

# DIGITAL **AGNES**

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## **Manifesting Black feminist subjectivity**

*With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*

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### **SPEAKERS**

Qanita Lilla and Kosisochukwu Nnebe

### **KEYWORDS**

Blackness in Canada, resistance, art practice, creative process, feminism

### **TRANSCRIPT**

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Hello! And welcome back to *With Opened Mouths*, I'm your host, Qanita Lilla. Kosisochukwu Nnebe fondly known as Kosi, is a Nigerian Canadian visual artist and curator working in a variety of media including video installation, photography and printing. She has exhibited her work widely across Canada and the US and has presented on her research as well as facilitated workshops at various galleries, museums and universities both nationally and internationally. In this episode, we delve into creative journeys and into rich ideas that culminate in artistic practice.

[Music fades into the sounds of Lake Ontario]

**Qanita Lilla:** Welcome Kosi.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Thank you so much.

**Qanita Lilla:** The first time I saw your work was at the *Brown Butter* exhibition at [Agnes](#) and it was so powerful and wonderful that I thought, "I have to get you to talk about your work."

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** I really appreciate that, honestly.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. I remember that it was on the left-hand side of the gallery, and it was you chopping and working with your hands. They were kind of different screens, and it was just really evocative and very still. So, I just wanted to thank you for bringing that to us when you did.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah, I was so excited to be able to show and to create that work, it had a lot of meaning for me in the trajectory of my practice, so I'm really happy that it resonated with you, honestly.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, it was beautiful.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** But can you tell me what led you to the visual arts?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Honestly, it was one of the best ways for me to express myself. I think as a child I struggled with speaking about my feelings and talking through things; it wasn't the way in which I communicated with other people, and it wasn't a way for me to understand myself through speech. And so, I turned to other forms of expression. I spent a lot of time writing. I wrote poetry and I wrote short stories, but I also spent a lot of time drawing and painting. And so, it had always been for me the best way of digging into myself, learning about myself, and finding a way to convey and communicate that -- not actually to others -- but primarily back to myself. I turned it back to that understanding of art: as something that is deeply revealing about oneself when I was in my undergrad. From there I started exhibiting work, despite not studying or taking a course related to the arts, I was doing an undergrad in economics at McGill. But being in Montreal still afforded me opportunities to show my work and to start to build a community and to really call myself an artist in a way that felt very real.

**Qanita Lilla:** That's incredible that you started studying economics. How come you kind of veered that way?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** [Laughs] I think economics because I'm Nigerian. So, all Nigerian parents want one doctor, one engineer, and one lawyer. And so, I didn't go into any of those, but economics sounded pretty good to my parents [laughs] -- and to me -- so I ended up there. Economics was interesting, and I did love it, I loved the theory of it. And what's been really fascinating to me in terms of thinking back to how that still informs my practice is that I learnt a lot of problematic assumptions about humanity because what you learn, especially at a school like McGill, is neoclassical economics. And so, you learn very briefly about Communism and Marxism, but it is never taken seriously as an economic kind of system and paradigms. The assumption is that "man is a rational thinker and makes rational decisions and self-interest is the motivating factor in how people and societies are organized." Those were so fundamental and deep-rooted in the field itself. And I ended up having to actively strive to unlearn those things even as I was learning it. So, I was happy to have friends in cultural studies who were teaching me, and I was learning through them about theory and about post-modernism. I never learnt about it in school until recently during my masters. But it basically meant that I had to go out of my way to constantly unlearn everything that I was learning. And in a way, it led me to this urge to kind of always dig deeper and go find those hidden layers in terms of what it is that we see and what we think we understand, there's always something operating below that really shapes and fashions our world views.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, I think economics from a Western perspective versus economics from an African perspective is so hugely different. Especially at its roots. So, I can see how that would create an inner kind of conflict, and that cultural theory would be able to facilitate an alternative view. But that's fascinating that you started with economics. All the amazing huge thinkers kind of employ economics to drive their theories and stuff.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Well, economics is a social science and so closely related to philosophy and so has traditionally been taught alongside philosophy and politics. And so, the thinking that it's more of a science *a la* physics is so recent and turning to calculus and all of these models to make it into something that's a lot more prescriptive than it really is, it's all so new. And those are things that I would love to go back to in my practice and really delve into. I've been thinking about this recently - how racism really is that huge distraction in a way because so much of my practice has been geared towards trying to understand race, because it's my lived experience. Whereas there's so many other topics that I'd love to touch on, but I can't in a way. It feels like I can't because I first must deal with this huge thing that my life has shaped around and that I can't escape.

