

# DIGITAL AGNES

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## One Person's Uprising is Another Person's Riot

*With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*

January 2023

### SPEAKERS

Qanita Lilla, Pamila Matharu and Winsom Winsom

### KEYWORDS

Youth Arts, Activism, Social Justice, Pedagogy, Spiritualism

### TRANSCRIPT

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Welcome back to a new season of *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*, where we sit down with artists, curators, poets and performers to learn from their creative journeys. I am your host, Qanita Lilla, Agnes's Associate Curator, Arts of Africa.

Last summer, I spoke with Winsom Winsom and Pamila Matharu about their artistic practices and the unique and lasting bond they share as mentor and mentee. Winsom Winsom is an Ashanti Maroon artist. She has a long and remarkable career working in textiles, painting, video, installation and puppetry. Winsom is significant both as an artist and as a cherished mentor to many artists of colour. Pamila Matharu is a settler in Canada of Panjabi, Indian descent. Pamila's work culminates in a broad range of forms including installation art, social practice, and experimental media art. Both Winsom and Pamila, recently exhibited at Agnes in two separate, but intersecting shows that celebrate untold feminist histories with ties to the city of Kingston.

So, let's dive into the conversation!

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Welcome, Winsom and Pamila.

**Pamila Matharu:** Thank you.

**Winsom Winsom:** Thank you.

**Qanita Lilla:** You're both in Kingston and Agnes right now installing your shows. Can you tell me about your practice, Winsom? I know it's big and where do you start?

**Winsom Winsom:** My practice. My practice belongs to the ancestors. They dream me. They tell me what they want and a lot of times things that other people may need, maybe I may need but I don't

know I need. So my practice is really just listening to the universe and understanding what they want and interpreting what they're saying because sometimes I understand quite easily, other times it takes many dreams to really get what they're saying.

**Pamila Matharu:** I guess for me, and the reason I'm here is because of Winsom, without Winsom's labour and care I wouldn't exist as an artist. She really helped me shape my vision and form of engagement as a visual artist, as a social practitioner, as an arts educator, but also understanding the 'art world context'. And I say that in quotations. Of understanding the market, understanding the lay of the land, of museum culture and what not. So as a young artist I did go to university, but unfortunately the university realm did not -- you know, even after formal schooling, I didn't see people like myself in the art world. I did not see people like Winsom very much after I experienced a program called Fresh Arts. And I am a graduate of Fresh Arts where I was under the tutelage of Black feminist cultural producers and thinkers and artists. And that really for me was the birthplace of my artistry and it was not just Winsom alone but many Black feminist artists who were present at the time and really informed my consciousness and my social justice value system around the work I do today.

**Qanita Lilla:** Winsom, tell me about Fresh Arts. There seems to be -- like Pamila mentions it again and again as being like such a critical part of hers and many, many other artists' inspiration and just like a formative grounding.

**Winsom Winsom:** Fresh Arts came out -- first it was Art Works and then it was changed to Fresh Arts. Fresh Arts came out of the uprising that happened in Toronto in 19 --

**Pamila Matharu:** May 4th, 1992.

**Winsom Winsom:** '92. And from that, a group of women, senior women, Lillian Allen, Itah Sadhu, Mumford --

**Pamila Matharu:** Marie Mumford.

**Winsom Winsom:** Marie Mumford. And we got together -- they got together with the government and talked to them into doing a program because the Black youth in Toronto couldn't get jobs or apprenticeships in the summer. There was nothing they could do. Today, I just passed them -- art groups, little kids doing art and I noticed that --

**Qanita Lilla:** At Agnes.

**Winsom Winsom:** -- I wasn't going to say where.

**Qanita Lilla:** Oh.

**Winsom Winsom:** I just.

**Qanita Lilla:** That's OK. We need to.

**Winsom Winsom:** And I only saw -- I didn't see any Black faces among all the kids. There were like 35 or 30 kids there, sitting there, I didn't see any Black kids. I saw two Asian and that was it. And so that was what we were seeing in '92, and the same thing that we saw then is what we're still seeing, and we realized that the young kids needed training and they needed jobs and so we got together, I was asked if I would do the visual arts section and different people did, and COBRA did the dance and different people did different parts of it. And Chapman did the writing. And there was a lot of different artists who were working and mainly women in doing it. And I set up the visual arts program, and my concept in visual art is that it's getting them to be free, learning how to do it. And so, in Fresh Arts they were paid just as if they were at work. They came for the summer. They logged in, signed in and they got paid. If they were late, they didn't get paid for that time because it's by the hour, at the end of the week they got money; if they didn't come to work, they didn't get paid. And with learning art forms was work. And so, I taught many different programs and what I tried to do was teach the kids in my program how to use with little material or whatever they have, how to do it. They didn't need expensive equipment to do silkscreen. They could do hand cut hand paint it and create and did shirts and things like that so they could start off. I ran all the programs in conjunction with that, where kids coming out to art school who knew how to use all the high-end equipment but needed at least \$10,000 to set up their studio, which they didn't have and now could come and set it up for \$200 and start producing. So, my thing was in looking at how to do it without putting them in a high-cost range. And the other thing was, for me, it was mentoring these kids, it was teaching them that they need to give back. Most of the young people that I worked with through Fresh Arts are now all giving back to the community, being mentors to young people and many others, they all are doing it. Even one (ex-student) is trying to set up an art program, an art school for young Black kids who want to go. And he was talking to me about mentoring and how it was the biggest part for him in learning. Sometimes, people think it's just about teaching work but it's also teaching them how to 'Be'. And my motto for them, because it was my motto that my father gave me growing up, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for the country." That's what they all seemed to be doing and helping each other, and that's where, for me, it is where we all should help each other.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. I think that's what Pamila was trying to put into words like how this shifted a whole mindset. It wasn't about art at all. It was about connections and community and –

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah, 100%.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- finding your place, and I think especially in a place where you are a minority of a minority, and not only that, but everything around you and you get told certain things consistently, and to actually have that space to be supported and nurtured in that way is phenomenal and incredible.

