: You know, goes along on the ride, you know? So, to be finally, you know, of that long investment free of that, you know, but still the reality of what it is to do the actual job is a lot different. Like you said, you know --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- then the fantasy of what it means to become the scholar. You know.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. So, like you -- we left off at you like, you know, pursuing like a bachelor's and master's in fine arts, and then like you continued. So, you're busy with a PhD, you're busy with Agnes. And so, let's talk a bit about that. Just a bit about how you kind of found your feet in a different way.

Sebastian De Line: Yeah. Well, when I was finishing my MA, I was -- it was part of my thesis, was I was interested in stories by Cornplanter, and I realized that being in Europe, you know, I had a great supervisor, but that wasn't her specialty, you know. Her specialty was feminist Marxism, and labour, and art. And so, she could only support me to a certain degree, but I realized if I really wanted to continue to learn more about the things they cared about that were related to my dad's culture, being a Mohawk, and that I needed to go home --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- if I wanted to learn more about that and I needed to be in community. And those were things that I missed out on growing up and I didn't grow up on the territory. And so, yeah, it just seemed like the natural thing, actually, to come back to Turtle Island and to put my roots back here, you know, and to be able to learn about our culture. So, that's why I ended up actually taking that turn after I finished my MA, then it seemed like, "Okay, I really got a taste for theory and I know I got the theory bug," so now I wanted to go on, you know, and pursue that more but I needed to be grounded in home, you know, and learn that from here. So, that's how I ended up coming to Queen's. It's 'cause I had extended family that lived in the region. And so, I felt like if I applied here also, I could learn Mohawk in university, which is amazing. I never got a chance to learn that growing up in Vancouver. And then I had cousins and my cousin's family, you know, were close by, so I could go visit. And, you know, when I had time off, I could go on even with the family and, you know, just feel I had some support, you know. I wasn't alone. And through that, you know, I started doing my PhD in Cultural Studies, which is the program that I'm in now on, a candidate in Cultural Studies. So, with Cultural Studies, you know, the -- there is -- it is kind of a natural fit a lot of times with art theory and visual culture. And so, my -- the theory that I studied in my MA was grounded in Cultural Studies because a lot of the professors work at Goldsmiths and then they were adjuncts at the Dutch Art Institute, which is where I did my MA. So, having that kind of, I want to say unofficially a Goldsmiths' stamp, but a number of them coming, you know, working at Goldsmiths, it was very much kind of grounded in Cultural Studies. So that was a kind of a natural fit to apply for those kinds of programs. And it gave me, you know, the freedom to be able to focus on subject matter that related to art and have a practice if I wanted to do a research creation kind of project or like the artistic research while I pursued, you know, a longer dissertation, which was something that I wanted to learn, which is to write a lengthier, you know, written document of research, to learn how to write also the craft of writing, right, and the craft of writing theory in that way. So, I guess there would go back to that theme, again, of being interested in some form of a craft of its different mediums. And with the Agnes, you know, actually the Agnes originally approached me a couple of years ago and asked if I'd be interested in pursuing a position as a research associate, and they wanted to spend time more dedicated to Indigenous collections and the lack of documentation about a lot of the Ancestors in the collection. And as part of the one of the things that we talked about if I were to apply to that position, and when that came up, was that what I had been interested in, too, was that well, it was important to me that we also focused on repatriation and repatriation, and that was -- that would be a part of it. Just how -- you know, how I have been taught and what I know for our communities what's important to us. And so, I was very pleased, you know, to hear that they were very open to that. They didn't actually have anyone on staff that was dedicated to the -- you know, what that entails and I didn't have experience in doing that. I have learnt on the job and I still am. And I have a lot of community support, thankfully. So, we've set up ways in which it's not focused on me, but I found that my role in doing that has been to bring community in. So, one of the things, you know, we have is an Indigenous Arts Advisory Circle that we set up last year that was, you know, our discussion and what our focuses are, annually. And so, we've been starting that work. And so, they are who I turn to. And then when we have projects that people bring to the museum,

