

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

Transcript of Episode 1: The Hidden Museum

SPEAKERS

Qanita Lilla (host), Jennifer Nicoll (guest)

[Music]

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

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: I come from Cape Town, South Africa. I come from a people who have been named "coloured", which is the term used for the generations of mixed race people, the laboring classes of African, Indigenous and Asian origin, the descendants of slaves brought to the Cape Colony from Asia and the rest of Africa from 1653 until 1822 by the Dutch and the British. Our existence is testament to a conundrum of the apartheid state and to the white settler colonials before them. Because of the great range of our physical characteristics: our skin color, hair texture and our bodies, our existence shows that race as defined by your physical characteristics alone is a baseless measurement that does not account for the mind or the heart. But history has shown that race carries the power to affect your existence in unimaginable ways.

I am a very new resident in Ka'tarohkwi and I have been here for a little over a month. I am still learning and only starting to understand the complexities of the history of this place, but a good place to start is to acknowledge that the Agnes at Queen's University is situated on traditional Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory. For me the gesture to acknowledge the original inhabitants of this land is personal. I understand that a statement is nowhere near enough to account for a history of broken promises and trauma to generations of Indigenous people but it is a first step gesture of recognizing a history and also a people. Hopefully it is the start of a deeper, more long lasting reconciliation.

I have come to Canada, as an uninvited guest, on a work permit with my family to learn more about brutalized, hidden, forgotten and misplaced histories. I wish to care for the powerful Lang Collection of African art and to share my knowledge about similar collections in vastly different environments. I also wish to learn from artists about the ways they find their voice, their vision and to learn what has made them brave enough to do so in a hostile setting.

As a new resident I am grateful to be able to live, learn, earn a living and contribute my knowledge in this beautiful and fractured place. It is my hope that the creativity, the good faith and the will to do hard emotional work amongst Kingston residents and amongst professionals at the Agnes, who I have worked with remotely over the last year, can help recalibrate this place on a new path.

In South Africa, settler occupation and apartheid ended more than 25 years ago, I know that reconciliation is not at all a simple endeavor with a easy solution, but a first step is to open our hearts, bare our truths and to recognize a common humanity that has long been denied to many of the people of this land.

[Ocean Sounds]

Qanita Lilla: The show at the Agnes called, [*With Opened Mouths*](#) includes ‘traditional’ West African masks, face coverings, hoods, helmets and crests from the Lang Collection of African Art and contemporary works by Nigerian Canadian artist Oluseye.

While this is a show about objects from Africa, and contemporary art from the diaspora it is also about the art museum. I see the art museum as a divided space made up of the Seen and the Unseen. If we think of the museum as a body, then the Seen is its visible head. It is the exhibition space where people encounter museum objects through the lens of curators.

This is how objects from Africa become African Art. Handling and interpreting objects, the presence of glass cases, tomb-style labeling, standardized accession numbering and didactic panels all reinforce particular story telling processes. This is the space where the technologies of display grind cohesively to present a smooth curatorial vision.

But the Unseen lies hidden within the bowels of the museum. It is the subterranean underbelly, the closet with the skeletons. But for traditional collections like the Lang collection, this place is the heart of the museum. It is where objects sleep and where they live in a suspended dreamworld. In this sphere, the seamless narratives and explanatory tools from the world of the Seen hold no currency. These archives and vaults tell a different and truer story.

In this episode, we visit the Agnes's vault with Collections Manager, Jenn Nicoll, who describes her journey at the Agnes and how it has changed during her tenure. No longer only confined only with the physical care of objects, care now includes broader community related issues that extends to opening up the vault to different audiences as well as different understandings of the definitions of the objects themselves.

The traditional masks from the Lang Collection, are collections whose intended purpose have been distorted through their displacement into an art museum. They are not art objects in the Western sense at all but rather they point to expansive cosmologies that expands beyond the walls of the art museum. But the fact that they are now contained at the Agnes interests me for many reasons.

I have been interested in the art museum since my first visit as a high school student in 1992.

In this episode, I start with a personal narrative describing my first introduction to Cape Town's premium art museum, The South African National Gallery. Embedded in the colonial history of the city that art museum in 1992 was very much a place of settler culture and of difference but it was also a place where the ripples of change was starting to be felt. This first visit started me on my journey into public art museums. It made me realize that there are many facets to a museum---some of these are seen and others are unseen.

