

# With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

## Transcript of Episode #7: Bantering Toward Radically Liberated Futures

### SPEAKERS

Qanita Lilla (host), Jason Cyrus (guest) and Ezi Odozor (guest)

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Hello and welcome to *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*. I'm your host Qanita Lilla. This podcast runs alongside Agnes's exhibition of the same name. The show *With Opened Mouths* interrogates conventional museum practices. It asks if objects that originate outside Western Museum making systems can find their voices in new ways.

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Today, I'm joined by Ezi Odozor, whose poem *Spirit Banter* will be installed at Agnes soon, and Jason Cyrus, who curated *History Is Rarely Black or White* and who is currently in the midst of installing his incredible show.

Ezi Odozor is a Nigerian born writer, student support specialist, an antiracist specialist practitioner, based in Toronto. Her work, whether fiction or nonfiction, focuses on themes of identity, culture, gender, race, health and intimacy. Ezi's work has been featured in several journals, including *Room Magazine* and *ARC Poetry Magazine*. Her writing has also been showcased in exhibitions such as Oluseye's 2017 show, *A Room Full of Black Boys*. Ezi works across the subjects of race, black feminisms, anticolonialism and global health. She has written on new ethics for black feminist theorizing and anticolonial interventions for global health. She holds a Master's degree in Education, and an Honours Bachelor of Science from the University of Toronto.

Jason Cyrus is the 2021 Isabel Bader Fellow in Textile Conservation and Research. He uses fashion as a lens to investigate connections between Agnes's historical dress collection and the transatlantic slave trade, the Underground Railroad and resource extraction. Using advanced observational tools in the labs of the art conservation program at Queen's University, his research project, *History Is Rarely Black or White*, uncovers these stories in the study of cotton not only historically to locate materials and their lineages, but to simultaneously highlight the rich legacy of racialized individuals who used clothing to assert their agency at a foundational

time in Canadian history. Jason has a Master's degree in Art History and Curatorial Studies from York University and starts his PhD in History of Art at Warwick University in the UK very shortly.

So, to give listeners a bit of context, and I think that like many stories over the past year, we'll start like this -- it all began in the pandemic. But our story really did begin in the pandemic. I was working on *With Opened Mouths* from Cape Town. Jason was working on *History Is Rarely Black or White* from Toronto. And Jason thought that since there were so many synergies between our shows, we would get Ezi on board to do some programming to celebrate that synergy. And although a lot of that did not happen, what did happen was Ezi's powerful poem that is soon to be installed in Agnes's first gallery. The poem, *Spirit Banter*, serves as an entry point to *History Is Rarely Black or White* and to *With Opened Mouths*. It is a kind of otherworldly, shifting portal that allows us to adjust our thinking as we move into the spaces beyond. *History Is Rarely Black or White* focuses on people groups brought forcibly to North America through the transatlantic slave trade, as well as their descendants in the United States and Canada. The exhibition interrogates cotton garments in the Queen's Collection of Canadian Dress through archival research and scientific analysis. It also engages contemporary art and fashion to examine colonial history and envision a radically positive future. Thank you so much for joining me today, Ezi and Jason.

**Ezi Odozor:** Thanks for having me.

**Jason Cyrus:** My pleasure.

**Qanita Lilla:** And I just wish that we could have been in person. Really.

**Jason Cyrus:** Yes, yes, here we are.

**Qanita Lilla:** But nevertheless, it's delightful, and I'm delighted that you could join me. And I particularly want to talk about the synergies between our shows but also some of the processes of exhibition making during the pandemic, which has really been unprecedented. And it's been a unique experience. I think for you, Ezi, it's been -- you know, this project started off as something that was completely different. And, you know, you had to kind of change and alter because, that's kind of what it was. And I think, Jason, I think you were working in a very similar way to me, where things kind of grew and grew. And we kind of had to kind of try to contain them. But also, it was just so exciting to start trying to do things in a new way. But I think for both of you, these topics are really close to your heart, you know. And I think that's really a powerful thing that carries you through and that you can clearly see. Ezi, how is *Spirit Banter* close to your heart?

**Ezi Odozor:** Kind like you said. In the things I write about, I try to write a lot about -- when I say intimacy, I mean our intimate relationships, however those may manifest. Right? So our relationships with each other, our relationship with histories and our ideas. And so when we talked about working on this poem and, you know, other projects that didn't happen because of, you know, the ongoing pandemic -- or panorama, as some people might say. But in thinking about how this poem connects the two exhibitions, I want us to think about the relationships involved in creating them, but also the relationships that are reflected in each of the exhibitions.

So the idea of relationships is so important to me. And so that makes this piece come from kind of within my centre. And so when we talk about *History Is Rarely Black or White*, the poem kind of starts with thinking about our relationships to self-definition. Right? Who do I get to be? Do I get to be who I want to? Do I get to be who you want? Is who I want conditioned by the kind of circumstances that I'm in? Or even *With Opened Mouths*, right? Who have we presented these -- how have we presented these pieces, versus who do these pieces actually speak for or represent? Which is kind of what you were trying to discuss? Right? And so all of those things to me are relationships, right? Relationships with the work, relationships with people, relationships with the time, the space. Right? And so that connects intimately to my idea of intimacy. And so for me, that's kind of how it hits me and how it stays true to the kind of work that I think about and I like to do.