**Qanita Lilla:** But I think economics and economic theory, just thinking about the Queen and about Imperialism, that's an economic kind of --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- Like a fundamentally economic idea and construction. That really is.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah, you're right.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. And that's affected us completely.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah. Yeah, you're right

**Qanita Lilla:** That's not so different.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** And racial capitalism really draws those connections and even thinking through coloniality and the ways in which there are so many axes through which coloniality operates. Yeah, you're totally right. Part of me also just wants to go back to the abstractness of econ and really tease that apart in a way that takes me back to how I learnt it. But anyways, I could spend a lot of time on that and it's not fully fleshed ideas.

**Qanita Lilla:** No, yeah. But also, I really want to talk about how at that time as an undergrad you kind of made a connection to cultural and social theory. Who were the people who informed you and led you deeper to explore visual arts?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Oh yeah, for sure. bell hooks was huge. So, I ended up reading a bit of her work and there were so many ideas that have been informing me and Black Feminist thinkers. That has been informing me in my practice since 2017 really. With bell hooks, she has this notion of a radical Black subjectivity that she describes, and she doesn't quite define it in a way that's very substantive and tells you clearly what it is. But she kind of points you towards this representation of Blackness that veers away from this binary of good versus bad representations that we end up falling into, because we always represent Blackness, and we tend to represent Blackness vis-à-vis whiteness. There's this need to kind of speak to this good versus bad. And she's constantly pushing towards this radical Black subjectivity that is really about transcending those kinds of binaries, about really leading to self-actualization and self-realization in a way that is not at all tethered to

Whiteness. That really departs from Whiteness. And in a way I've kind of been interested in thinkers who kind of think through Blackness as an ontology. Blackness is something that is beyond Whiteness, beyond racism, but instead it transforms how we live and navigate life. Some of this thinking you could tie back probably to Standpoint Theory, in terms of this understanding of social positioning and positionality as being what determines your world view and how you navigate the world. bell hooks talks about this often with reference to the margins versus the centre, and Black women and racialized people finding themselves at these margins. But from within these margins, they have this view of society that is so distinct, that is so unique and produces its own form of knowledge. And so, this kind of understanding of how one's positionality and the ways in which one navigates the world as a result of their Blackness creates a particular knowledge; it creates a particular world view, something that I keep coming back to. And in addition to that, I ended up really falling in love with Frantz Fanon and his thinking. Not necessarily *The Wretched of the Earth*, but more so *Black Skin, White Masks* in which he speaks about the lived experience of Blackness, focusing of course -- and this is one of the criticisms of him -- on the Black man in-particular. But the way in which he talks about that kind of lived experience. The way in which he talks about it in a very visceral and embodied way and the experience of racialization is something that has fascinated me and something I spent a lot of time in my practice trying to visualize: this kind of tearing apart of the Black body and its reconfiguration in ways, in the way that I try and do it, that kind of takes you beyond that binary of good versus bad representations of Blackness that, in a way, leads you to that radical Black subjectivity. And so, seeing this process of racialization and all the things that it generates, seeing it as something that leads to a different reality of Blackness -- and it's not in a good versus bad, it's just the reality of it. That reality for me has always been the piecing together of the Black body and new configurations that aren't necessarily good or necessarily bad but are just a result of this thing in which you're navigating.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. And I suppose also we tie in with what would be informed by your lived experience.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Mhm.