[ocean sounds]

Qanita Lilla: Visiting the Art Museum, Cape Town, South Africa 1992. I love the gentle rocking motion of the train. Suburbs flashing by. The wind against my face. The thick muted elephant-like skin of the plastic sheets. Secret messages doodled on the grey walls. The extra wide grimy windows I could push my body out through. The salty wind on my face. The freedom of being 17. Stepping out and onto the platform into a subterranean world of neon lights on shop fronts and emerging from the vertical escalator into the sharp bright world above, moving towards the light. Emerging from an underground train track barrow, rushing at bodies through throngs on Cape Town Station, the hub of city trains arriving and departing, the noise of people in motion talking, rustling plastic shopping bags, buskers singing, traffic in the distance, the noise of a saxophone echoing through the underground. Emerging above ground, the fresh sea air, mountains reaching up to touch the sky, the two bright sunlight, walking up Eddity Street, looking up all the buildings, beautiful curved windows and doors, brass nameplate and territory roofs, the colonial traces in Africa of Little Britain standing in between the glass and steel of younger, more uniform corporate cousins.

The story of a European garden started Cape Town on its path to multiple secular occupations. The city with its fertile soil and hospitable climate was the location of a food garden for European ships en route to India and the spice route. From 1652, the classically organized garden I walked through formed the basis of a European presence in this part of Africa. I walk into the VOC company gardens and the avenue of oak trees planted by Dutch settlers. They create a dappled canopy above, shielding the African sun. Past the buildings of Parliament, speeding up past the white guards dressed in pith helmets, rifles and razor-sharp trouser pleats. Distracted by a homeless man talking to a squirrel. Finally reaching my destination, the National Art Gallery, through the manicured French style gardens up wide sun warmed stone steps, through the imposing wooden doors and the carved friezes of Africans surrounded by the bounty of local produce. The carvings in the Art Gallery tell the story of Cape Town as the promised land for white settlers. Black Africans, as well as my ancestors, the enslaved people captured along the spice route, are depicted as part of the bounty of the land of plenty. I first went to the National Gallery as a high school student. A new exhibition called Recent Acquisitions was causing some excitement in the Cape Town art community. It was a journey through the noise and bustle of the city into the cold, white calm of the museum. The contradiction was sharp. Cape Town was and is a place of contradictions, and so is the museum.

The museum stood both inside and outside the city, both inside and outside the movement and chaos of the world. The contemporary art we came to see was mostly by white South African artists. And it was powerful. Work by Andries Botha, Jane Alexander, Willie Bester, Penny Siopis,

William Kentridge and Norman Catherine jolted me into new ways of looking and understanding the world and entering new possibilities. It made me feel unsure but excited. It was raw and transgressive. The unease of the exhibition mirrored the uncertainty throughout the country. Nelson Mandela was released in 1990. And we were still two ways -- two years away from the 1994 election. The message of the exhibition was that we had reason to hope and that they were different times to come. But outside of the new exhibition, the rest of the museum was a glaring contradiction. Collections of pictures of horses, fox hunts, red coats and beagles occupied the interleading hall. Portraits of British aristocrats who were either pink and plump or powdered pure white. The contrast between these collections was alarming. It was not only that the subject matter was different. It was that their messages rubbed up against each other violently, staking their claim over a space in profoundly different ways.

A collection of art that celebrated aristocratic leisure pursuits, asserting the right to belong in this place, could not sit comfortably with a new collection that spoke of the quiet horror, absurdity and trauma of living in a police state. Meanwhile, surrounding the contradictory collections was the museum itself, always silent, cold and harsh, floors and surfaces gleaming, white people in lab coats disappearing behind closed doors and screens. The no entry signs signalled the hidden world behind the scenes. Despite the atmosphere of the museum, I knew this to be a place of secrets and intrigue, of the past, but also of possibility and of the future. It was the new collection that drew me back to the museum again and again.

The story of a museum starts long before you arrive through its doors. A museum is not only about the collection it contains, the art on its walls, or even its institutional history. It is about you. A museum is a living entity. As you enter a museum, your story becomes its story. Your experience of the museum is about who you are and where you come from. Do the curators imagine a person like you coming to look at the art in this place, on its walls? How were you imagined, made visible or ignored and silenced? Consider this. By apartheid, all public areas were segregated according to race. But the National Art Museum was one of the only spaces that was not reserved for white audiences. That meant that anybody, regardless of race, could visit. Why did this anomaly exist? Was it because that the state generously believed in the educational benefit of art, the Enlightenment idea that art could uplift the spirit? Or was it more insidious? Did they believe in the civilizing function of art for black and brown -- for the black and brown masses? Was it that racialized people could be dissuaded because of the proximity of the National Gallery to the government buildings or Parliament? Perhaps all these things played a role. But I think that it is because no racialized person would choose to spend time willingly in such an exclusionary bastion of white culture and privilege. There was no breaking the apartheid law because racialized people knew that the space was not meant for them. The museum space spoke to white visitors and racialized visitors differently. Why would you choose to visit a place that valorized pervasive and continued white privilege and that emphasized your difference?