**Winsom Winsom:** And one of the things I think people don't realize is that a lot of the young people that I have worked with -- not just through Fresh Arts, but I worked with the youth in prison and many different groups like that where I would go in and I would use art and spirituality to work with them. I'm not talking about religion. Spirituality. We are listening to yourself, knowing, figuring out how you would like to be treated and you treat others like that. You don't want somebody messing

with your shirt, so why mess with the other person? Show respect to them. And most of them have come out and are now really good citizens doing really great things. Part of it is, in school they don't teach them the history of their culture. They're getting the White man's history, and nothing is wrong with the White man's history if it was true. What they need to be taught was that their lives did not -- Black lives in particular did not begin as slavery. We were kings and queens. We were inventors. We did many things but most of the young Black kids think of themselves as just starting at slavery. And I point out to many of them, that you're standing on your ancestors' shoulders; if it wasn't for your ancestors you wouldn't be here today. If they had jumped over that slave boat, you wouldn't have been born. So, they suffered what they did to push you up so make them proud. Look at what they're doing and look at what you're doing and say "Would my grandmother, or great-great-grandmother who suffered all the hardships through slavery: "How would she be proud of what I'm doing?" Just to do what would make and make yourself, and once you decide to make yourself proud, then you're going to great things. I had a choice of going bad or good. I chose good. [Laughs]

**Qanita Lilla:** Where did you get that sense of connection? Coming here in the '70s, where did you get that strong sense of connection, that ancestral connection?

**Winsom Winsom:** I have had that since I remember at age four. I knew I was going to be an artist, and I knew that I came to protect young people. That's my purpose this time around. I'm very connected to when I was growing up, they would call and say "Oh, she's a throwback" and I used to think it was really bad. Because I would do stuff and they would say "Oh, she's a throwback." And then when I really went back to Africa, I realized a lot of the stuff I was doing was stuff the ancient people used to do but I had no idea they were teaching me. I didn't understand why I was learning all these things. And so, I used them. I know people thought I was strange, and I don't think of myself as strange, I just think of myself as I'm different. Probably I'm going to say I'm from another planet, and even the country I grew up in, most people would say to me, "Where are you from? You're not from this country because you don't think like we do." But part of it is the ancestors. I listen to them. They dream of me and that's where my art comes from, from their dreams and it may not be for me, maybe for somebody else. For instance, I remember --and I do things that sometimes I don't really want to do but I know I need to do it. For instance, I remember YYZ [Gallery] said that a gallery in Toronto called me and asked me to do a show and it was like in three weeks, the whole thing, and I said three weeks? Turned out they said that they had somebody in that slot and the person couldn't come, something happened and I would fill it for them? I didn't want to; I don't do shows in three weeks because I have to think about stuff, and I talked to many people around me. I remembered seeing Glen Marshall, who is a great leader in the community, who said to me, "That's the gallery that has never shown any Black art before, and if you don't show they're going to say they asked a Black person and they didn't show... so I think you should try and do it." But I should back up, before that: I was in Mexico. I found this huge stone and I hit my foot on it. I picked it up, and I stopped to tell it "I was sorry for kicking it," and then it wanted to come (home with me). I picked it up, and I took it with me to where I was sitting, and my kid said to me, "What are you doing with that stone?" and I said, "I don't know. It wants to be with me." And I was coming back to Canada, and when we were coming back at the end of the holidays, I started trying to get it in my suitcase and they said "You can't carry it, it's too big. You can't, that's a lot of weight for you to carry." And I said, "Well, I guess my stuff will have to stay and I'm taking this stone

because it says it's coming home with me." And so, they all sorted it out and got some of my stuff in their suitcases and I got to take my stone. I brought it home and I plumped it on the ground by my bed, and it was there for almost a year and a half. And then, when I decided I'm going to do this show in three weeks, suddenly I hit my foot on the stone -- I've never hit my foot on the stone after I placed it there. Walking around the bed I hit my foot and I'm like, "Do you want to be in the show?" And it was the centerpiece of the show. It was there and I remember the day of the opening, lots of people and it was crowded, people around the block trying to come and the police came to see why people were lining up, they couldn't get in, it was a small gallery and stuff. And then three days later the gallery called me and said, "I don't know what to do. There's this woman, she's so distraught. She comes in and she sits on the ground, and she keeps her hand on the stone in your work and we don't know what to do. What do you want us to do? We said to her you shouldn't touch the work, but she still does it, and it's like she doesn't hear us." And I said, "Leave her alone." I remember how the stone talked to me, so I figured maybe it's for her. She kept her hand on the stone for all this time. And then finally, one day in maybe after a month while I was passing the gallery, I thought let me stop in and see, it was near lunch hour, and they said she comes in every day around lunch hour. So, I went in to see if the woman was there and I said, "Has she come yet or am I too early?" And they said, "She came in around three days ago and she was just laughing and happy. Thanking the stone and stroking it, saying 'Thank you, very much' and praising the stone." They hadn't seen her since then. So, the stone was hers. I cannot do something even if I don't feel like doing it because it may be for somebody else.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** I don't know if I rambled.