**Qanita Lilla:** I've watched some of your other work and I know it is close to who you feel you are. Can you talk about a recent work that is especially close to your heart?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah, I think going back to the one with *Brown Butter*. That one was really interesting because I've been really interested in Black affect and the kinds of knowledge that it can produce, specifically with hesitation. And as someone who grew up in a predominantly White environment - I grew up in Gatineau so there was not only race but also language. Yes, the realities of being a Black person in Quebec are very unique as well. So, that led to a lot of internalized racism but also this particular way of navigating the world that for me has always been characterized by a certain level of hesitation. Hesitation, like in French it's called "tête en mains," but this kind of grasping is the way in which I feel like I've navigated the world. When I came across the work of these feminist philosophers who take this field of philosophy called phenomenology and the branch that's really inspired by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who Fanon is actually in conversation with in his work. They see hesitation as something that's generative, not as this bad thing, but as something that opens you up to new possibilities. Because it speaks to this slowness, this openness

to different realities and so in a way it creates an opening to new ways of understanding and being. Hesitation has been something I've been playing around with. I've been playing around also with eroticism. I've been playing around with pleasure based on the work of Audre Lorde. And I've been playing around off obviously with Black pain and suffering with regard to that process of racialization and the violence that it can engender. There are different forms of Black affect that I've been engaging with. And I felt as though I kept on creating works that were helpful but, in a way, I felt were still easily consumed by Whiteness in a way. I felt as though there was something within me that I was withholding, that I was keeping in that was continuing to kind of hurt me. And I realized I was just very angry, and nothing I had done had allowed me to express that anger. So that anger was still there and had not been touched upon. And it's corrosive, anger is corrosive, it eats you up. And in the wake of 2020 and the killing of George Floyd, I had a lot of anger, and a deep need and desire to let it out, to not have it eat me away. And so, I wanted to create a work that really was an ode to that anger. To not see that anger as something that was useless and needs to be clamped down. But I really saw that anger as something that can and should be let out into the world. That can and should be destructive. And so *Brown Butter* was really about thinking about anger differently. And through it I was able to touch on these histories of resistance and refusal that you find in the Caribbean that were unknown to me, but I immediately connected with, because in a way the anger that these enslaved Africans felt they were able to leverage and to use. They were able to harness it in a way that was the ultimate rejection of the anti-Black world in which they found themselves. I think that so often we go through this anti-Black world, and we accept it as it is. And I needed to be reminded of the ways in which we can wholesale refuse it.

**Qanita Lilla:** Kosi, this idea of hesitation, it's really interesting. I can see how it can be generative because it takes us to a particular space. And obviously, if you feel that, socially, you're in a hostile environment, that is how you are going to navigate through hesitation, it makes complete sense. It's a form of self-preservation.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Mm-hmm.

**Qanita Lilla:** But I can also completely see how it can be corrosive because it can stop you from doing what it is that you need to do. And getting in-touch with that anger is, as you explain it, just really powerful. Especially when the way that it is encapsulated in that piece, like the *Brown Butter* piece, because it's manifested as being deliberate.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Mm-hmm. Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** This kind of understanding of anger as being deliberate --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** Thoughtful.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** Coming from a history and a place of consideration of thought is completely the antithesis of the angry Black woman stereotype.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah. I think that's so fascinating because, yes, 100%, it is deliberate. And so, essentially the video is showing the steps that enslaved Africans used to make cassava - which is a naturally poisonous crop that's native to South America. Instead of trying to eliminate that poison, the cyanide content, what these enslaved Africans would do was actually try and concentrate the cyanide content and create this powder with which then poison slave masters. The first time I saw reference to that -- I had started looking into cassava because I knew that it was poisonous -- my sister had done research into cassava as her masters' thesis. And then I came across these entries and kinds of catalogues that British men had created based on their time in Jamaica, in I think, the 17th century. Just kind of cataloguing the flora and fauna. They were describing cassava, what it looks like, how enslaved Africans used it in order to make it edible. It was all kind of very objective, the description, the categorization and cataloguing of these objects. And so, there's this completing these enslaved Africans with the flora and fauna to be observed and objectively discussed. And yet, from there, there was this transition to a warning. The writers would then say, "Caution," basically to the other British people reading, because these enslaved Africans or these slaves have developed a process by which they can poison slave masters and then they describe those steps.