like other, say, professors that, you know, want to invite their students to engage with the collection or graduate students who are interested in projects that involve conservation or autonomous studies. And that's what my job has become, is to bring them together with our own people to be able to hear from them what our needs are, our community's needs are, then getting -- guide that process rather than the other way around, which is, you know, commonly the way in which things are operated in museums, where especially in the logics of museums and the logics of universities, you know, where research is often something that is someone's idea within the Institute, and then thinking that that might serve community. It's -- so we try to take an approach the other way around. So yeah, that's how I ended up here.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. I'm interested, you know, in your bio, you mentioned that you're interested in how Indigenous Ancestors are transformed into labouring objects of extraction. That's really interesting. Could you talk a bit about that?

Sebastian De Line: Yeah, sure. Maybe with that, I'll try not to use such inaccessible language as I wrote in my bio [laughter]. Basically, what I'm interested in, is I'm interested in ways in which different Indigenous and racialized communities, how communities understand their own Ancestors. And what I -- what we mean by that is that not only when you think of the word ancestor oftentimes if you know the word, we're referring to human Ancestors, so human remains, but, you know, from my culture and from many other cultures, a lot of people understand Ancestors to mean also what the Western logics are often referred to as "artifacts" or "objects." So, non-human beings, you know, that are embodied in a different way. And so, when we think about it from those kinds of perspectives, which is at the heart of my dissertation too is basically, you know, referring in different ways to our different cultures, having that understanding of that aliveness of relatives in museum collections that's really counter to this kind of Western logics of objectivity and objecthood. Then when we understand that, we can see in other ways in which they're performing a form of labour as well, you know, within collections, within exhibitions and what does it then mean to be alive and to be remembered, and known, and have a role in community, but being not in community, but then being extracted from community and being accumulated, you know, within collections and archives, and performing a certain kind of function, right, and creating validity, right, or having value extracted from them, like from their -- literally their embodiment, you know, within those collections, has been the focus of my interest in telling those stories, you know, and telling the way -- telling the story in which the way at how that operates and how that is counter to the ways in which they live and how the repercussions of those choices and the harm, the impact that it has on them in their, oftentimes, inability to be returned home, are the moment before return, you know --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- and what they're doing in that -- in those places. So, yeah, what it leads a lot of, you know, in that direction, in that way too, when we, like, when we're -- you know, those Ancestors that were also connected to those ancestral -- those Ancestors in the museum, their embodiment, let's say, as a mask, or, you know, as a ceremonial pipe, or as medicines, as beings

that questionably are not necessarily -- well, they may be highly artistic, you know, and highly, you know, highly beautiful in that way that they really need, you know, with the creator's breath in mind, their, you know, their purpose in life was not to be a "artwork," you know, in a museum. Right? They serve another role, right --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- in their societies. And so, you know, and those spirits that are still connected to them that lived with them in that period that they were alive, and that have used them and that made them, and passed them down to their relatives and, you know, they still have a connection to them. And so, the way I've come to understand things is that when they're awakened to perform labour, you know, in museums, like, say, on exhibition or even on a permanent display in a vitrine, you know, in which they're then awakened, you know, then it's really activating and not giving rest to those spirits that are connected to them because most of them, right, they were found -- you know, they've been on earth, right, from a lot of them from burial places. Right? And where spirit was meant to be resting at that point, you know, and not being called upon to labour, you know --

Qanita Lilla: To do stuff.

Sebastian De Line: -- certainly not in that way. Right?

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. So, how do Indigenous people experience these collections? Do they feel as if they are living Ancestors?