**Qanita Lilla:** So, things like objects, everything, everything can --

**Winsom Winsom:** I did a piece on stones from around the world and people were sending me stones and I never said anything about what I was doing. I had a dream to do a show with stones and suddenly stones were arriving. I still remember this woman who went to India, Mel Kaspar and she was a woman. She's --

**Pamila Matharu:** Transitioning.

**Winsom Winsom:** So, I said to her when she came back from India, and she said to me I have something for you, it's the only thing I brought back for anybody. But every time I go to get rid of it, she walks out from Mount Kilimanjaro, and she said I hit myself on the stone and a vision of you came to me. I picked it up and looked at it and I took it back to the hotel room. She had it in her hotel and said that when she was leaving, she was getting everything and throwing out everything, and as soon as she picked up the stone, she said, "There you were again. So, I brought it back for you" and she gave it to me, and I said, "I'm doing a show with stones from different parts of the world." And on the bottom of the stones, I wrote where they were from. And then I did a smaller one where people could take a stone and leave a prayer for the universe. It all came to me just

through dreams and stuff and people sending me stones. The universe talks to us in different ways and that's how it talks to me, how I know what to do with people. And I worked in the prisons, and I worked in the prison for women. I got many artists here in Kingston, and I have women like Faith Nolan, I got different people to come in and do work in there which helped women. I just do what needs to be done. Somehow something tells me what needs to be done. That's it.

**Qanita Lilla:** The connection of places elsewhere, places that have a connection to you. Like India for example, what is your connection and movement from Canada to India and how does it inform your practice? Like what Winsom was saying, Africa has such a profound influence on her.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah, I think for me and many people who grew up in the diaspora, my concept of India is very much – there's a phrase called "*Desh Pardesh*," which means "home away from home." And the India I've created in my imagination, perhaps, or in my home or family home, that's through food and culture and aspects of culture and what not. And I think Fresh Arts was really affirming and validating around that self-awareness, because even though I'm non-Black, non-Indigenous person. The year that I met Winsom, it was the summer of 1994 and that was the year that they allowed non-Indigenous and non-Black racialized youth to be part of the program because it was also incumbent on sustaining funding. If it didn't grow like that it would mean some detrimental decisions would be made. But anyways, I was very much in proximity to Black thought and Black cultural production--particularly Black feminist thought. And I tried to use the model that Winsom employed. Winsom mentioned that in her department the entire program was made up of a multidisciplinary approach—so there was music, performing arts, literary arts and visual arts. And with the visual arts, Winsom would really share the platform. So, I met two individuals -- Winsom, you might remember them clearly--but Scheherazade Alam who just recently passed away and Zahoor Ul Akhlaq, her partner who also died tragically in Pakistan in Lahore. And they were really instrumental -- Winsom was really instrumental in sharing those platforms so youth like myself could understand that in terms of artistry and self-awareness, and as Winsom mentioned the spirituality piece, like that is something that is honed internally, it's an internal kind of way of life and being, a way of knowing. I think it was really modelled to me very early on around that piece, meeting people like Zahoor and Scheherazade, along with Winsom and Althea Prince and Michael St. George. The entire group of facilitators that I became very close with, that summer, and it was really about being honed into your spiritual practice as well as your artistic practice. They were not in some way siloed way that the Western canon teaches art, and in fact, we don't ever talk about the spirit in the Western canon. It was very like something that was familiar to me on a spiritual, religious level but then I quickly realized through Winsom's teachings that, you know, the spirit is something to be nurtured and honed for the artist. That was about going back into myself around learning my Indian-ness in a very diasporic context.

And being born in the UK, there's a very large diasporic South Asian population in the UK, as well as in Canada and Australia and many different parts of the Western world. Our India is not just from the motherland, but all over the place. And now with music and film being so extrapolated through digital access and the Internet, it's not that far or foreign to a young person who doesn't have access to India. I couldn't necessarily have a lot of return trips home. What I mean by that is going back to Jalandhar and Kapurthala, my father's village and mom's city. But, I had a few trips, the identity shaping around my Indian-ness came from a diasporic lens. And also watching Winsom and the

Black youth in Fresh Arts, and being in proximity and adjacent to them, I understood my culture through learning about Black thought, and not mimicking or appropriating, but understanding that context around my own identity and how I was shaping it as a young person. It was 1994, it was summer and I was going to turn 21 in the Fall. And, yeah, it was really for me, very instrumental and foundational to get that kind of teaching, I would say, and that knowledge acquisition around the self-awareness piece, and around understanding what working with your spirit and ancestral spirits meant. And when you're a young person you laugh at all of these things but –

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** And it was like Winsom would put up with our antics, we're like little punks. But she was like --

**Qanita Lilla:** That's serious. I'm sorry. What comes into my head every time, is how do you communicate everything that you are saying to kids?

**Pamila Matharu:** Mm-hmm.

**Qanita Lilla:** Young people, who are actually quite not even resistant, but hostile to these kinds of ideas --

**Pamila Matharu:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** Because they're feeling dislocated in a Canada and that doesn't acknowledge their reality -- how do you communicate that?

**Pamila Matharu:** Well, asking basic questions in a Socratic way that Winsom did like, "Who are you?" So asking yourself, "Who am I?" That's a very large question.

**Qanita Lilla:** That is a huge question.

**Pamila Matharu:** "Where am I going?"

**Qanita Lilla:** You ask them that?

**Pamila Matharu:** Yes. "Where am I going?" I'm 20 going on 21, but I'm introduced to Malcolm X and C.L.R. James. You know, amazing, like Stewart Hall, and all these thinkers that I just did not have access to in my undergraduate fine art's visual arts degree program. So you can imagine, my mind's blown and I'm going back into the realm of York University and its completely White professors, the White canon, right. I see nothing that looks like me and it took me two or three years to get to a course called Arts of Asia taught by a White professor and it was just for a lack of a better word, atrocious around the way the framework around aesthetics were looked at. Because I'm also looking at very spiritual places, the Ajanta Caves, Taj Mahal, and the Golden Temple. All of these amazing -- in terms of how my living ancestors are going into something that my deceased ancestors made by their hand's, way before engineering. This is engineering by hand, cut stone, sculpting by