**Qanita Lilla:** Wow.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** And it was just so fascinating because there was a shift in language, there was this shift -- and for me it was perceptible. There was this going from describing these people as objects and describing how they use the flora and fauna as accessible to them. To then contending with them as agents who are capable of wreaking havoc on the lives of the British. There was this way in which the agency of these people was asserted through their ability to spark fear in the lives of the British, of the colonizer. And so, there was automatic relationship to me with rage and agency. Because for me, I knew that if you were going to risk your life attempting to poison your slave master, you needed to be really angry. [Laughs]

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** People forget that anger tells you something. All negative emotions. All "negative emotions" have value. They tell you something. All emotions tell you something. And anger is telling you that there is something you're being faced with that you cannot accept. That is what it is telling you. And so, anger and rage, yes, can be expressed in ways that are volatile or seem chaotic. But they aren't necessarily, because at the end of the day, it's this understanding and realization that there is something that you can no longer accept. There is a meditation from that, in terms of living a reality, of realizing that you can no longer stand this reality, and in terms of finding whatever you have access to and using it to create a weapon with which to exercise your agency. When so as I came across this story, I pieced all of that together and I recognized, "Oh, this is actually something for me." Hidden in this document that the British wrote by themselves and for themselves. Here, accidentally, they slipped in something that I can resonate with. I see that as a transmission of those enslaved Africans that they're describing to me. And I felt like those instructions were for me.

**Qanita Lilla:** I think that the feeling of transmission is clear. It looks like step-by-step instructions. If you want to kill your slave masters, do this.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** [Laughs] Exactly.

**Qanita Lilla:** Like this is what you need to do. And I think the kind of screen that for me always stood out was when you put this mixture into your fingernail.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** And that kind of made me imagine, who would this woman be? Where would she be standing in relation to sitting? Would she be sitting or kneeling? In relation to her slave master. Or would she be in the kitchen or be in a room? It fleshed out this reality of a person just because you put that into your fingernail. And which is incredible in many ways, the fact that slavery is so close, it's kind of in your DNA, it's woven in. It affects you and continues to affect people in the present day. And yeah, I just thought that was amazing -- and how deadly is this?! If this is going to land in somebody's goblet or something. What power does that hold? What kind of quiet power does that hold?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** The poisoning method was actually called, in these kinds of catalogues, "The Thumbnail Method," because of how it was transported into the home of the slave master. And for me, that thumbnail that's an image I've used multiple times, kind of holding the mortar and pestle and I'm holding with the poison under my thumbnail. It's one that has become so important to me, because it speaks to this idea of a weapon hidden in plain sight. Using whatever means that is available to you as well and by any means necessary -- which is again this saying that we hear regarding rejection of anti-blackness. And then finally, this notion that what you need to take control of your life. What you need to take over your own liberation, and to rechart the world as you experience it and live it, all of that can fit under one thumbnail. That's all that's needed.

**Qanita Lilla:** But even like I told you before, the iconic mark of the thumbprint.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes, yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know, like the first democratic election when most South Africans who could not sign their name made their mark by using their thumb.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah. It's fascinating.