**Qanita Lilla:** And the idea of bantering. Bantering as, you know, good humored teasing. How did you kind of go through that truth? Because intimacy is quite a -- it's something that is really close and quiet and kind of self-reflective. How did you translate that into something very active and joyful?

**Ezi Odozor:** Yeah. Just like you said, banter almost has a playful quality. And I think it was kind of -- when I wrote the poem, I was thinking about the different ways in which Black people exist and have existed and show up. And so each of the kind of sections of the poem represents a spirit. And then there's this idea that everything -- when we talk about Black people, there's kind of gravity and seriousness to our histories. But we aren't always about sorrow, and that's in the poem, right? Joy too, not always sorrow. Right? And so that idea of, yes, it's a serious topic, and there are serious topics in there. But there's also the kind of freedom of being able to talk about it the way I want to talk about it. And it doesn't have to be this super structured, rigid idea that is serious all the time. Right? And so it's serious, but there's a loosening to it that allows me to do it the way I want to do it and allows me to be the multiple different people. And so therefore, banter and the kind of playful exploration, right? Or the -- it doesn't have to be necessarily playful in the sense of nonserious, right? It could be playful in the sense of "I choose it." Right? And the spirit is something too that is not bound by our ideas of time and place and those kinds of things. And so a spirit might be able to have the conversation in a way that is not within the bounds of human understanding about the serious or the unserious or however you want to put that. And so it's this kind of exchange of spirits. And they're kind of saying "get it or don't get it." And they're laughing at us. Right? They're laughing at our boundaries, kind of how we understand things. And so it's like -- I think there's one point that says, essentially, "You will see me, whether you want to or not." So it's kind of like -- and there's a laugh in the poem as well. So it is like I'm laughing at your simple understanding of my life, because it is so much more than what you have decided that it is. And I'm going to tell you what it is. And you're going to have to see it whether you want to or not, whether you get it or not. I do, right? And so it is a kind of -- I'm playing with you. And this might be a light game or a deadly game. And so I get to be those different entry points. And so that's the point of the exchange. The banter is also exchanged. So four different beings, playful insistence, but also a sense of control around the gravity of the situation.

**Qanita Lilla:** I think it also speaks very closely to the African masks and the fact that they are so full of spirit. And we really struggle to comprehend, not only where they come from but how they exist in that space today. The kind of -- yeah, their playfulness. And I think that is -- there is something in that. There's, like, you know, there isn't a sense of a loss of agency, that they cannot live -- in a new place, that they are finished. The story is finished. You know, I think it will -- definitely -- it's continuing.

**Ezi Odozor:** I'm excited for folks to see the visuals because, you know, the way the visuals are split up, it's the performance of the poetry, but then also just the free expression of Blackness on the other side of that as well. And so part of the visuals are composed of pieces of people's faces from both Canada and the United States. At just different moments. And the pieces, you know, when I took those photos, I asked people to create their own different expressions. You choose the expression that you want at this moment, and I'll take the picture. And that's -- and it's your choice, right? It's your choice. And you never necessarily know whether or not that expression was taken in a happy or a sad moment. And it might be a sad moment in the poem or the side of the vision where the poem was being read. But the expression might be playful. And so it's again that -- it's, again, that idea of banter. It's again that idea of agency, even in the midst of the gravity of our life.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. Jason. Jason.

**Jason Cyrus:** Ezi.

**Qanita Lilla:** I know.

**Jason Cyrus:** Ezi. Ezi.

**Qanita Lilla:** I know. It's a fantastic moment to talk about the agency of your show and how you, on the one hand, expressed your own viewpoint, and how you kind of consolidated all the different multitudes of, you know, kind of facets of your amazing show. Please talk to us about that.

**Jason Cyrus:** As Ezi was sharing so articulately and powerfully, I thought, quite clearly, in the ways that *Spirit Banter* speaks so strongly to *History Is Rarely Black or White* in reminding us of who are the spirits, what are the spirits that is inherent in the clothing that we're looking at? Who was involved in the picking? Who's involved in the harvesting of the cotton? Whose lives were ripped apart in creating these beautiful cotton garments that have been preserved in the Agnes's Collection of Canadian Dress? And I'm jumping ahead a bit of myself, but there is Karen Jones, a Vancouver-based artist, whose work looks at identity and cultural exchange, has been commissioned by Agnes to create a stunning piece called *Freed*. And her piece encircles one of Agnes's garments. And the installation really speaks to the souls, the identities, the stories that are -- that have been washed away from this garment. We know so much about who wore the dress. We know so much about the dress's social and cultural context. But the whole notion of *History Is Rarely of Black or White* is to reinsert the humanity involved in the raw material and to speak to the importance, the cultural erasure and its connection to our contemporary time. And I remember, I did a site visit with Karen in her studio on the West End in Vancouver this

summer. And I walked into her studio, and I had such a visceral emotional reaction – because I'm not going to give the installation all away, because I'd love you to see it – but the way that she configured it was as if the souls of the enslaved workers themselves were being freed. Their spirits were finally coming alive and being seen there. It was -- speaking of banter, just the way that shadows were playing and light was playing it was this notion and the sense of freedom that I felt so emotionally moved by. And what I love so much about the conversation between each of our installations between *With Opened Mouths* and *Spirit Banter* and *History Is Rarely Black or White* is in the way that we are finally hearing from and seeing and spending time with spirits that have voices, stories or trying to create space for agency to occur where the object is not just seen from a colonial perspective or categorized and kept and stored in a vault for institutional purposes, but its cultural and political and social meaning, and the heart, the humanity of it is restored. And we can spend time with what that means and where it has gone and in what ways we've lost so many things and what can we regain and how can we look at the way we see our lives now.