stone, all these things. But the West did not teach me anything about that. So that context of saying things like, you come from a very beautiful culture, don't discredit that. Winsom really helped us understand and shape that agency and that activating our voices through that. Feeling pride in that. Not in the ethnocentric way, like the way soccer matches are in Canada.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** -- or during World Cup or something. But it was about like you come from a beautiful culture. You can go back into that. And nobody in my undergraduate degree said that to me; whereas I was finding that in Fresh Arts and definitely through Winsom's teachings. So back to your question, Winsom showed me a pathway to this other ground-breaking organization called *Desh Pardesh* which was a festival and conference. And it was very interesting, because Winsom saw who I was becoming and I didn't even know. I wasn't even out to myself at the time, but she saw something in me. She was like, "You might be interested in this organization that shares the same office space as Fresh Arts." And I was like, "Oh yeah, what's that?" And then I got introduced to this -- again, mind blown -- this phenomenal organization with these amazing diasporic South Asian thinkers, activists, academics, artists and performing artists. They ran their festival for about 10 years, and I got involved in the programming committee and what not. And after that, I went back to another job, it's called Jobs Ontario Youth Funded Program. Much like Fresh Arts it was another program called Theatre in the Rough, and that's where I met Dr. Amah Harris who is a very significant theatre person also from Jamaica. I had a lot of exposure to Black creative professionals, particularly Black feminist artists that really helped hone who I was in terms of my Indian-ness, to help me shape that consciousness. And then of course, *Desh Pardesh* was incredibly instrumental in my shaping of that, yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** This is like translating --

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- this experience --

**Pamila Matharu:** Mm-hmm.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- from Fresh Arts and all those kinds of community activism, how does that translate into the art world and into museums and gallery spaces? How do you navigate that because now you've got your--?

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- your networks, you've got your communities --

**Pamila Matharu:** Right.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- you've got your people, but how do you interact with the --

**Pamila Matharu:** I think I really love what Dr. Julie Crooks from the AGO talks about, which is I got one foot in the institution and one foot in my community. And similarly, that's how I roll. Like today I'm working in this museum or this university art gallery. After Labour Day I'm back to my high school teaching job and I'm serving students. That's what I do, I lead, and I serve. And that's what Winsom did.

**Winsom Winsom:** I opened the door and kept it wide open. [Laughs]

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah. And I use the same framework. And no word of a lie, I have called Winsom up in the recent past and say, "Oh my gosh, what do I do about these youth? They're not listening and this and that." And I have shared my struggles, and she's just coached me from afar when she lived in Belize, when she's back in Toronto visiting or what not. I just kept this one mentor that I actively keep a connection with. And, I have to say, she's right here but she calls up the youth too and still stays in touch with everyone. It's about keeping that active connection, and --

**Qanita Lilla:** And also, as an artist, do you go knocking or do you wait for them to come?

**Winsom Winsom:** I don't. I don't.

**Qanita Lilla:** Of course you don't.

**Winsom Winsom:** I don't. I don't. I'm the first Black-Canadian to have shown at the AGO.

**Pamila Matharu:** AGO, yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** And I kept --

**Pamila Matharu:** Do you want to --

**Qanita Lilla:** Wow.

**Pamila Matharu:** -- share what year it was Winsom?

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes, please.

**Winsom Winsom:** 1999, I think. 1999.

**Qanita Lilla:** What?

**Winsom Winsom:** That show --

**Qanita Lilla:** That's very recent.

**Pamila Matharu:** Very recent.

**Winsom Winsom:** But they had shown Black artists, but from other countries, not Canadian Black artists. And so I put together a thing myself and with Kofi Kayiga. We started writing to each other about spirituality because his spiritual work is on an African concept and I had shown my very first show in Jamaica and it was with Kofi Kayiga. We're both Jamaicans of that heritage. And we travelled the world. And we decided to do a show together because it marked 50 years that we had shown together. And so, we put it together and then I talked to the AGO. We just couldn't get anywhere at the door and then, but I passed by the curators and everybody and I made an appointment with the Director of the gallery.

**Pamila Matharu:** And that time it was Matthew Teitelbaum?

**Winsom Winsom:** Matthew Teitelbaum.

**Pamila Matharu:** Right.

**Winsom Winsom:** Yeah. I made a thing, and I got to know Matthew and talked to him and stuff. I think he supported me, and through the curator. That was when they hadn't quite said yes yet, and then CANBAIA an art organization looking to do a show there at the AGO of Black artists, but I think it was mostly from other countries because I wasn't asked to be part of it. And then theirs was turned down, and I don't know why it was turned down, and they suggested that they talk to me to see if I would let it be the show to promote with CANBAIA. When I talked to them, I asked if they wanted certain people and then I said, "No, I would only do it if I selected the people" because they wanted it to be bigger than two, so we selected it. So, I had two other people, another two guys who work in spirituality from a different point of view than ours, one was Haitian and the other was a Buddhist, and then I talked to some women who I knew, artists that I respected. They said, "At the AGO? They won't let us show." I said, "Yes, it's going to happen if you say yes". And so, they did. That was how I presented it. There were -- I can't remember how many of us: Kadija Bushra Junaid, myself, Jan Wade, [laughs], there were six or seven of us. Which is my number, somehow, seven came together. We did the show and then while it was happening the curator decided they didn't want one person there because I can't remember. It was Keith and I said, "No, he is staying. His work is going to be in there and stuff." So I called up all the other groups and other people and I said, "Look, if Keith's work isn't in there, we all walk. We won't do it."

**Pamila Matharu:** Right.

**Winsom Winsom:** And they all said, "OK. OK." And so Keith was in there, we were all in there and the show happened.

**Pamila Matharu:** But back to your question about the art world, right. These are the kind of barriers that exist for BIPOC artists like Black, Indigenous, and racialized artists, we often have to wait and it's prior to the realm of decolonizing and looking at the actions for the Truth and Reconciliation Report. There's been a long history of gatekeeping. And if you want to use that Western model, well the thing is, and this is why Fresh Arts was so successful: you boil down those silos. You just break them down. And it is like a one-room schoolhouse.