**Qanita Lilla:** Another thing that I'm so fascinated by is how you use yourself and own body as a subject in your own work. And I'm fascinated by artists from the diaspora in Canada, like Anique

Jordan and her salt photographs, also using herself as subject. And it's been documented throughout the world - how artists (of colour) use their own bodies. What are you thinking when you use yourself as a subject in your own work?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Like I said before, my work has always been about me trying to understand myself. It's kind of second nature to think that "Oh, it has to be me in these images, it has to be me performing these actions, because it's always this navigation and questioning my own lived reality." It's not necessarily actually that it's second nature. That's not true. So, initially when I was creating my work, when I was starting out as an artist in Montreal doing my undergrad, I was doing portraits of Black women. That's what I was doing because what was motivating me at that time was this desire for positive representations of Blackness, right? I was a young Black girl who had grown up in Gatineau, had not seen representations of Black beauty and needed to create that for herself. Many years were spent just doing that with oil pastels, oil paint, and watercolour. That was my practice. And then what I realized is that it wasn't helping me feel better. [Laughs] It was creating these lovely and beautiful images, but what the issue that it was facing was around racism and the process of racialization. How it was that I, someone who was born in Nigeria, left at the age of five, came to Canada and came to Gatineau of all places, and all of a sudden became "Black." And then for the rest of my life --

**Qanita Lilla:** Wow.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** I had to deal with what it meant to be "Black." And so that's where Fanon and that process of racialization -- and I began to focus on the process. That has always been my focus. Because racialization is a process.

**Qanita Lilla:** That is awesome. I'm sorry to cut you off but I whistled, "Wow."

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** You are so right! You are so right! You start feeling your skin colour depending on where you are in the world.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes. Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** And who you are with.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** And that must have been so dramatic and obvious for you as a final child.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know, suddenly being such a tiny minority --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.



**Qanita Lilla:** -- becoming Black --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Exactly.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. I think that would be an amazing title.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** Like becoming Black because it's important for people who are not racialized to understand what that means.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Exactly.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know, yeah.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** And not only people who aren't racialized. The experience of Blackness is so different, right? As someone who spent time in the US, someone who grew up in Canada, or someone spent time in the UK, and someone who's Nigerian. Blackness is discussed, experienced, and lived so differently. There's an understanding of Blackness that Haitians will have that I don't have, because their nation basically -- like Haitian history is something I really want to delve into a lot more to be honest. And it's just so fascinating in terms of that kind of relationship to Blackness, and a rejection of the terms on which Blackness was created. A kind of understanding of Blackness in a totally new light. That's what you get from Haitian history. And so, Haitians, I've been having conversations with them since moving to Montreal, because there's so many Haitians which is amazing. And they're creating amazing artwork here. But their understanding of Blackness is so incredibly different from someone who was born in Nigeria and then moved to Canada.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, or somebody like myself who's African but not dark.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** And people's dark-skin, in South Africa because of Apartheid and the way we were categorized based on the tone of our "darkness" - just thinking about how that translates into Canada and this environment -- it's really strange.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** I can imagine.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's kind of opening up all sorts of new ideas about what it means to be racialized. It's like you say, it's not a one-size-fits-all kind of thing.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** No, exactly.

**Qanita Lilla:** I think this ties in very well with your ideas about what is hidden and what is visible. What can you see? What is transparent and opaque? What drew you to these ideas?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** I think for me, so much of the work that I was doing ended up revolving around this broader notion of this politics of visibility around Blackness. The experience of Blackness in Canada has been described -- I believe by Rinaldo Walcott --, this absented presence. There's this kind of understanding that Black people in Canada are constantly navigating this invisibility, this feeling of being absented, but nonetheless present and sometimes hyper visible.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** And overrepresented in particular ways when you think of incarceration, when you think of being stopped by the police or random road checks.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** There's a way in which we quickly go from not being seen and not being talked about to being over surveilled, to being watched, to feeling as though you stand out in a way that puts you in danger. And so, you're constantly navigating this spectrum from one pole to the other. The flipside, or the kind of parallel, is navigating from this space of transparency to one of opacity. And transparency is obviously also speaking to Western theories and Western understandings from the Enlightenment. This desire to categorize things, to know them objectively, to be able to create classes of humans, of things, et cetera. So, there's this desire for things to be transparent to understand them fully. And so, there's this transparency that, for me, speaks to hypervisibility. Blackness as this that needs to be studied, surveilled, and categorized in order to sustain White supremacy which is built on the dehumanization of Black people. There's this obvious need to know Blackness in a way that allows you to control it. And so, transparency and hypervisibility go hand in hand. And then on the other side is invisibility, where there's a desire within the community and landscape. For example, to dismiss the relationship that Black people have to this country that stretches back four hundred years and to always treat Black people as recent immigrants. And the experience of Blackness in Canada is so incredibly heterogeneous compared to that in the United States. I'm a recent immigrant and yet there are these dynamics that push back against the reality that there are Black people here whose ancestry dates back much farther. But beyond that, this desire to not necessarily show Blackness as being part of the national imaginary, unless it serves that national imaginary as we're starting to see now.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes. Or a particular narrative or ticks a particular box.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Exactly.