For me, the exhibition started speaking, going back to your thought of the pandemic, from an extremely personal way, because I think what the pandemic did for many people, as three racialized people on this podcast, I will assume and know that this was not new revelations for us. But for many folks, they finally, I think, saw directly the connection of systemic oppression in relation to the pandemic and what was going on with the racial uprisings of the spring and summer 2020. And seeing the overlap between the way that marginalized people across class barriers, specifically race barriers, specifically Black people, were disproportionately affected by the pandemic due to all the class and social structures that oppress Black people in Canada. And it's a similar thing, I think, that has happened with dress history, where we love to talk about the materiality of the garment, how beautiful the fabric is, how it was loomed, how it was embroidered, its construction, and then we love to investigate its social and cultural importance. This dress was worn by this person at this event and this is their station in life. And the garment therefore represents this x, y, z. And sadly, because of the way that garments were given to archives, we don't have a lot of working-class garments. We don't have a lot of garments from Black people and other people of colour, because generally speaking, institutions, especially with dress collections, have preserved the garments of wealthy White women who gave their garments to build these collections. That's just a reality of how many collections across the world have come to be. Now a lot of things are being donated by diverse people groups, but generally speaking, the garments and institutions don't represent everyone's experience. But as someone -- as a racialized person, investigating and researching dress history from the mid to late 1800s. And especially if it's from the early 1800s -- I know from African American history and global history that there is a connection there between enslavement, labour and cotton. But that is a connection that is very rarely made. And especially within curation and exhibition making.

So last year, again, I felt even more emboldened to find a way to connect these histories and to bring them together. And to be able to finally see a garment in its full self and to be able to finally -- for my own selfish reasons, to be able to finally see myself reflected in these institutions, to see my story, my history. I'm Guyanese Canadian. I came here in 2000 with my family from Georgetown, Guyana. My very history and identity comes from the transatlantic

slave trade. A combination of my great grandfather coming from the indentured labour ship, the labour boats, from Madeira in Portugal. My great grandmother came from what was then called -- was now called Chennai. And, of course, I have family who are Black in Guyana. And of course, their presence in Guyana comes directly from the transatlantic slave trade and just how these three cultures on both sides of my family intermarried and created my very self and my siblings and millions of other people over Guyana's history. But it's so rare to see that reflected in an institution in garments that always represents Whiteness and wealth. **So what *History Is Rarely Black or White* does is it allows viewers and gallery-goers to not see these two histories as separate. Black history and White history are not separate things. Material culture and the history of slavery and enslavement or the transatlantic slave trade are not separate things.** They are completely totally intertwined and connected. And one is created out of another, in fact. And I hope the spirits across all these realms can finally start to banter as Ezi has so beautifully and articulately put in *Spirit Banter*, that we can finally start paying attention to our stories.

**Qanita Lilla:** Jason, I want to ask you something about dealing with difficult traumatic topics, having to go there, you know. And Ezi, too. Whenever I talk about these things, it's a painful thing, you know. How do you deal with that, because we in institutions that like to level things off, that like to -- that kind of look down on the kind of, deep emotionalism that we're dealing with, you know, that kind of also makes us feel very, humiliated for kind of bringing this to the table. You know, this is where it needs to be because this is where people are, you know. Ezi, how do you deal with that? Like, bringing, like, your true self into these spaces. How do you negotiate your voice?

**Ezi Odozor:** Oh, I think it's a couple of things. I think it's just been a practice of time in some ways. You know, working also in postsecondary institutions, which in Canada are predominantly White, has meant having to cultivate a sense of self as a young Black woman to be able to stand up to the very severe microaggressions that can exist in that space. And so in crafting that type of being and like how I can move through those spaces, it's also allowed me to have an avenue to put my work on as well. Right? So being a person who can kind of resist the oppressions of those spaces by insisting on my capacity, by relying on my years of experience, by being able to say "no", I have evidence that this is how this works, then I can also be able to say, "And my ideas also have space in there, the other ideas that I have." And so in one way, it's just been a practice of building that skin, which is an unfortunate thing to have to do. You shouldn't have to build an armour to exist, you know, in the same world that other people can just walk in -- walk through without a care. So that's just the reality of that. But then, also, you know, people love to say that writing is cathartic. It's freeing. But I'm like, no, it's like a super involved process that sometimes you have -- you're, like, afraid to say the things that you want to say, and maybe writing is the only way that you can say them within an acceptable medium where it's art. And so people sometimes think that it's not real life, you know. But it is, right? And I think the mix between insisting on my being, as well as insisting that I, just like you, have things to say, and that combination has now served me. I don't want to put out the idea that it's like -- there's a magic potion or, like, if you just say these words, it'll be alright. It might not be. Right? But it's more-- **how do you cultivate for yourself the ability to make and take space? Right? How do you do that for you? For me, there's been certain things that I have done. But what makes you feel firm in a place? And then how do you rely on that to then do the other things that you need to**

do? So I think -- you know, also, there's always the feeling of, you know, is this real writing? Am I a real writer? Am I a real artist? Am I a real whatever? And it just had to be the practice of "I've written it. And so it's writing." You know, that's what really makes you a writer.