**Qanita Lilla:** Mm-hmm.

**Winsom Winsom:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** Right?

**Winsom Winsom:** Which I – yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** Which is what works –

**Winsom Winsom:** It works.

**Pamila Matharu:** -- for multidisciplinary -- because the language in the West is multidisciplinary but that is the strategy that a lot of non-White cultures used.

**Qanita Lilla:** Any way.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yes. Poetry, prose, right? Like this is in our spirituality, right?

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** And just like way of being.

**Pamila Matharu:** The way of being, the way of knowing, our ways of knowing, right. These are our Indigenous ways of knowing. So when the West wants to sell yoga back to me or meditation --

**Winsom Winsom:** It's what you live.

**Pamila Matharu:** -- or, yeah, or mindfulness it's like, "Are you kidding me?" This is what I grew up on, right? This is what my family taught me in my faith. I just at some point had to stop working with White practitioners of yoga, because it was like you are extracting all the beauty and spiritualness out of this form of contemplative practice. And I don't know where contemplative practices are like Winsom 's can fit in the museum. If we're going to talk futurities, then we're going to have to do a lot of work, a lot of work deconstructing the ways of what the West assumes around acquiring work by artists like Winsom ' s or Indigenous artists or myself and what not. Even though my language or the way I operate around materiality and form is of course what I learnt from school, but I'm also trying to play within the museum, and I'm leaving things crooked on purpose on the wall.

**Winsom Winsom:** OK. OK.

**Pamila Matharu:** On the wall. It just so happens that I'm wallpapering my imagery on the Agnes's walls but sometimes I push too hard, and something rips. I'm like, "Oh well. It's going to stay." I'm not going to rip this down. I'm going to leave that rip up, that little tear in.

**Winsom Winsom:** But those rips --

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah. Yes. Yes.

**Winsom Winsom:** Those rips are meant. The universe wants it. For instance –

**Pamila Matharu:** I was about to get to that. No. Please, please take over.

**Winsom Winsom:** The universe wants it, so you don't try and correct it. You look and ask it, "Why do you do that?" I mean sometimes I have a drop of paint outside the canvas and I'm like, "OK, what are you trying to tell me?" And I remember this particular one I turned it into a beautiful tree. Then the next thing I saw was an animal and it was outside the norm of the painting and people came and said, "Oh isn't that unusual." That's kind of neat having that little piece outside of the square that you painted. You unbalanced it but it's still balanced but they don't realize the universe wants it and we're just trying to control this great massive greatness that is there, that is leading us. That's how I deal with all the kids. When I work with kids, that's when I do. I don't try, it's kind of like saying listen to yourself but I respect them and that's the foremost I think why the kids are -- and I call them kids, they're kids to me.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** To you they are, yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** They're kids to me.

**Pamila Matharu:** You're a kid too, Winsom.

**Qanita Lilla:** I know. I know, it's great. [Laughs]

**Winsom Winsom:** You know. But I respect them and, you know, by respecting them, they want to do -- they start to respect themselves --

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** -- and try to get into themselves so they are because I don't talk down to them.

**Pamila Matharu:** No.

**Winsom Winsom:** I don't -- we're equal. I respect you. I can learn from you. You can learn from me. I see that all the time, where I may tell them to do something this way and someone smart-ass person will say I want to do it this way and I said, "OK, you can do it that way. If it works, it works." I will learn something new and if it works, I congratulate them and say, "Oh that's great. Now I know another way to teach it." And I think that sometimes that is what happens when young people knock against people who are trying to help them, because they're dictating to them you have to do this in this way.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** Mm-hmm.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, and then they're living for a new generation, different time, a time without us.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah. And Winsom, you just used the word norm, right? So, norms, standards, like that value system and is hegemonic, right? So that paint drops outside of the canvas, whether it was intentional or not, whether the universe kind of goes, "You know what? we're going to, you know, fuck with your symmetry today." Like, you know, like those things --

**Winsom Winsom:** Watch your word, girl.

**Pamila Matharu:** OK.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's OK.

**Pamila Matharu:** OK. OK.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah. OK. But the point being is that those are, again, very innate kind of decisions that the system just doesn't allow you to make those kinds of sloppy misses and mess ups.

**Qanita Lilla:** Are we always going to have to have one foot in and one foot out, or are we going to have to turn it down or are we going to have to pull it apart?

**Pamila Matharu:** Oh, yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** How are we going to have to put how are we going to make space and live in the space?

**Pamila Matharu:** Ok, what matters is, and I really, truly feel this in terms of, if you're going to -- are you talking about decoloniality? For just --

**Qanita Lilla:** No, I hate that word.

**Pamila Matharu:** OK.

**Qanita Lilla:** I hate that word.

**Pamila Matharu:** OK.

**Qanita Lilla:** Because I feel that liberation has always been around and it always has been.

**Pamila Matharu:** It has been.

**Qanita Lilla:** And I feel that that term has been co-opted by people in institutions to tick off a box.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** Completely.

**Pamila Matharu:** Right.

**Qanita Lilla:** I feel the spirit of that –

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- but I just...yeah. –

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** I think that we've been trying to do this for so many years.

**Pamila Matharu:** Absolutely. And the thing is people like us, it's like there's this phrase with equity facilitators --

**Qanita Lilla:** Oh God.

**Pamila Matharu:** -- they are invited to the party, but never asked to dance. So you have a seat at the table, but don't do anything.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. Or you can't, you can't.