**Qanita Lilla:** That way you use these ideas of transparency and opacity in *Brown Butter* with the curtains -- can you talk about that? Because you know you walk past it, but you don't see it?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** But you might see it from across the road.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** Can you explain it? It was very cool.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah, so, my interest in opacity is also related to the work of Édouard Glissant, whose work and theories on poetics, and opacity have been very fundamental to a lot of Black artists. He speaks about this right to opacity and it being this refusal of transparency; this refusal of needing to be seen and understood as a kind of prerequisite for being respected and valued, and to be seen as someone that you can be in a relationship with. I turned to his ideas of opacity as a way of wanting to understand and accept the parts of myself that I don't understand. Finding refuge in not understanding, and not having to be seen by people if they're predisposed to seeing me in ways that don't resonate. So, finding refuge in opacity. Opacity kind of flipped my understanding and experience of invisibility because I had always seen not been seen as negative.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Opacity kind of makes you realize that “Oh, opacity, not being seen, and finding refuge in that can actually be a strength, and a power, something that we need. And all of a sudden, invisibility became something different or could be something different. It opened me up to an understanding of the ways in which our forced invisibility can be used as a way to exercise agency. And so not equating invisibility to oppression as easily. With these enslaved Africans, many of them had been women, and the reason why there's a saying that “Poison is a woman's weapon” and that's because of the relationship poison has to domestic labour and care labour. If you are preparing someone's food, if you're cleaning someone's home, et cetera, you have access to their food and to their house in a way that allows you to poison them. And so, there's this link between womanhood, femininity, and poison that in a way that subverts our understandings of care labour and the oppression that women who were forced into these positions faced. And in a way, that helps you see how it afforded them an opportunity to exercise their agency and reject that system. I was really interested in the ways in which invisibility and being part of the house, being an object within the house, is what allowed these enslaved women to actually poison the slave masters. I wanted to create a piece that would blend into the home, that would become part of the architecture, because that's what those women were, they were objects within the home. They were not people. They were not treated as people. They were not treated in a way that respected and saw their humanity. They were seen as objects within the home. From that, they were able to do what they did in terms of exercising their power in other ways. I wanted to find an object within the neocolonial home where the exhibition [*Brown Butter*] took place that would allow me to touch on all of these things. It became those curtains because they very much bled into the architecture of the space. Those curtains looked close enough to the original that people would bypass them without a second glance. And those curtains saw everything.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, there was one kind of image you reproduced on the curtains --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- it's like a mortar and pestle and a woman's hand.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes. Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** That out of the corner of your eye, looks like a bird. Kind of looks like a --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Oh.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- looks like a bird sitting on a tree.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Interesting, I see what you mean.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. It really does. And that's what I thought until I looked closer, and I thought, wow.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Interesting.

**Qanita Lilla:** They're two sets of curtains and they speak to each other.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** The shiny ones.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** I don't know, damask maybe, I don't know what kind of fabric that is.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know, that's a mortar and a pestle. And then on the right is a very transparent chiffon. And that's a blow up of that image.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Exactly.