Sebastian De Line: I mean, people have different beliefs, so that's something that I have to preface. You know, I can't speak for every nation. Every nation has their own understandings and protocols, and their own ways. Right? I'm primarily taught from a Mohawk or a Haudenosaunee perspective. So, that's how I understand things, but, you know, even as an urban person, right? I'm an urban, mixed race person of Indigenous descent. I didn't grow up, you know, learning those things. I learnt them later in life. And so, there's a lot of people that also, you know, in community that might also still view them as non-agential, and as objects. And that's -- I feel like that's a product of colonization. That's one of the ways in which we've been assimilated. So, there's really -- you know, we have lost an everyday memory and understanding of those things. But the way I've been taught about that is that, you know -- they are alive and they have a spirit, you know. Everything has a spirit, this table has a spirit, right? This table I'm sitting at, you know, it's also made of wood. You know, it also came from beings that are alive. Right? And then they're -- if their body's been sacrificed to now, you know, becoming -- come to this table that I sit here at, you know? And so, in that way, how does it affect communities? I think it -- I know it affects a lot of communities, especially it affects communities when the Ancestors are ceremonial, when their purpose in life was to be a medicine. Those are because if you think of it that way, then they're not -- when they're in a museum, are they really having the ability to then be that medicine to community?

Qanita Lilla: Mm-mm.

Sebastian De Line: No, they're not. And so, they miss out on being able to be -- fulfill their role as a medicine, right, in the community, or their ceremonial role that then, you know, revitalizes and supports, and nourishes community. So, yeah, community really longs for the return of those Ancestors, because they fulfill a really vital role that they can't fulfill when they're in a museum, because the idea of museums, again, maybe coming back to like what it -- what we think of what art is, you know, that there is a -- that there's a certain idea and purpose in which, from a Western perspective, what is the kind of labour being asked of those Ancestors? Right? But I also know that like sometimes community members, you know, the people also feel, you know, happy about seeing some of their Ancestors represented in a place in which is predominantly very Western, you know, and to see a pride, right, in the artistry and in the deep spiritualness, and, you know, the knowledge and beauty of one's Ancestors is --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- can feel really good, right, to come into a space and to feel that if it's done respectfully, you know, and if they're shown respectfully to that -- that's conveyed, you know. I, you know, I don't know, I was wondering about, you know, your thoughts about that, too, but I really feel like any of these kinds of decisions that we make, you know, in museums and in making art as artists, how something is made with a certain intention, is really conveyed in the whole process and that's felt, you know, by the visitor, you know? So, I think it's complicated in that way. It's not a -- I don't have one answer for you other than it's quite context-specific, it's person-specific, family-specific, nation-specific, you know.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. But yeah, and I also think, you know, as curators, as academics, you know, where you're coming from and your, you know, your place, and then where you kind of, yeah, where you're speaking from, is it's very like important to kind of make that clear and to make your, you know, your positionality so that people have a sense of that. Because like very often in museums, just kind of covered up, you know, behind this veneer of doing things in a particular way, you know, of presenting thin glass cases and having wall panels, you know? But I think it's really, especially for people who are coming into the space as -- like a real alien space, it is, it's an alien space for many, many people. And, you know, they want to know who's speaking, like who's speaking to me, you know? Whose voice is speaking to me and telling me the ideas, like who -- you know, because yeah, for example, in South Africa, official spaces are like everybody knows they are highly politicized in political spaces, you know. So, who is it? Like, who is the official voice? And I think once you make that clear, people can transition, like, you know, it's like an easier transition. So, Sebastian, like lastly, I've kept you here for -- and it's been fantastic. It's been so amazing speaking to you. I wanted to know how would you say you found your voice now that you are conveying like the voices of Ancestors of many nations? Like how do you see yourself like in that process and how do you -- you know, is this a creative process? Like, how do you kind of, you know, like reconcile that?