If art museums in colonial and apartheid South Africa were bastions of white culture, then where were the objects made by African people? And did African people make objects worthy and deserving to be displayed in an art museum? In the National Art Museum, traditional objects made by Africans were largely absent but could be found across the company garden in

the South African Museum of National History. In this museum, black and Indigenous people were exhibited in glass cases as the first people and were placed alongside animals in a building dedicated to natural history.

These are some of the reasons I've dedicated my professional life to museums and art and to peripheral voices in the museum. I am particularly interested in questions of agency in museums, of the voice museums speak with, of the voices they choose to silence and choose to ignore, of objects of art that are given space to speak inside museums and of those that are made to conform to the organizational structure of the space itself. And since my first visit to a museum so many years ago, I understand that what is hidden from the public eye gives insight into the way the museum speaks.

About a year ago, as guest curator, I started working remotely with the Justin and Elizabeth Lang collection of African art at Agnes. Numbering 500 objects, this collection is extensive and ranks among Canada's most comprehensive. The collection is made up of works from West and Central Africa and mostly consists of what in Western museums would be considered sculptural three-dimensional objects. But coming into this project from South Africa, I had an understanding that these creations from Africa were not art in the way other European collections at Agnes are. They are integral to seeing the world in an expansive African way. These collections speak in ways that Western museums often struggle to comprehend, and they are inadvertently silenced or hidden in the process.

But because of COVID restrictions, I was not able to visit Agnes in Kingston yet. But I've been introduced to the collection by Jenn Nicoll, who has the important work for caring for these amazing collections. In the rest of this episode, we will go into the bowels of the hidden Agnes, find out about the voice of the museum and visit the African collection with Jenn.

[Ocean Sounds]

Qanita Lilla: Hi, Jenn.

Jennifer Nicoll: Good morning, Qanita.

Qanita Lilla: Hello. How are you doing?

Jennifer Nicoll: I'm doing well. Thanks for talking to me today.

Qanita Lilla: Thank you for joining me. So you have been overseeing the Agnes's permanent collections since 2007.

Jennifer Nicoll: That's right.

Qanita Lilla: And you've been the collections manager, and you've coordinated exhibitions at Agnes.

Jennifer Nicoll: Yes.

Qanita Lilla: Could you tell me about the vaults? Why are they important? Give me an idea of the vaults, please.

Jennifer Nicoll: Well, the first thing that comes to mind is that they offer physical protection for the artworks. And we have two large vaults at the Agnes. They have great big high ceilings and high doors so that we can move artworks of any size in and out of the vaults. There is a lot of shelving in the vaults. And we have racks that we hang paintings from. We have bins. We have drawers. The vaults are -- to give that physical protection to the artworks, we keep them at a particular relative humidity. And they are at a consistent temperature. So they're at 50% relative humidity and we keep them at 20 degrees. And the environment that preserves many types of works and objects from deterioration. They're protected from light in the vaults. When there aren't people in the vaults, the lights are left off. Light is one of the ways that -- one of the agents of deterioration for artworks. And it protects them from theft and fire. So those are the physical protections. But the vault also provides a secure space for researchers, Indigenous community members, curators and interns and practicum students to research and access our collections. It provides a safe space to process works when they come into the collection to examine them. And it also provides a secure space to house artworks that we borrow from other institutions. So those are some of the reasons why our vaults are important.

Qanita Lilla: So, all the Agnes's collections are stored there when they are not on display. Is that correct?

Jennifer Nicoll: That's right, Qanita. Yes.

Qanita Lilla: Okay. So how have they changed, Jenn, like, since you started working there in terms of, like, technology? Like, how has that changed, like, over the years?

Jennifer Nicoll: Well, there have been some significant projects that have happened since I've been working at the Agnes. Technological changes, but also changes in the way we have stored particular objects. So for instance, we've been undertaking a long-term project to rehouse Indigenous Ancestors. When I'm speaking about Indigenous Ancestors, this is what has been referred to as objects or artifacts in western museology. We've removed the Ancestors living at the Agnes from plastic bags. So, traditionally, in museums, plastic bags have been smaller. Objects have been stored in plastic bags to protect them from pollutants and dust. But these are suffocating to the Ancestors, so now we have wrapped them in unbleached cotton that breathes. We've cushioned them better for support and for comfort. And that is the same sort of change that we've made with some of the African works that are stored in the vault to give them better cushioning and support.