**Qanita Lilla:** And then because of the light shining from the chandelier, if you cross the street at night, you'll see this woman's hand with a mortar and pestle.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's very beautiful but also once you understand --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- what she's doing --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- it's got this strong power to it.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** And the thing is, people oftentimes will bypass and walk past the curtains. But in a way the woman who's represented is watching you constantly.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Right? And in that invisibility -- this is what Black feminist theory teaches you -- is that from that positionality in the margins, you see things in a way that no one else can. In that position of invisibility, there's a perspective that is so distinct and unique that is afforded to those women. And constantly my work is very much about epistemology. It's about those perspectives that come from a very specific lived experience, and I am always trying to highlight the value of that knowledge. Not necessarily for other people but that knowledge was important for those people. And it allowed them to do something and to see the world in a way that is extremely unique and different and I'm always trying to think through that. Another work that I have that is very much in line with this -- and it takes a very different approach -- it's a podium in basically an empty space. So, you have a podium and then over the top are these sheets of red plexiglass, on opposite walls in the room are these red banners. Essentially the podium is fashioned after a slave auction block, but no one knows that. You're basically asked or allowed to get atop the podium and to look through the red plexiglass. And when you do that, you can actually see hidden images.

**Qanita Lilla:** You can stand --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- you can stand on top of the podium?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah, you can and that's the whole point. The exhibition and installation can only be experienced from the top -- auction block.

**Qanita Lilla:** Wow. What are the images? Are the images projections or are they --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** No. So, the images, one is text, and one is image. The text says, "I have been withheld" with the "been" in brackets. As much as I love the idea of opacity, withholding, invisibility as things that we can use to exercise our agency and there's also the reality that it still speaks to a form of suppression. And so, I had been reading this book by Dionne Brand called *The Blue Clerk*.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes. Oh yes.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yes, Dionne Brand is amazing, and *The Blue Clerk* is amazing.

**Qanita Lilla:** It is. Especially because it talks about the verso.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** That's this power like the verso.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Exactly.

**Qanita Lilla:** And you can kind of read it just from that perspective of verso and every -- Yeah, the clerk --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- that's actually labouring and weaving in and out of the story. It's fantastic.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Yeah. And so, *The Blue Clerk* starts off with "I have withheld more than I have shared." And as soon as I read that I was like, oh this is super interesting. There's a lot of discussion of withholding, and I thought that withholding was something that can be powerful. I remember going to the writer's talk that Dionne gave and getting her to sign my book and telling her, "It's really important for me to see you talking about withholding in a way that shows that as a form of power and blah, blah, blah." And she looked at me and she was like "No, no, you misunderstood. For you to withhold means that you're withholding from yourself, and it's another form of suppression."

**Qanita Lilla:** Wow.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** And so, it became this wanting to withhold as a way of saying I'm going to keep this to myself, and I don't need to share with you, and realizing that withholding is still a form of suppression. That's something I still consider quite a bit and then on the hidden image, was an image of a spider. What people didn't realize looking from the top of the podium is that the spider is actually made out of human body parts, so my body parts. It's a self-portrait of me as a spider. That's me speaking to the idea of the Trickster in Guinean culture. Which is in other cultures as well, including Igbo, but Anansi the spider, the Trickster spider. In this constant navigation towards the idea of a radical Black subjectivity, I've been gearing towards the Trickster as my model. It's an active refusal of that binary of good versus bad, moral versus immoral, and navigating the human and the godly realms. I've been turning to the Trickster as that thing that really gets me to see myself, experience myself, and represent myself in ways that are beyond transcendental. That was the image that people could see. So, in fact it was a bit of a game of hide and seek in a way. I'm here, but you can't see me, and you don't know I can be found. And even when you see me, you don't know that you can. So again, it's this kind of opacity.

**Qanita Lilla:** Is it the case that you moved closer towards the digital in your practice? You mentioned that you started painting using oil paints, water colours, and pastels. What role do you give the digital? What is the kind of liberatory role, basically?