**Qanita Lilla:** Why is that? Why is that? The imposter thing?

**Ezi Odozor:** It's the institution that we're in, right? That defines it as being a certain thing or a certain way. Like, if you don't know -- if you can't rattle off, like, the top five, you know, crusty White men, then you're not real. And so I think you have to kind of throw those little bits away. And it's just like I've written it, so it's writing. I'm a writer. Like, people might not like it, but it doesn't make me any less of the real thing. And I think that that's just a practice because sometimes it feels like that's untrue. Like, it feels like it's hard to situate yourself as the real thing. And so I just think it's a practice. Like, you just have to keep trying to do it and surrounding yourself with people that will, you know, allow you to live in your truth.

So right now, also, one of the things I'm working on is a collection about -- along with two of my colleagues is a collection on kind of Black women's worldviews, and there's four books in this collection and each kind of takes a different entry point. And so one of the books is looking at Black Canadian feminism -- and beyond. And so writing a chapter on what is Black Canadian feminism even. And so part of that is thinking about theory and its connection to Black women, right? People love to connect theory to the idea of the masculine, right? When we think about theory, we think about the schools of thought that, you know, Aristotle and that kind of school of thought or whatever it is, right? But people don't think about racialized people, in particular Black women as creators of theory. And that theory is this thing that's separated from emotion or affect. But then one of the things I've written is that actually, theory arrives out of affect, right, because theory is just us trying to make sense of our world, right? To make the intangible tangible, to make it digestible and concrete. And this is how it works, right? And whether we say this is how it works, full stop, or this is how it works, and I want to change it or different things, but the theory part is understanding the circumstance in the first place. But what moves you to do that is affect. Right? You have some kind of visceral internal, whatever, unease that lets you then approach the question of what makes it so. Right? And so affect is the base of theory, not this, like, abstracted, intellect, like, you know, disentangled from human beings. And so people -- there's that thing about the angry Black woman. And one of my favourite intellectuals is Brittany Cooper. And she has this book called *Eloquent Rage*. When people say the angry Black woman, it's as if anger is not a valid emotion because it comes from Black women. It's as if after all the years and all these things, we still can't be angry about them. So anytime you're angry, it's read as unreasonable, that you are somehow basal. Like, you are somehow a beast. And a beast will respond in these ways that are, you know, visceral and violent and immediate, as if a response to oppression is unreasonable. So everybody else gets to be angry. Right? And so if we're always angry in a way that doesn't make sense, then how can we be intellectuals? How can we think as if the thinking being is also not a feeling being? But the feeling being needs to be feeling. The thinking being needs to be feeling first. You feel something, and then you react to it. And whatever your reaction is can be different. It can be, you know, to have a structured reaction or not, but you feel it first. And so part of what this chapter is about is that Black women have always been necessarily intellectual. Right? And that intellect arises out of a

consideration for not only our circumstances of being, but then how we are in relationship to the rest of the world. And you see that so often in movements when it's like Black women, who are, you know, at the helm of all of these movements for issues that are not just solely contained within dialogues of race. Right? Like, you can be Black and queer, Black and differently abled. And so there's lots of ways in which Black women's social movements are about race, yes, saliently about race, but then also take care of social conditions that make our lives the way that they are. And so just writing about that and thinking through that has also -- these are the kinds of things that also allowed me to feel more sure about how I enter spaces because those are the kinds of conversations that have divorced us from the kind of surety that, you know, others kind of feel without having to think. If we're always angry, and you're always questioning your emotions, always questioning the validity of how you feel and what you think. And so if you reclaim that to say, "I might be angry, but it's not unreasonable. It makes perfect sense. But I'm not only angry, I'm also this other host of things." Right? And so that lets you, you know, put one foot in front of one another and not feel like you're going to sink through quicksand every minute of every day. Right? And so sometimes, in responding to these institutions is to give them the same energy. Right? They insist and take for granted that what they say is so. And so too do I, then. Right? Yeah, that's kind of the energy that I'm trying to move with.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, that's profound. I think that's profound. I love that you reclaim theory. That is so powerful. You know, I think Steve Biko's work about "writing what I like" -- which is so powerful. And it's as if, like, people of colour have been denied that space because of, you know, everything that we've experienced intergenerationally, like, the trauma intergenerationally. And now we are just these feeling creatures who cannot think. And I love that idea of the quicksand, the quicksand that we find in these institutions, you know, and that we kind of have to find things that help us, that facilitate renewal, continual renewal. And it's really -- it's really tough, and it's really difficult, but it's necessary to call it out for what it is. Jason, what do you think about this?

**Jason Cyrus:** Oh, I'm just here trying to take all this in because it's -- I think, my first thought will be about community, because as we navigate through the hardship of telling these stories and doing research, one thing I can honestly say "thank you" to both of you for is that you're part of the community that holds me up. And I mean that as genuinely as I can say. It's -- to have like-minded souls, who you deeply respect, whose characters you deeply respect, whose work you deeply respect, come back to and just share experiences. Having a home, a hard home to come back to, to share and to check in with and to encourage each other, I think it's been a hugely important thing for me along this journey. You know, we've each done it for each other. We do it together. I think of allies like Anne-Marie Guérin, who's the conservator working on this project, who she and I have had so many conversations together about the research process and the hardship of what we're reading and how important community is for me, because I -- as Ezi was mentioning so well, this whole notion of anger comes up in me so often because one of the things I've struggled with so much on working on this exhibition, in addition to the multiple moving parts that have been quite a lot to kind of wrangle is generating content in terms of writing didactics. It's something I started working on quite early in spring, and I've been chipping away at -- it kind of stems from my fellowship report. And it took me, I think, the