Sebastian De Line: I mean, I just see myself as a helper. I think that's my role. That's a role I feel I'm coming into in community. My role is to support communities and getting back in touch with their Ancestors here at the Agnes, and learning from them, how they wish to ceremonially take

care of their Ancestors from their own perspectives, that are from many different nations. So I've always been reluctant to take on this idea of what I think a lot of institutions often do, where they'll place a person in a certain kind of job and say, "Okay, now you are the "expert" on something." And in reality, I could never be an expert on everyone else's different nation --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- you know, let alone my own as a learner, you know. And that to me is that's being authentic in our roles in which what our capacities are as people who work in museums oftentimes with Ancestors from other cultures and with artists from other nations, and who have different life experiences, and come to the decisions that they make based on, you know, all of that. So that's my role, I think, as a helper in that way and to help those Ancestors too, and to help them bring that communication, you know, make that smoother between them and their beloveds, and centre, you know, their needs, centre communities' needs, centre those Ancestors' needs. And that informs the kind of decisions that are made in terms of what -- how they want to be while they're in this museum, who they might want to teach, who they might not want to teach everything about their life --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- what is appropriate and what is not, you know. And so sometimes my job has been to kind of navigating those challenging questions of relearning and unlearning certain kinds of very Westernized ideas about knowledge production in spaces like museums, where even, you know, in this university, too, and probably safe to say all universities across Canada and throughout the United States, you know, there is very much grounded an idea, I think, that's tied to enlightenment, you know, European enlightenment, and this idea that knowledge is universal, and it's meant to be accessible to everyone. And not all knowledges, from the way I was taught, are actually meant for everyone. And the reason why is that I think back to one of my elders, Al Doxtator, you know, he often teaches me that, you know, with knowledge, what we learn carries a responsibility and especially when it comes to Indigenous knowledges and carrying certain knowledge, is that with that, there is a -- there's a role, there's a kind of a job or an obligation, you know, to the whole of that. And so, we do not want to know everything because that would be a huge burden to carry, to be responsible for, not just for ourselves, but then our whole community and giving that back reciprocally, you know, and thinking about that seven generations ahead and how that affects the next seven generations is an enormous responsibility even to then carry one thing. So, you know, if I see it the way I'm taught in that way, to be a helper, I still have to think of it in that perspective. What does it mean to be a helper that makes decisions and choices in my life that affect, you know, the next seven generations in our community? Is something that I have to hold and I have to keep in mind whenever I navigate decisions. And that's why we have a process that involves having a circle that I can turn to with people who have a lot more knowledge --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- you know, that our elders and knowledge keepers, and people who have worked also in the arts in many years, and have had to deal with similar challenges and have ways of navigating them, and good ideas on how to go about doing that in a good way. So that's the way I approach it and that's how I'll probably always see my life, you know, as a helper --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- and a learner, because I don't know about you, but I never want to stop learning, you know. That's I think when we stop learning even when we're older, you know, then we've closed something off --

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Sebastian De Line: -- you know, that we're not being open, you know, and being humble in that way, so yeah.

Qanita Lilla: That's awesome. Sebastian, thank you so much. You know, I totally agree. I think that, you know, the more people you have on board, you know, when you are dealing with such potent, heavy, you know, rich knowledge, is it's really important. It's really important to have your support system because, yeah, it's just too much for one person. And also, I think, you know, this idea of, you know, the artist is genius, the artist as an individual is just something that we have to break down and to open the field up and to let more people in. So thank you so much. Thank you so much. It's been fantastic and it was worth waiting for. Thank you so much, Sebastian.

Sebastian De Line: We were long overdue for conversations.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. Oh my gosh. Like months and months. Yeah. Like across oceans and so forth but thank you so much. Thank you, Sebastian.

Sebastian De Line: I'm very grateful. Hey, thank you very much too. Take care.

Qanita Lilla: Thanks. Bye.

Sebastian De Line: You're welcome.

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*. Special thanks to our guest Sebastian De Line for speaking with us today.

The podcast is hosted by Dr Qanita Lilla and produced by Agnes Etherington Art Centre in partnership with Queen's University's campus radio station, CFRC 101.9 FM.

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