Some other upgrades -- we have installed museum grade high density mobile shelving and drawers for our works on paper. That keeps them better protected and more accessible. We have added hanging racks for our paintings so that they are not stored in bins. We've also added shelving for our costume and upgraded our caution storage by making padded hangers that will better support garments, and also, we've improved their storage in their -- their support in their storage boxes. So, there are a few changes that have happened since I've been there.

Qanita Lilla: What's so interesting is the way that ideas have changed surrounding art objects, you know, depending on what communities, how communities respond to these objects and how you've had to, you know, make adjustments and, kind of expand your ideas of what it

means to have these collections. I think it's really amazing that you incorporate the white cloth because it now starts feeling more like an embalming kind of process, instead of just protection and care, so that these objects can go on and be exhibited. I think that what the vaults are becoming is more of a home instead of a morgue. Do you think that is?

Jennifer Nicoll: Yes. Yes. And it makes me think of the objects having different needs and how we're guided and learn about those needs.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. So do you have connections with communities outside the museum?

Jennifer Nicoll: We are working and building -- and building those relationships with communities. We've started that work and outreach to communities to let them know that their Ancestors are living at the Agnes and in letting them know that they're there, providing access to their Ancestors that live at the Agnes. And that starts the process of giving those Ancestors proper traditional care.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. And giving them a new voice in a new environment. So how do you see yourself in relation to this work, you know, to caring for these objects? Maybe we should start with ~~the~~; how did you choose to do this work?

Jennifer Nicoll: I took a course in conservation and collections management. And my interest was -- I'm really -- I'm fascinated by -- I'm fascinated by who made an object. And it's -- for me, it's really neat that I have access and can see the evidence of who made these -- the things in our vault and that there's a sort of connection to those creators through that object. And I think, you know, to answer your question, I want to be an advocate for the objects and for their creators. And I want to make sure that the objects are accessible to their source communities, whatever those source communities may be. And that's something that can't -- doesn't happen immediately. We are working to make those connections and relationships. And certainly, the physical caretaker or one of the physical caretakers, I think that's a work that a number of us do at the Agnes. I'm also, I think, need to be a caretaker of the intellectual property related to artworks. And I'm fortunate to greet objects when they first enter the museum and the vaults. I handle them, and I examine them. Part of my job is to examine a newly acquired work to determine its condition. So I see all parts of the objects, like the history of labels on the back of a painting -- and that was highlighted by Paul Litherland in his *B-Side* exhibition last year -- or the inside of a purse, maybe the interior finishing of a silk dress and the artist inscriptions and notes painted or written, back of a painting or drawing. So that's how I see myself in relation to the objects in our vault.

Qanita Lilla: I think it's so amazing and so beautiful. And you're just so fortunate to see the interior spaces of things. I think curators tell stories, and they use objects to illustrate stories and their understanding of the world. But you work with the actual thing. It's amazing. It's just -- it's just really beautiful. And I think it tells me something very special about your own voice and, and how you communicate quite quietly, but strongly with the world. You know, since this podcast is about finding your voice through your practice, how do you think that your practice allows you to express your own voice?

Jennifer Nicoll: I think that I do that by ensuring that or doing my best to ensure that the work and objects that are entrusted to us are as accessible as possible so that others are fortunate as I am so fortunate to have that, that special view and relationship so that others can have that same access. And that can be by providing really good images and information on our website, facilitating loans from our collection to other institutions, making artworks and works accessible to community and to researchers and students of Queens, facilitating traditional care of Ancestors and ensuring there are spaces where the community can smudge and provide traditional care. I want to care for artworks and always respect artists's practices and wishes. So that could mean ensuring that a print is matted and protected with acid free tissue, or it might mean allowing an artwork to naturally deteriorate if that's the artist's intent for the work or a community's intent for an ancestor. I want to make sure that I advocate for creator's rights. And in particular, in my work, that includes their intellectual property rights. So right of reproduction, the right to exhibit and their moral rights. And then, you know, they're maybe -- they're taking steps to let source communities -- this is so important -- to let communities know their Ancestors have been living at the Agnes. And there are many, many communities that need to know that and help it -- helping them to -- helping to make that happen but nurturing good relations with those communities. And then they're the sort of less interesting ones like -- but important, making sure that we move artwork safely. And we keep good clean storage conditions and careful records of locations and that we train other staff to handle artwork safely and advocate for use of gloves, which keeps the artworks and the objects safe, but also keeps people safe. And that we have good record keeping.

Qanita Lilla: I think it's wonderful. What I can hear from what you're saying is that, as far as is possible, there is a commitment to open up a space that was like previously hidden, that was previously kind of just basement type space. And I think it is the right place to start. It is the right place to start opening up for all different communities and to kind of expand a definition of what art is. So, thank you. Thank you very much, Jenn. That was fantastic. Thank you.