entire summer to finally come to grips with why this has been such a struggle, because on one level, how do you summarize enslavement? How do you summarize cultural genocide? And how do you do that when your very identity is tied up in this? There are times that I'd be reading whether it be research books with ledgers of the number of enslaved folks who left certain ports on the African coast, or in terms of the number of people who finally made it over and were deposited in -- whether it be in Louisiana or in South Carolina and so on. And the pain that I feel, I have to close the book and move on to something else, because for me, that's not just, "Oh, well, that sounds horrible" and I just move on and I summarize. It is my very identity. It's my very nature. The pain, it's what in some Indigenous communities they call blood memory. I'm remembering the pain all over again. That, again, has always been quite removed from the study of material history specific with dress. An amazing, amazing resource has come in from the Ontario -- sorry, from the Queen's Special Library called *A Northside View of Slavery*. And it is the actual account of folks who made it to the Underground Railroad and settled in Canada. And it's organized by a town where they were settled, or where they did settle, and their stories, and we know their names. And on Thursday morning when the artifacts were unpacked, and I started reading through some stories to pick what pages to open, and to share with our viewers, I had a really emotional reaction. There were some very heart wrenching stories in there describing whipping and its effects on flesh and what will happen to the body or someone walking through the plantation and seeing someone hanging from a tree or describing the hardship of the journey along the Underground Railroad. These are not things that through the colonial structure of Enlightenment, where we're supposed to remove logic from feeling. And that is completely predicated on Whiteness. And that is exactly how institutional research has come to be. We're supposed to be these scientific minds that remove feeling from research, remove logic, remove any type of emotional connection and see what -- see information in front of us as something to be extracted, something to be summarized, something to be put up on a wall. And then we move on to the next project. That does not work when your very history is embedded in these stories. So I felt anger. I felt sadness. I felt deep moments of wrestling with "What am I doing with this? What am I trying to do?" This is a lot for me. This is a lot for folks. And you want to care for the people who are coming through this show. I want to care for my fellow people of colour who are coming through the show and who will see this information and see these stories and feel what I feel. I'll be completely and totally remiss if I connected all the dots historically, connected all the information and done an amazing job of giving you this wonderful historical overview of the cotton supply chain of enslavement without understanding the humanity involved and the genocide and the hardship that was involved in this. Of course, there's a fine line between that and at the same time giving people some sense of hope, some sense of joy. Our stories are so often told from the perspective of pain. It's so often told from this perspective of anger, of being ripped apart of. But we are here. We are existing. We have existed. We have laughed. We have made community. We have our very culture that sustains us. Our very stories and spirits sustain us. And it's that joy. It's that multiplicity that I hope to embed into our projects. But that process is hard. So it's that whole personal, I think, wrestling that happens. And the other part of it is the exact opposite, where I'm extremely emboldened to tell a story and where I have no qualms about making claims. One example is that the Agnes's collection of cotton garments have come from the Queen's Collection of Canadian Dress. The very system that brought these cotton garments into being has led us to the dichotomy of Kingston as it is. Kingston is a beautiful town of gorgeous Victorian architecture. It's by the

water. There's lots of historical significance. And on the other hand, there are penitentiaries here of -- that are overrepresented by Black and Brown and Indigenous bodies and other people of colour. There's a whole population here who have moved to live close to their incarcerated loved ones. And the other half of it is this idyllic Victorian architecture with, you know, the City Hall and the farmers markets. And in a sense, that dichotomy is the Agnes's cotton garments because the supply chain that saw Blackness as labour, as an economic cog, as inhumane, that put people in ships where they were shackled foot to head, where they -- one-third of them only made it across the voyage, that did not see Blackness as human. That entire supply chain that then created these garments because those people then picked the cotton, harvested the cotton. It went to different mills. The final fabric would then have been made up into garments that could have been bought by Canadian consumers. Or the fabric itself loomed that embroidered or printed would have been imported into Kingston and then would have been bought by a Canadian consumer. The Canadian consumer, the Kingston consumer is implicated in the cotton supply chain and in enslavement. This way of seeing Blackness as something to be policed, something to be controlled, something that's inhumane is a legacy that has led to incarceration, is a legacy that's led to the prison system. That is the very notion of what Kingston is now. So we cannot have cotton garments without the jails and the prisons. The two are directly linked. And I made a very bold claim of that in one of our label copies. And I felt at one point I wrestled a lot with is this too far? Is this a claim that, you know, I need five walls to unpack to be able to share the data, the research? And then I thought to myself, absolutely not. Oral history is as important. Our stories are as important as ledgers from slave ships or as the accounts of the cotton that is coming in from Louisiana and South Carolina. And therefore, then, there's another ledger that shows that slave ships then docked in those areas, but nothing actually brings them together. So this whole notion of what is beyond a reasonable doubt and prove this Enlightenment sense of logic, as Ezi you're trying to really debunk and show us how we have to then remove our anger from that. But then all the history of oppression, we're not allowed to feel that after all these things have been brought together. We have to start seeing histories as connected. We have to start seeing these things as connected. So in a sense, I go between those quite often, this personal wrestling, the personal pain I feel because of my own identity. And then the other half, this boldness to tell a story, this boldness to really challenge -- to shake thinking. And how I end up wrestling between those two again comes back to our community, comes back to conversations we've all had about what do we do in this situation? How are you dealing with this? How are you just doing? Period. Considering all of everything else that is going on in life. This exhibition and our own exhibitions are but a drop in the ocean of our very stories and the aggressions, both micro and macro, that we feel on a daily basis, the histories we've inherited, the stories we're yet to tell. So it's this notion of community that allows me to dance between being bold and feeling my -- being in my own self. But I really hope that, in a sense, when folks come through, they get a sense of all of that, the complexity of it all, and that they don't feel that this is an institutional show. I want people to see themselves reflected. That is the most important thing. If that is not the case, I would not have done my job. And I mean everyone from people with histories connected to enslavement and peoples whose histories are connected to the cotton garments from a space of Whiteness. We all must see our histories together because we all have to start seeing each other. Our spirits have to banter.