**Pamila Matharu:** You can't do anything. Your hands are tied. And people don't know, and you're just asked to smile, and kind of keep the peace. And it's like, at the end of the day, I can't tell you when I did my show, A Space in 2019, if you ask people in Toronto who I was, "Oh yeah, Pamila Matharu. Da, da, da." But it was my labour that was used and that's what created so much attention. Not necessarily my exhibiting history. I then made an artwork that kind of poked fun at that. It's like I was serving it back to the curatorial committee and the community in Toronto. We're very aware of what you do and pigeonhole us and gate keep, all those kinds of things and pat us on the head. There's only so much you can take for a certain amount of time. It's like even looking at the day of May 4th, 1992, one person's uprising is another person's riot. One person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist, right? It's all about perspective as everything, right? And I really employ that in my role as an artist, as an educator, as a cultural producer, as someone who has recently gone to market. That's still very new to me. But, again, the precedent or the model-shaping for me is watching Winsom, and she was doing all those things and I was like, "Yeah, I want to grow up and be like Winsom."

**Winsom Winsom:** [Laughs] I want to grow up and be like Pamila.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, it's like you said, you've only recently --

**Pamila Matharu:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- come into the scene. For me and for White artists who's been practicing for as long as you have and has been developing the practice. That is completely absurd. That's absurd.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah, 28 years. I started at age 20.

**Winsom Winsom:** I started at age 10 --

**Pamila Matharu:** There you go.

**Winsom Winsom:** -- and I'm just beginning to really show in any --

**Pamila Matharu:** In a major capacity?

**Qanita Lilla:** So, is it worth it? All these --

**Winsom Winsom:** Not even major.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- you know, all these systems --

**Pamila Matharu:** Right.

**Qanita Lilla:** That are now opening up and are now giving us, I'm speaking from my own perspective.

**Pamila Matharu:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

**Qanita Lilla:** I basically had to leave South Africa to come and get an audience here.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah. Like --

**Qanita Lilla:** While you're --

**Pamila Matharu:** I'm sorry. Go ahead.

**Winsom Winsom:** I don't know if I should say this, but I think after it's the year of United Nations for people of colour to be shown, to be done. And all the galleries that are showing and having them on their heads, and after that period is over, I think they're going to go back to the way it was and gate-keep more, even tighter.

**Qanita Lilla:** Wow.

**Winsom Winsom:** That's my gut feeling.

**Pamila Matharu:** But they're selling off a lot of art now in major museums to make space and to create room for BIPOC artists in their collections.

**Winsom Winsom:** They're not really.

**Pamila Matharu:** I don't know about Canada but I keep reading about American museums....

**Winsom Winsom:** Canada, I don't think. I just feel -- I don't know. I don't know.

**Pamila Matharu:** You don't --

**Winsom Winsom:** Maybe I'm too vocal for a lot of them. That's the other thing. I'm very vocal and I'll say what I see and think. "You're not paying my bills." Yes, it would be nice if you did, if I made money through you but I'm just going to say what I think. If I think you're not a nice person, I'm going to tell you you're not a nice person. And some artists that's what they're doing, they're buttering up and smiling, putting up with things, and I won't do that. And I think -- I don't know. I don't know. I don't know anymore.

**Pamila Matharu:** But Winsom, that's about your livelihood too as an artist, right? So it's like in Canada we have a granting system but not all BIPOC artists amongst all other artists are successful at those grants. So what do you do then?

**Winsom Winsom:** I mean --

**Pamila Matharu:** You have to sell your work.

**Winsom Winsom:** Yeah, and I was the first person to have four solo shows in Canada. I had four brand new, not a retrospective, brand new solo shows plus I had a travelling retrospective happening in the US. I was in group shows in Central America and I applied for a grant to do a new body of work. I didn't get it, but when the show opened at A Space they opened all in the same week, all of them. This woman -- and that was what really threw me when I picked up and said, "OK, this is it." She asked me, "You've got a lot of grants to do so many shows." And I said, "No, I didn't get any." And she looked at me, and this is a White person, and she said, "If you were White, you'd probably have got it. I got one and I'm not even doing anything."

**Pamila Matharu:** Wow.

**Winsom Winsom:** And that really bothered me that day --

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** And I said, "So what are you going to do?" I thought maybe she said, "Oh, I applied for the grant, but I'm going to go travelling then do some things just to send in a report."

**Qanita Lilla:** I think something that struck me about Pamila's show was the kind of labour that you had to do--like what you did from the time you were – well, we just kind of engaged with the Kingston space --it was phenomenal. It wasn't just with one work. It was kind of like you are always, always busy.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** Well, because they're young people and a lot of people that came and –

**Pamila Matharu:** And parenting.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** Three kids.

**Qanita Lilla:** Three kids.

**Winsom Winsom:** Young people who came in, they're often Black, mainly from the Caribbean, and I worked with some Indigenous and different groups of people. Whoever's child needed it, I was there for them. So I did a lot because of the children, that's my purpose of coming back this time around: it was to protect and help them. The other day somebody phoned me, and I didn't remember her, and she said, "I came to your house when I was 16, and I hung around there and stuff. You don't remember me but I remember you," because I was just thinking she came in from the Caribbean and she was having such a hard time being in there with her family and couldn't go back. And she said, "I was thinking of killing myself when I met you and you kept me from that." And she said, "I know you don't know that but— "You know, so I think I must have known. I kind of knew about you and stuff, I can read into people who need more. I worked really for young people and stuff like that because they needed it.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** Because that's even why I ran for school board trustee. Not that I wanted to be a school board trustee, because I had other things I was doing, but because the person who was in there wasn't from my ward, was not doing anything for the kids. He never even showed up at many of the meetings because he was off playing golf or something like that or doing whatever he was doing. So I ran. I said, yes, I would run and I waited for the last moment to see if somebody would go up against him. But nobody did, so about five minutes before I handed in my stuff. I got to city hall, waiting, so I did. And it turned out he had been in for like five terms, never had anyone running against him. And so that was when I ran. Then when they thought I had won and was winning, the CBC or The Globe went and interviewed him. The Globe is in the one I just gave you.

**Pamila Matharu:** The scrapbook. Yeah. OK.

**Winsom Winsom:** They interviewed him about how it feels for a newcomer to be running. And I didn't have any money, I ran my campaign for \$25.