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** The digital has been informing me since I started moving away from painting and started working with photography. Having to work with things like Photoshop and seeing the possibilities there. And then recently, I started to work with video work for the first time and playing around with that and with sound a lot more. I began to see the possibilities there. But more

recently, really delving into the digital has been this project commissioned by Mozilla Foundation, which runs Firefox. They run this annual festival called MozFest and they invited me to create a project for MozFest 2022. At that time, I had been working a lot around language and imperialism -- because my practice has a lot of different threads, they all come together somehow, but there's a lot of different threads. One of those has been imperialism, language, and anti-colonial solidarities. I had been thinking a lot about those ideas and about the story of the Tower of Babel.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** This is a biblical story wherein humanity is united by one language, and they created a tower that reaches up into the heavens. God is like, "No, I don't like that." Basically, it spreads humanity across the globe and makes all of their language mutually unintelligible. I was approaching that story from the perspective of understanding and realizing the language they're talking about, that one common language, wouldn't that be English? And then asking yourself, "How did English come to dominate?" And realizing that maybe the story is not necessarily done on purpose, but it speaks to a history of imperialism. So, how to approach this story from an on-time imperial perspective, that understands the harms that might have led to the possibility of a universal language. That doesn't see any universal language as something that is necessary or always super positive. It wants to push against this idea of a plurality of languages as a punishment, which is what the story tells you.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** There's so many different dynamics within the story that you can start to tease apart. And amongst those is this environmental analogy of a monoculture versus a biodiverse ecosystem. These are the kinds of languages that you can very easily apply to language. And you can apply this to the understanding of English, French and other colonial languages as kind of a part of a colonial monoculture and exploitation, in a way, and one particular monocrop being these languages. So, wanting to make these allusions between language, culture, and nature in a way that pushes against the binary of nature versus culture. In a way that asks us to question what we can learn from nature in terms of reconceptualizing language. What we can learn from thinking about language as a biodiverse ecosystem in order to see different ways of understanding how language operates and the possibilities behind it. Those were the kinds of themes that I was working with, and now I'm working with Mozilla to use their platform, Mozilla Hubs, to create a digital, interactive digital environment that speaks to all of these ideas. We made a first prototype in June 2022 that uses Mozilla Hubs and audio recordings of people responding to a prompt, it creates this immersive and quite chaotic environment. The users then enable to navigate at will. So, that was a prototype that we are now working to flesh out as part of getting ready for the next MozFest in March 2023 when we'll hopefully be launching the full project. And from there, hopefully working on physical installations as well for June 2023. Other things that are in the works have not been confirmed but I hope will work out. Yeah, it's really great working with the digital in that way and seeing the possibilities of hopefully being able to explore AI (Artificial Intelligence) [Artificial Intelligence] more. I don't think I'll be able to do it with this project, but in the case of Mozilla it's more of a metaverse kind of feel. I'll be working with someone who creates 3D assets using Blender to create a very customized environment. There are lots of things I'm learning.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** It's all very new.

**Qanita Lilla:** And it sounds fantastic. I'm looking forward to that. I remember you describing it before and it sounds so exciting and wonderful, you're the perfect person to be heading this project.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** I appreciate that.

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you so much Kosi for speaking to us today.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Thank you.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's been fantastic, and I really love what you're doing and your processes, I think --

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Thank you.

**Qanita Lilla:** With *Brown Butter*, you just opened people's eyes to all sorts of new potentials so thank you so much.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** I appreciate that. And thank you so much for having me and inviting me.

**Qanita Lilla:** Well, it's a pleasure. Anytime. Come back to Kingston please.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** I will, I want to.

**Qanita Lilla:** Okay, cool. Thank you.

**Kosisochukwu Nnebe:** Thank you.

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Special thanks to our guest Kosisochukwu Nnebe for speaking with us today. This 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 Jamil 3DN and 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 platform. If you liked what you heard, leave us a review and subscribe now so that you don't miss a single episode. We'll see you next time.

[Music]