**Qanita Lilla:** I wonder whether -- what role contemporary practice, contemporary art, Ezi, the contemporary view of the spirit plays in this, lifts us up, holds us up. I know, for myself, with Oluseye's *Eminado* series, that really captivated what I was trying to say. I was trying to say that traditional objects of African art are not in the past. They exist today, you know. People exist today. People's thinking -- people are continually going back to their histories, thinking, like, Jason was talking about, thinking about their journeys, you know, through life. How do you think your practice is particularly contemporary? It's uniquely drawing from all sorts of fonts of knowledge.

**Ezi Odozor:** You know, when we say history, we think about, you know, when things were filmed in black and white. People think very far back, but history is yesterday. And so, when I think about something being contemporary, I think just more about, like, how have the boundaries changed? Like, what are we freer to do? Who are we able to be? I don't think it has to be this huge play on... how have the structures vastly changed? And what are the new rules? But it's just, you know, how have I been -- how am I able to show up now that I wasn't able to show up yesterday? Or how will I insist upon being that is different from yesterday? How have I been able to personally evolve? And again, I think that, you know, even in this show, the way it's been put together, our show has actually been put together. Like, is that a traditional museum practice? Right? And so the contemporary, I think, is found in our shifts. Because something of yesterday was the contemporary of before. And it's in the shifts that make it contemporary, that make it new and make it of this time. And even when we think about contemporary, how long back does that go? What are the boundaries between the ages? And so I think, just for me, what makes the thing new is how have I shifted? What am I saying now that I wasn't able to say before? What am I saying now that I'm more awake to? For me, sometimes it's in the choice of word. I mean, it might be -- you know, I might have assumed that I needed to present a poem this way. And now I'm like, "No, it doesn't feel me." Right? And so that feeling me *is* the newness. Right? And I might have thought that that was me yesterday, but now I'm somebody new. And so what are the things that I'm doing now? That's really it for me in terms of what makes something contemporary. It's just a shift. So yeah, nothing too much more profound than that.

**Qanita Lilla:** That's pretty profound.

**Jason Cyrus:** Yes, it is.

**Qanita Lilla:** Seriously. It's like, really, like an anti-historical contemporary. Jason, you know, you've included a lot of contemporary artists' work. And it provides not only like a counterbalance, but a real kind of depth. Can you talk a bit about that?

**Jason Cyrus:** Absolutely. The very notion of my practice is -- again, Ezi, I love your connection of your expression of history being yesterday. Our very lives are this multiplicity. And I hope my practice kind of involves those. So in a sense, it's always going to be some type of archival element and some type of contemporary art mix just because of how that, for me, shows that duality. And I've been extremely fortunate to collaborate with three profound, profound, profound artists in *History Is Rarely Black or White*, the first being Karin Jones, who I met, whose work, I should say, encountered back in 2015. Karen created an installation for the ROM [Royal

Ontario Museum] called *Worn*, a Victorian morning dress in black made out of black braided hair with cotton around it. I was so struck by that work in the way that Karen's practice, again, going -- Ezi, going back to what you're saying, but this whole notion of being, like, immediately now, who is she now, what is the work about now. And what I love is that every Black woman, every black person walking into that show and seeing her piece got the history of slavery, dress history, as well as in a contemporary setting, the -- what's the word? The conversations around Black hair and around respectability and around what hair looks like and *who* it looks like. And this notion of what is considered respectable forms of dress and where does that come from. You got all of that just by looking at Karen's garments in one go. And that's something, I think, I've always been highly affected by by Karen's work. So when we approached her earlier in the year and asked her to create an installation for us based on Agnes's collection of cotton garments, and when she said, yes, I was over the moon. Karen is a wonderful human being. Her lens -- she's a teacher. She's an instructor at the Vancouver Community College of Art. She teaches jewelry design. She's a professor there as well as having her own artistic practice. So what her installation does in the exhibition is built around what -- it's cotton day dress, which is one of the most important garments in the Agnes's collection because it was worn by the mother of the third Premier of Ontario, Henry Mowat. And the -- I don't want to give up -- I don't want to give all of it away. But the garment has a lot of significance to Kingston's local history as well as Canadian history. The materiality of itself is important because it was fitted using a ruler printed machine, which was a relatively new invention at the time. It's one of the very few in Canadian collections after that that jumps, like, I think it's the [Victoria and Albert Museum] and at [the Metropolitan Museum of Art]. So the garment is very important. And it's always seen as, like, I started to sound like a broken record now, from a perspective of its social cultural history. But what Karen's garment does, it reminds us of who is working on the garment by enlightening and activating these balls that are a mixture of cotton, raw cotton and black hair. And these balls encircle the garments almost like in this cosmic, almost ethereal sense. And I'm going back to that moment I had that studio visit with her, and I just got it immediately. It was this freeing of the identities, all the identities that are involved in making this garment, specifically the enslaved ones, and how the black and the white were mixed in the cotton and the hair just showed how these histories are so intertwined, and we can't separate them, even though we've tried to do so for centuries.