**Pamila Matharu:** But wait a second. That campaign is 1988.

**Winsom Winsom:** It is, yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** And you arrived in the 70s. You're not quite a newcomer. That's like –

**Winsom Winsom:** I know.

**Pamila Matharu:** That's like decades ago.

**Winsom Winsom:** I know. But I wasn't in politics or anything.

**Pamila Matharu:** Sure. It's interesting how they –

**Qanita Lilla:** I mean; I think that's lots of -- lots of like new people come

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah. Yeah. It wasn't --

**Winsom Winsom:** They asked him, and he said, "Oh, she could have it if she wants it, it gives me more time to go play golf and all the rest of it and stuff." But then the last ballot thing that came in, he won. We know why he won in the last, and suddenly he was visiting the places and stuff like that, and where they were voting for. So I was happy that people kept saying we can do a recount because it's so close. And I said, "No, it's OK. We'll just hold him to it now." But after that, when he got in, every time he did miss the board meeting, people were like why weren't you at the board meeting and when he wasn't -- when they called, and he never responded. I think after a short term he didn't finish out the term. He resigned. He said it was forced work. People are calling him for --

**Qanita Lilla:** And now suddenly he was accountable –

**Winsom Winsom:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- because somebody had set a different kind of precedent.

**Winsom Winsom:** Yes, it's a lot of work but sometimes you just must do the things that seem needed for anything, I do. I see the Vietnamese people needed a thing, so I got my community to house them and work with them. I just do things.

**Qanita Lilla:** That was Kingston in the '80s?

**Winsom Winsom:** Which one?

**Pamila Matharu:** What you just described.

**Qanita Lilla:** What you just described.

**Winsom Winsom:** Yeah, that was in the 80s and the Vietnam was whenever the Vietnam War was and that was in Lansdowne which is beside Kingston just down the road in a village outside.

**Pamila Matharu:** And you did a lot of fundraising here for different organizations.

**Winsom Winsom:** They needed it, and I believed in them, like the Kingston Artists Association Inc., I believed in them, so I did it and a lot of them were fundraisers for different organizations in other places. I had the skill of being a chef and being able to cook, so I did it, you know.

**Qanita Lilla:** But you came up against resistance?

**Winsom Winsom:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** You came up –

**Winsom Winsom:** Yeah, but –

**Qanita Lilla:** -- I mean it wasn't just -- it wasn't easy.

**Winsom Winsom:** No, it wasn't easy.

**Qanita Lilla:** It was really hard.

**Winsom Winsom:** It wasn't easy, and I think I did it for my kids. Because I remember when my son was walking down the street and a car stopped. He was walking with his dad who is White, and a car stopped and told him to "Go back to your country, go back to where you are from" and stuff. I don't know what else. And it was a one-way street, and they must've gone around and come back Princess Street and did the same thing and then his dad said, "Come let's go home" and they went home. He never said anything about it, and I went to my son and I said, "What's wrong?" He must've been 11, 10, or 11, I said, "What really happened?" And he told me the full story and I said, "So did you talk with your dad?" He said, "I don't think he'll understand."

**Qanita Lilla:** Oh.

**Winsom Winsom:** Well, he was White. I went to functions and many things I didn't want to go to, but I went, I was the only Black person there in Kingston.

**Pamila Matharu:** Mainly White rooms.

**Winsom Winsom:** You know, but you have to do things. If you are here, you have to open the door. You have children, you have to open the door.

**Qanita Lilla:** I've got one more question and I want to know what is it that specifically, what can people do? What can artists do to rise above to -- you know, especially in a place that is so homogenous?

**Pamila Matharu:** I think informing yourself, not expecting Indigenous, Black or racialized people to teach you constantly. So doing your own work. There's wonderful Wiki pages on anti-oppression or anti-Black racism or understanding what it means to be in solidarity with Black folks and racialized folks, Indigenous folks. What does it actually look like and sound like and mean. Fundraising and using food as a container of care and social-relational practices or just sharing what we call sharing a meal.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Pamila Matharu:** Spiritual to be doing that in a lot of cultures. The thing is not to be afraid. Not to be afraid of the other and understanding that the time we have on Earth, if you really are considering your ancestral and spiritual work, what are you doing to be a good ancestor for the future, right? Pay it forward. And that's what Winsom did for us?

**Winsom Winsom:** I don't think it's up to us to change it.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** I think it's up to the other people to learn to inform yourself. I don't mind when people ask me questions. White folks for instance ask me or Japanese or whatever, just learn about each other's culture.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yes.

**Winsom Winsom:** Just sit down and ask, you may see something, and I do something. And if you wonder about it, don't go off making your own stories up, and turn to me and say, "Why did you do that?" And as a Black person, I think you should also answer it or any race should answer truthfully because a lot of times I've met many White folks who are afraid to ask. For instance, I'm going to tell you about this short story. This woman, I moved into Sydenham which is just outside of Kingston and a next-door neighbour didn't want her kids playing and coming over and the kids wanted to come and play with us. I finally just went to her and said, "Why can't my kids play?" They would come over and play but as soon as they heard them when they were driving, they would dash home and say, "We got to go home, we're not supposed to be here." I went over to her, and I said, "I need to talk to you." And she said, "Why?" I said, "I want to know why your kids can't play with my kids, they're all the same age?" And she looked at me and she said, "If it's OK with you I guess they can." And I said, "You can come over too. If you don't know who I am, come on over. They're young kids, I can see." And then she finally told me, her first encounter with a Black person was in Toronto. She was on the subway, not subway, in an apartment building in the elevator going up. And her little

girl must've been five or six and a Black man entered the subway and the little girl looked at him, and to her and the little girl said something to him about "You're tall" and asked him some questions. He just turned and she got really scared. She was afraid for her life. He ranted at her. So right away, she pulled back and it's "Black people are a certain way." Her very first encounter.