Jennifer Nicoll: Thank you, Qanita, for talking to me about this, about -- and like you said, that's one of the first steps. And so it's been nice to be able to introduce our vaults this morning to you.

Qanita Lilla: It's, it's so inspiring to hear how definitions have expanded over the past 30 years -- totally different! A vault was considered to be a glorified closet. And the most important thing was to keep things intact and keep things preserved. And then kind of take off all the wear or take off all the kind of patina and make it look brighter new and stuff. And it's just -- it's really changed a lot. And it's really important to let people know, you know, how it's changed.

Jennifer Nicoll: That's what we're trying to do. And you're right, like vault, that word vault is like a crypt. That's sort of what a vault means is a place to keep everything out other than what's supposed to be protected there. But maybe we need to stop calling it a vault too.

Qanita Lilla: I think it's really important because it is a place where there are precious objects and precious, Ancestors and all these precious things. But vault just does not, you know, give that sense of care kind of community because it is -- it's part of a community, a different kind of community. But it needs to -- we just need to use another word.

Jennifer Nicoll: Yeah, you're right.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah, it's awesome. I mean, I love -- I just love, you know, the fact that you're using, like, muslin cloth. And wow. It's amazing. And also just that you have like a very -- a very real sense of what it means to be handling, these objects and that they're just bought out, like, such diverse histories and having to, like, cater for things from delicate purses to Ancestors. It's quite remarkable.

Jennifer Nicoll: Yeah. I'm trying to think -- I'm trying to think of how we could refer to the vault, to those areas to better express how we want to provide access and allow others to have the same relationship that I'm fortunate to have.

Qanita Lilla: I think it's got to do with just like a space of slumbering, a place of sharing, you know, a place of care. And I think the project of, like, looking at the labels at the back of paintings and looking inside purses is so incredible. It's amazing. I wish I'd seen that exhibition: I'm just always interested in, like, the underside of things.

Jennifer Nicoll: And I think everybody is. It's -- and that exhibition was specifically -- Paul had photographed the back of paintings. And that's what was shown in the exhibition was the backside of other painting, because it reveals the history and what that artwork, whether it's a painting or it's a dress that has the evidence of somebody's dinner on it. Right? Shows what I think is one of the most important -- one of the many important aspects of that object is what it's -- what it's gone through and lived through.

Qanita Lilla: Yes. And also evidence of human hands, you know. People touching it, people always, you know, being like in the stream of humanity, you know, that it wasn't ever made to be, like, separate, to be, you know, isolated in art museum or whatever, you know, that it actually had meaning, like, outside in that context. So that's awesome. Thank you.

Jennifer Nicoll: Thanks for giving me the opportunity to talk about it too, Qanita.

Qanita Lilla: It's a pleasure.

Jennifer Nicoll: And it made me -- the question about how my work gives me voice was a great question to ask me and to -- it made me -- it gave me the opportunity to stop and think about it, you know, because you get so concentrated on this sort of minutia and the logistics of you work.

Qanita Lilla: I mean, especially you. It's just -- it's so big. And it's so extensive. And you're so busy doing so many things. You know, like in your heart, why it is that you do what you do and why you love it. Often, you just don't get the opportunity to actually think about it and speak about it. And yeah, I mean, when I met you and when I went through the vaults and when I got the sense of the vault, I just knew, you know, this is somebody who just -- who really loves, like, what she does and it's in a place where people wouldn't think to look. But it's so critically important. It's just such an important place.

Jennifer Nicoll: Well, I'm looking forward to meeting you in the vault in those -- in that -- in the space downstairs in the Agnes Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: I cannot wait. I seriously can't wait. Those -- you know, I just -- I stare at the pictures of those objects. And I just know that they don't do them justice. They couldn't -- they couldn't -- like, no picture could do those African objects justice. They're just so beautiful and powerful. And I can't wait. I cannot wait to just look at them. And I probably wouldn't be able to look at all of them because I -- you know, they just -- they're just so intense. But I'd love to spend time with him and with you in the vault.

Jennifer Nicoll: Same here. All right.

Qanita Lilla: Okay, Jenn.

Thank you.

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths: the Podcast*. Special thanks to our guest Jennifer Nicoll for speaking with us today.

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

The music is composed by "Jameel3DN" and produced by Elroy "EC3" Cox III.

Subscribe now so that you don't miss our next episode. You can find the podcast at Digital AGNES, CFRC's website, and on podcasting platforms like Apple, Google and Spotify. We'll see you next time!

[Music]