Damien Jöel is another artist that I've been very fortunate to work with. Damien is a queer Jamaican American living in Brooklyn. I first met Damien a year ago in a symposium. Damien was explaining his work in the context of making contemporary garments and telling historical stories. And again, similar to Karen, I just got the historical and contemporary sense in their work immediately. And Damien has worked very closely with the Gullah/Geechee nation off the coast of South Carolina and across and along the coast as well. The Gullah/Geechee -- I believe the specific radius of the land they occupy now goes from Jacksonville, North Carolina all the way to Jacksonville, Florida. They do have different location centers and where people groups are spread. But he worked -- or at least he created a collection called *Songs of the Gullah* that tells the story of the Gullah/Geechee nation that was this kind of amalgamation of the African people groups and nations that were forcibly removed from the west coast of Africa, settled in this very region. And then the language, their cultures came together to form this nation. And they over the centuries have worked very hard to preserve their identity, their language, their

culture, their food, in spite of the simulation, gentrification, colonialism. And he created this amazing collection and then shared it and consulted with Queen Quet, who's elected Chieftess of the nation. And what I love is this collection Damien has created. And he calls his collections "fashion stories". These are not garments that you can walk into Nordstrom and find on a rack. These are bespoke, one-of-a-kind garments that are made from deadstock fabric, fabric that, you know, is not -- is off-cuts of other things. Or it could be upcycled garments from vintage things, because he's referencing the sustainable ways that the Gullah/Geechee have lived off the land as well, as his own practice. And this collection tells a story of the Gullah/Geechee nation in different passages. In the exhibition, we will have the first passage in three garments that speaks to, again, this notion of duality, this notion of the history in the contemporary. The garments speak to who the Gullah/Geechee are now as well as who they've always been, as to where they've come from. There's one garment, *Turtle Dove*, that mixes the Yoruban spiritual practice with the imposition of Christianity and Catholicism in one garment by way of Mocha Jamia and the Caribbean, which, again, comes from my own heritage. And again, looking at one garment, you see the history -- you see yesterday, 200 years ago and tomorrow in a snap. And Damien does that so profoundly. What I think pushes it even more into telling story and enlightening the past as well as the future is that the garments are created as genderless. Damien himself, being queer, is really trying to also not say that gender is a modern construct, but we've always been there. I as a queer person myself know that my stories have always been there. They're just not been told. And this is not -- again, even thinking of black history and queer history, they're always separated. The intersectionality of it shows that we've always been together. We've always been in community living, making cultural contributions.

And then we're moving into the last gallery. Gordon Shadrach who is an amazing portrait artist and who paints the portraits of Black men and women, I'm going to sound like a broken record, to show them the past and the present. He paints in a historical style. He uses these beautiful gilt and wood carved frames to show the dearth of representations of Blackness in Western art history. Why have we never been painted in the way that the lord of the manor in a huge house has been portrayed? But yet in the facial expressions, in the skin tone, in the clothing, he speaks to the experience of marginalization. I met Gordon, I would say, six -- no, five years ago. Four years ago, sorry, rather. We worked -- he had an exhibition up and I chatted with him to program a conversation. And I was so struck by his work and specific pieces that were in that show and how his practice has evolved over time to be even more bold, to tell even more -- to make even more pronouncements about how the experiences that black people have now living in Canada, living while Black are connected to histories of enslavement, histories of incarceration. And their experiences there are now -- and traveling back. Ezi, as you so brilliantly said, "how was I different yesterday? And how am I showing up today? How will I show up tomorrow? How much can I insert myself? And how much of the systems around me do I have to subvert and change and challenge?" You get that with Gordon's work in an instant, just in terms of dualities of the portraits put together. And in that room, Gordon's work is in conversation with some tintypes from the 1800s of formerly enslaved folks who escaped into Canada. And what I hope audience members will do is look at the tintypes, look at Gordon's works and ask, "Are our experiences different? How are they different? What has changed? And what is connected to the micro and macro aggressions that we feel now? Where does that come from? And how were we 200 years ago, but how were we yesterday? And how might we be?" This is the

offering that I hope the exhibition does. How might we be? And Ezi, that's a very important part of *Spirit Banter*. How might we be now? Let's come together now. How might we be? And what do we want to bring all together? Qanita, I know this is a bit off topic. Well, one thing I love so much that I realized standing in the galleries on Friday is the ways that our shows look in on each other. I think it's the masks from Côte d'Ivoire, and I think it's Sierra Leone, but I think it's Côte d'Ivoire. Before they look directly through the opening to *History Is Rarely Black or White*. And they look at Africa. That is a specific point on the map.

**Qanita Lilla:** Half of them look at the Atlantic. Half of them look at Africa.

**Jason Cyrus:** Yes. And the Atlantic -- the projection of the Atlantic in your show actually looks directly into the part of the Atlantic on the map. They are looking -- it's this -- they're looking back home. They are home. They're looking back home. They're remembering.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's like, you know, all these -- they're such powerful cues. You can't read it without feeling. You can't read it with your eyes. You have to -- because there are too many things, you know. I was looking at a mask, but my eye caught on your map because it's so powerful. And it's so -- you know, you can not see it. You cannot see it.