I was on Wasaga Beach when my son was five. And as we were walking down, I saw these women talking and they were pulling themselves together and pulling their kids over and I went. My son just ran down and the kids came forward. And I went down, and I said, "It's OK, they can play together. It doesn't bother me." The woman looked at me and started talking. Then the one little girl said to me: "You are so lucky; your mother never knows when you're dirty." The mother was apologizing, and I said, "No, I said to her it's his skin, he's Black and stuff." And he said, "You don't look like the Black people on TV." It was the first time they were seeing Black people. This was in 1969 or 70. I came in 69-70. And it was the first time they were seeing Black people in person.

**Pamila Matharu:** This is Wasaga Beach?

**Winsom Winsom:** Wasaga Beach.

**Pamila Matharu:** Wasaga Beach.

**Winsom Winsom:** Wasaga Beach.

**Qanita Lilla:** Where is Wasaga Beach?

**Winsom Winsom:** Outside of Toronto.

**Pamila Matharu:** Outside of Toronto.

**Qanita Lilla:** That's crazy.

**Winsom Winsom:** Yeah, but it was true. I went to Hamilton, I remember when I saw the first Black person in Hamilton, I was like [gestures as if walking and rushing] across the street to talk to them. No, because it didn't happen in the 1960s-70s and so and the woman said, "You're not upset?" I said, "No. She's just saying she sees it when she gets dirt on her so it's brown and you make her wash it off so that's what she said. And I didn't take it as an insult or anything. I just took it, here's a kid who doesn't know, I need to explain to them what it was, and I know it changed." After that the woman started talking to me and asking me things on a movie they had seen, and I know the one they were seeing. And they were asking questions about it and I said you need to get out into your community, and I said find an organization and get to know some Black people and stuff in a good way. I told them it's not a patronizing thing. So sometimes we have to just be helpful too when they ask us. I've had friends who are White who have said stuff, and I think about it and I said to them, "I think that's racist what you just said." And they'll say I don't think so and they'll explain why they said it and stuff, and I said it could be both ways. And I said, "I don't like it but I can see where you're coming from."

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Winsom Winsom:** Because it wasn't more racist than what's more stereotypical than racism and stuff. But I never got upset and that's part of it. I think I have a mixture, I have South Asian, from Japan, and from all over the world, friends, everybody. If you're good to me and treat me with respect, that's what we should all be looking at.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah. I think the reciprocity piece really matters around that. Just like Winsom's saying meeting folks in the middle around learning and unlearning.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, but for people of colour or Black people, for racialized people, how does that story translate? Do we fight, do we laugh, do we--?

**Winsom Winsom:** I think the first thing is for the government of Canada and the world to apologize for slavery. Nobody has apologized. They've apologized now to the Indigenous, they've apologized to the Japanese, the Jewish people, and we have not heard one word of apology ever for what they did for breaking our family. And the Indigenous peoples, yes, they did wrong to them, but they at least were kept in their country and their culture. Most Black people don't know where in the world or in Africa they're from. What area their nation, their tribe, or anything because they took us and moved us out and shipped us out.

**Qanita Lilla:** And took our stuff and put it in university art collections.

**Winsom Winsom:** Yes.

**Pamila Matharu:** And brutalized.

**Qanita Lilla:** And brutalized. And continued.

**Winsom Winsom:** And now, to me, all I want now is an apology, an official apology, a true meaning apology. Prince William and his wife went around to the Caribbean and they only did that because they saw every country, and all the countries are trying to break away, and they wanted to keep them, so they went around. They never apologized to any of the countries. None of them.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. That was actually, the first visit that caused a lot of trouble.

**Pamila Matharu:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** Usually they kind of, you know – galas, etc.

**Winsom Winsom:** The Queen --

**Winsom Winsom:** And you got in Belize, the Mayan people, "Nope, we don't want you" and everybody and it's like and I feel the same way. I want a proper, proper apology. And send them back. A tornado is going to come in. Oh yeah, it's coming in, and she's going to wipe everything,

and they're going to remove their bottom, and then settle everything, and they have. Everybody has to begin at the beginning. And I wouldn't be surprised if COVID is not the start of it of putting everybody back on the same level and dealing with people. I don't know. I just love people. I do. Especially if they're young, younger than me.

**Qanita Lilla:** I really wish I had the privilege that Pamila had of being in your class.

**Winsom Winsom:** Still can. I have a lot of people I still mentor. Some of them are older. I still do a lot and people just talk to me on Zoom. They think they're going crazy, so. They all know I'm crazy, so they call me to talk because I say I'm crazy. Also I tell more people who I see are unbalanced, it's OK to be unbalanced too. They don't allow you to be, and support you on either side and that's what people need. I know when I was young, I should have got proper support, and I never got it. My parents didn't know, they were scared and stuff, things about me and my sisters, everybody. But for me, it's just supporting people where they're at and helping them. When they're ready to move forward, move forward with them. If they want to stay where they are, leave them, but explain, "I can't stay here with you. I have to move forward. When you're ready, call out and I will stretch my hand behind and pull you up." Everybody should pull everybody up.

**Qanita Lilla:** Wow. That's very beautiful. That's a beautiful way to end. Thank you so much Winsom.

**Winsom Winsom:** Your welcome.

**Qanita Lilla:** And thank you so much Pamila.

**Winsom Winsom:** Thank you. Thank you.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's been such a pleasure.

**Pamila Matharu:** Thank you.

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you.

**Winsom Winsom:** Your welcome.

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:**

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. Thanks to our team behind the scenes: Chancellor Maracle, Dinah Jansen, Danuta Sierhuis and Evan Wainio Woldanski. The music is composed by Jameel3DN and is produced by Elroy "EC3" Cox III. Episodes of *With Opened Mouths* are released monthly and you can find them on Digital Agnes, CFRC's website and on your favourite podcasting platforms. Subscribe now so that you don't miss our next episode. We'll see you next time.

[Music]