**Jason Cyrus:** And I do that and vice versa. The last few days I've been in installation, I just see your masks. I just see them. And what you have so brilliantly done in the staging of it, you know, removed all didactic elements -- I mean, I know there's the panel and there's the hand out. But we're just forced to spend time staring, being in front of, questioning our own selves with these masks and asking ourselves deep questions. And the projections of the Atlantic behind and the soil between them, it's to me such a visceral reaction because it's something that removes my intellect, you know.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's that pounding.

**Jason Cyrus:** It's pounding.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know, because that is the Atlantic. The Atlantic is crashing. It's crashing.

**Jason Cyrus:** And I don't know if you know, but, like, so Damien's installation has that film, *Songs of the Gullah*. And there's song. There's incantation in that. And there's the beautiful overlap of the crashing waves of the Atlantic from *With Opened Mouths*. And there's this layering now for both our shows that happens as you go through. And I'm hoping that we'll still be able to hear a bit of Ezi as you move between space. And these are things that are -- these are the synergies that you can't plan but come from community. That comes from deep looking.

**Ezi Odozor:** Can I just read something -- as we're talking about time and whether something is contemporary or historical is actually, you know, the piece I wrote, I wrote in response to both of your exhibitions. And so there's these two parts of the poem, I think, that fit right now in what we're talking about. So if you don't mind, I'll just read it. Okay.

*I have brushed the dirt from my lips,*

*untangled the cobwebs and laughed at you  
and your surprise.*

*I am full of mirth and tomorrow shaped things  
whatever you may wish to believe.*

*You will see me in your blinkered eye,  
open or closed, I'll insist.*

*This is not news, but it is a promise worth repeating.*

*I have returned to where I have never been, always  
belonged, and dreamed of always and never.*

*I am back, having never left,  
knowing forward is as much back, as standing still.*

*My veil of cowries shows me the way home.*

*I lay it at my feet, jump, and land  
shaking the earth for I am material, here  
where I have never been and always known.*

So for – [laughs].

**Jason:** Mmm.

**All:** [snaps]

**Qanita Lilla:** Ezi, we could not have hoped for a better voice. We could not have hoped for a better voice. And I love you both. I wish I could have been with both of you together doing this. But it's just -- it's been phenomenal. It's been so phenomenal. Thank you so much. Thank you for your time. I could talk to you all day. But really, I think that part of the poem is a perfect way to end and start a new beginning as people go into those galleries and see Jason's magnificent show. I mean, it is just such a -- yeah, you just made such a monumental -- it's like all your dreams, you know, all your dreams of this kind of debate. You try to envision them. It's so beautiful. It's so beautiful. And it's so beautiful that you put your heart out there. And it's so -- it's amazing that you do the same, Ezi. Thank you so much.

**Jason Cyrus:** Thank you so much. Well, you know, I have to obviously give credit to the massive team that's working. Anne-Marie Guérin is a fantastic conservator of working on this exhibition as well, who's very heart and soul and professionalism has allowed us to -- not just the garments and breathing them back to life so we can tell the stories of their lives, but just how we bounce ideas off each other, how we build community together, pulling things all together. Leah and Scott and Mark, installing and keeping the whole machine of everything just going. But of course, Qanita and Ezi, your ways of just encouraging me and sharing ideas together and bouncing ideas off, and from an institutional perspective as well as from a more personal one. This show is really a reflection, I think, of community. And I hope that is seen. And I want to honestly say thank you to both of you. Love you much, so much.

**Qanita Lilla:** I seriously hope that we will be able to work together, you know, in the future.

**Ezi Odozor:** And in the flesh.

**Jason Cyrus:** [Laughs] Yes!

**Ezi Odozor:** In the future and in the flesh.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes. That would be amazing. So thank you, guys. This is my last -- my very last podcast episode. And thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths, The Podcast*. Thank you so much. Thank you.

[Ocean sound]

**Qanita Lilla:** Jason had a few more thanks to give following our recording and asked us to include them here:

**Jason Cyrus:** Speaking of community, I would also like to thank Robin Chantree, the amazing designer of this exhibition for their creativity, for their technical expertise, and the decolonial methodology that they bring and that is so integral to bringing this project to life. I also have to thank Danuta, the Agnes's technical wizard for the amazing work she has done to create an online platform for the show so that long after the physical exhibition ends, we can continue to experience and hear from these stories online. Thank you Danuta!

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*. Special thanks to my guests, Ezi Odozor and Jason Cyrus for speaking with us today. The podcast is hosted by, myself, Dr Qanita Lilla and produced by 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.

As this is my final episode for this season, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my wonderful guests: thank you for being open to this project and for trusting me with your stories. I would also like to thank CFRC's Station Manager, Dinah Jansen, who has been enthusiastic



about this podcast right from the start. A special thanks to Chancelor Maracle who has done superb work editing all of the podcasts. Thank you to my marvelous co-conspirator, Danuta Sierhuis, Digital Development Coordinator at Agnes for coordinating the logistics and more importantly for collaborating on something completely new for both of us and for sharing a belief in the untapped digital potential of the museum. And last, but not least, thank you, Emelie Chhangur, Director at Agnes, who championed this podcast as speaking to a reimagined museum where safe spaces can allow for all of us to open our mouths and to be heard.

[Music]